In Conversation: LGBT+ Transitions Before and During Prison

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Prison environments can be dangerous places in which hypermasculine discourses prevail. They are often dehumanising, inflexible and viewed as places of punishment rather than rehabilitation. Regimes of power circulate to reinforce informal hierarchies and violence, intimidation, physical and sexual abuse may go unchallenged. Within this context, LGBT+ people in prison are particularly vulnerable. This paper uses extracts of dialogue from conversations which took place between both authors between March-April 2024. We focused our dialogue on educational and life transitions before and during prison to capture the lived experiences of Scott, one of the authors of this paper. The dialogue highlights the multiple transitions which Scott has navigated before and during his time in prison. These transitions were synchronous, ongoing, and multi-dimensional. We do not offer a systematic analysis of the dialogues. Instead, we offer our individual reflective commentaries on the conversations and identify some implications for policy and practice. The insights from a serving prisoner and the application of Jindal-Snape's Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to this context provide a unique and original contribution to knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

Let's start by introducing ourselves. Scott [pseudonym] is serving a lengthy prison sentence in the United Kingdom (UK). Jonathan holds an academic position at a university in the UK. We both identify as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans/Transgender (LGBT+) community and specifically, we are both gay. A mutual contact within the University who is conducting academic research with Scott facilitated us making contact. We position ourselves as authors rather than participants within this paper.

The paper focuses on Scott's educational and life transitions, given that there is a paucity of literature on the transitions of LGBT+ people in prison. Following a brief review of the literature, we present extracts of our conversations which illuminate our transitions. The conversations are followed up with reflective think pieces from both authors.

Recent data in the United Kingdom illustrates the demographics of the prison population. In 2022, 96% of people in prison were male, almost three-quarters were White (72%) and the overwhelming majority (97%) reported that they were heterosexual (MoJ, 2022). However, this last figure may not be a true indication of the number of people in prison who are LGBT+, given that fear of disclosure is well-documented in the prison literature (Fernandes et al., 2020; Knight & Wilson, 2016; Simopoulos & Khin Khin, 2014).

Many years ago, Steven Spritzer coined the term 'social junk' to describe those members of society who are considered 'bad' for society and therefore need to be contained. The prison system has been largely punitive and prisons are often places for subjecting people to punishment. Within this context, social harms, including violence and bullying, are often unpoliced and accepted by those in power as part and parcel of prison life. It is only more recently, that attention has focused on the role of prisons as sites for rehabilitation and interest has turned to the use of trauma-informed approaches in prisons to support rehabilitation.

Unfortunately, LGBT+ people in prison and their physical and mental health needs continue to be overlooked (Carr et al., 2020). There is a paucity of research in this field and there is also a distinct lack of research into the experiences of LGBT+ people in prisons, particularly those in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2018).

Historically, it was assumed that segregation by sex within the prison system would prevent sexual and romantic relationships from occurring (Carr et al., 2020). In fact, sex in prisons is often viewed as deviant (Stevens, 2020) and non-normative categorisations, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans/transgender, have often been associated with contagion (Carr et al., 2020).

Across the general population (as opposed to the prison population), research indicates that 64% of LGB people and 80% of trans people in Scotland experienced hate crime because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Pearson, 2017). In England, hate crimes related to sexual orientation increased between 2017–19 and transgender-related hate crimes increased by 37% from 1,703 to 2,333 over the same period (Home Office, 2019). These experiences are likely to be exacerbated within the prison environment (Fernandes et al., 2020).

Arguably, the prison system has been designed by men, for men, and therefore it is unsurprising that there is a hypermasculine discourse that is prevalent within prisons. Hypermasculine environments are typically associated with the exaggeration of hegemonic masculine traits or behaviours, including violence and the normalisation of negative and disparaging attitudes towards women. These behaviours are a common feature of prison life in the male estate (Fernandes et al., 2020). Thus, masculinity, as in wider society, is privileged within the masculine-heteronormative environments of prisons, resulting in the erasure of LGBT+ identities. This environment drives non-normative identities underground and normalises homophobic attitudes amongst both people in prison and staff (Fernandes et al., 2020). Thus, LGBT+ people in prisons may be reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity for fear that they will face discrimination or abuse (Knight & Wilson, 2016; Simopoulos & Khin Khin, 2014) or disclosure may be selective (Fernandes et al., 2020). That said, experiences can vary significantly between different prisons (Forder, 2017), depending on staff training and the prior experiences of staff with LGBT+ people in prisons (Poole et al., 2002; Lamble, 2012; Marlow et al., 2015).

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Prejudice and violence linked to sexual orientation or gender identity directed at individuals in custody is often addressed by segregating those affected for their own protection, which is often viewed as a reactive response or a punishment by LGBT+ people (Stevens, 2015). The United Nations (UN) states that 'prison administrations shall take account of the individual needs of prisoners, in particular the most vulnerable categories in prison settings' (UN General Assembly, 2016, p. 3). In the UK, the 2010 Equality Act provides some protection for LGBT+ people in prison in that it places a legal duty on prisons to protect LGBT+ individuals from direct or indirect discrimination. However, policy, even when it is enshrined by law, does not always translate into to practice. Fernandes et al. (2020), for example, highlighted several issues which demonstrate the gap between policy and practice. These included lack of access to support for LGBT+ people, the prevalence of banter, lack of staff knowledge and hostile environments which prevent LGBT+ people in prison from being open about their identities. However, research demonstrates that LGBT+ disadvantage was not a privileged source of disadvantage (Carr et al., 2016) and thus, a range of factors can position prisoners as vulnerable.

Despite this concerning picture, we have witnessed increasing rights being extended to LGBT+ populations across recent decades (Carr et al., 2020). Although same-sex desire may be viewed as a threat to Good Order and Discipline (GOaD) in prisons, research also suggests that LGBT+ people in prison may also be a valued resource for other people who need advice (Carr et al., 2020). Arguably, 'being gay is part of a complex ecosystem of individual and social characteristics that determine safety and security in prison (Carr et al., 2020, p. 557). Thus, LGBT+ people in custody may be afforded status because they hold responsible roles within the prison or because they have been found guilty of a crime which places them at the top of the informal hierarchy which exists within the prison estate. In addition, the literature addresses the concept of 'jail gays' (Car et al., 2016; Carr et al., 2020, p. 555). 'Jail gays' are those who are willing to suspend their heterosexual identity during their time in prison but revert to being a heterosexual when they leave the prison estate. They may enter sexual and sometimes romantic relations with other people of the same sex. The concept of 'jail gays' unsettles notions of sexual identity and suggests that identity work is a continual process of adaptation.

TRANSITIONS

Our conversations focused on Scott's educational and life transitions. In line with Jindal-Snape et al. (2021), we view transitions as a process of *adaptation* rather than the change itself. Although we acknowledge that transitions can be normative (i.e. they are expected to happen at fixed times), we think that more recent perspectives, in which transitions are conceptualised as synchronous, offer a more accurate account of people's life experiences of transitions. In line with this conceptualisation, we draw on Jindal-Snape's (2016) Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory to frame Scott's educational and life transitions. The MMT model (Jindal-Snape, 2016) assumes that transitions are co-occurring, ongoing and multi-dimensional. Thus, transitions for an individual can trigger transitions for other individuals and organisations, including those that the individual is connected to. According to MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016), individuals inhabit social, cultural, psychological, and physical domains. A transition in one domain can trigger a transition in another domain and transitions experienced by individuals can trigger transitions for others (Gordon et al., 2017). In our review of the literature, we did not source any studies which specifically explore the transitions experienced by people in prison who are LGBT+ and we are not aware of studies which have specifically explored the application of MMT theory in relation to people in prison generally, or indeed LGBT+ prisoners. We therefore make the reasonable assumption that this article is the first study to apply MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to this specific context.

MINORITY STRESS

Our search of the literature did not source any studies which had applied Meyer's model of minority stress (Meyer, 2003) to LGBT+ people in prisons. Meyer's model assumes that individuals with minority identities, for example those who are LGBT+, are exposed to additional stressors. Meyer categorises these stressors into distal and proximal stressors. Distal stressors are external to the individual but impact on them and can result in poor mental health outcomes. Examples include exposure to prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and violence. Proximal stressors are internal and reside within individuals. They occur because the individual with a minority identity

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may be anticipating that they will be exposed to a range of distal stressors. In the case of LGBT+ individuals, proximal stressors can result in a range of adverse effects, including internalised stigma and concealment of identities. Proximal stressors can result in a fear of 'coming out' and adverse mental health. Meyer's model assumes that individuals with minoritised identities can form groups or collectives to mitigate the effects of distal and proximal stressors and that these collectives can result in positive mental health outcomes.

RESILIENCE

Earlier perspectives on resilience conceptualised it as a fixed attribute within individuals (Masten & Garmezy, 1985). However, contemporary perspectives conceptualise resilience as a dynamic construct which can be enhanced through access to social support, social networks and positive institutional cultures (Greenfield, 2015; Luthar, 2006; Roffey, 2017; Stephens, 2013). Definitions of resilience emphasise positive adaptation following adversity or trauma (Gayton & Lovell, 2012) and the capacity to grow following adverse experiences (Stallman, 2011). Definitions also emphasise the capacity to rebound from adverse experiences, the ability to problem solve and to return to the previous state (Sanderson & Brewer, 2017). However, this ability to 'push through' regardless of circumstances is a dominant theme in the literature (Reyes et al., 2015), but these perspectives only offer a partial understanding of resilience. Resilience is not a straightforward concept (Roffey, 2017). It is dynamic and influenced by socio-ecological factors, including access to positive social relationships (Roffey, 2017), supportive institutional cultures and positive socio-political and socio-cultural contexts (Greenfield, 2015). Although internal factors do impact on resilience, for example maintaining a sense of hope and purpose and high self-efficacy (Greenfield, 2015), external socio-ecological factors do influence resilience (Greenfield, 2015) and therefore to conceptualise resilience as an internal attribute is misleading.

THE FOCUS OF OUR CONVERSATIONS

Given the paucity of literature, specifically on the transitions of LGBT+ people in prison and on their experiences of minority stress, we identified the following aspects to frame our conversations.

- Types of educational and life transitions before and during prison.
- How these transitions were experienced.
- Stressors, mental health, and resilience.

We used these to provide focus to our conversations, although inevitably the conservations frequently diverted away from these, as is usual within dialogue.

OUR APPROACH

We position ourselves as 'socially organised biographical objects' (Plummer, 1995, p. 34). We have adopted a generative methodological approach using handwritten and electronic communications that took place between us between March and April in 2024. We have documented extracts from our conversations to illuminate Scott's educational and life transitions as a gay man in prison. We have also captured Jonathan's transitions. The conversations took place through letters, e-mails, and text messages that we exchanged between March and April 2024. We used a monitored prison e-mail system (eMates) and a secure App to exchange text messages (Unify Messenger). We also exchanged letters which were sent through the postal system. We have omitted aspects of the communications which did not specifically address transitions. We have presented a series of conversational pieces rather than 'data' for analysis. We have therefore not applied analytical techniques because we wanted to present a dialogical piece rather than presenting data for analysis.

As Scott is held in prison, the practicalities of timely and manageable communication needed careful consideration. Adopting a variety of communication methods which were available, as noted above, proved to be an efficient way to develop the collaborative auto-ethnographic approach that was intended for this article. Our approach was to produce collaborative auto-ethnography, which positioned both authors as subjects of inquiry. Ellis and Bochner (2000) noted that the aim of auto-ethnography is to see the researcher as the subject and to convey

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potentially highly reflective and personal narratives about individual and collective life experiences. We adopted a rigorous process of collaboratively selecting and omitting narrative for use in this article, taking into consideration the need to avoid identifying Scott and other third parties through jigsaw identification, thus limiting the potential to cause the reader distress. We jointly selected narrative from our communications that focused on our various transitions, and it is hoped that our approach will add value to the research and provide valuable lived experience that brings the theory to life. Lengthy discussions were held between the authors before, during and after writing this article, with the aim of ensuring that informed consent of both authors remained throughout the whole process and to address any issues that such raw narrative could expose. His Majesty's Prison and Probation service (HMPPS) and HMPPS National Research Committee ethical approval and research clearance was not required as this article does not constitute an independent empirical study of prison staff or people detained in prison. There was also no need to obtain informed consent because we did not collect participant data.

IN CONVERSATION

In this section, we have presented extracts from our communications which specifically address the various transitions that we have both experienced.

TRANSITIONS

Adaptations

Jonathan: It can take some time to adapt to various life transitions. I remember when I left home at the age of 19 to go to university. I struggled with all the different transitions that I had to navigate at the same time. I didn't make any friends, my mental health deteriorated and I struggled to adapt to living in a new city, far away from home. Being gay and living in student accommodation, which was characterised by outward displays of hypermasculinity, I struggled to fit in. In line with MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016), the social, physical, cultural and identity transitions that I was experiencing at the same time triggered psychological transitions for me. My resilience was negatively affected because I had no social support. I now reflect on this and understand how this was an example of MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) in action. If I had understood more about the socio-ecological factors that impact on resilience (Greenfield, 2015), maybe I would have known better how to improve my resilience.

Scott: The biggest impact on me when I came to prison was the loss of self-worth and all hope for the future. Hope is a personal construct. It fills us with optimism of prospects for the future, especially when facing extreme adversity. However, hope needs to be grounded in reality and will look different for every prisoner. Whether it is a desire to re-build family, to become a better person with renewed self-respect, or to gain skills and knowledge to carve a new future, the most important thing is that we find it … hope. For me, it was education which gave and continues to give me hope for the future. Whether prisoners should be entitled to benefit from higher education, as I have whilst serving the sentence, and if rehabilitation into a graduate-level role following a serious conviction is a realistic option, is another debate. Societal opinions aside, higher education has very much been a positive factor for me whilst serving my time, offering a sense of purpose and positivity, and above all, a sense of hope that I will exit this period of my life with a bright future.

Have I fully adapted? Well, I think I know what to expect from prison now, but I still have times when I feel uncomfortable in prison. When I move prison, it can take me a few weeks to find my feet. I also avoid violence and any kind of conflict in prison. The environment can be volatile with conflict between peers and, at times, peers and staff. Illicit drugs play a significant part of prison life. Many of my peers take whatever drugs they can get hold of, with Spice being the most popular choice at the moment. Conflict and violence in prison make me feel unsafe, and my reaction to these is to retreat to the safety of my prison cell. I don't think that I will ever be comfortable with conflict or violence. Other than that, I would say that I am settled in prison. Do I fear being institutionalised? Well, I accept that I am in many respects, but I try to keep myself informed about life beyond the gate. I do feel that I have a grip on reality, and unlike many of my peers, I don't fear stepping back into life outside of prison. I am excited to begin a new adventure, meeting new people and building a new life. I have developed a long list of things that I want to do and achieve, so watch this space.

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Jonathan: We have talked a lot about the importance of hope and sense of purpose for prisoners. I know from these conversations how hope and sense of purpose support you and other people in prison to be resilient and Greenfield (2015) identifies both of these attributes as factors which influence resilience within his theoretical model. However, hope and purpose do not always come from within us. For me, education has always given me a sense of hope and purpose, and during challenging times in my career, I have always believed that I am somehow making a difference in the world.

Scott: I feel very lucky that I have been able to build some firm foundations for the future. I know that I have achieved this through determination and hard work, often having to navigate a multitude of barriers that are inherent within the prison estate. I have navigated a path, walking alone for most of the journey, but I have met inspirational people along the way. Some of these people have been within the prison, such as prison and education staff that have helped me to overcome the hurdles to higher education. Others I have met have been professionals and academics around the country. I have a growing network of contacts that I know will offer support to me upon release from custody. I am really excited about the future, and the new adventures and opportunities that are yet unknown. These things give me a sense of hope and purpose, which support me to stay resilient.

Identity Transitions

Jonathan: Like most LGBT+ people, I struggled to tell people that I was gay. Meyer's (2003) model of minority stress highlights how LGBT+ people are exposed to internal proximal stressors. According to this model, they may conceal their sexual and/or gender identities because they are worried about experiencing rejection. Meyer's model also highlights how they might experience self-stigma. I definitely experienced both of these and I experience the continual pressure to disclose my identity in new situations. For example, when I start new jobs, disclosing my identity always causes me anxiety, even after all these years.

Scott: For the first 28 years of my life, I was worried about people finding out that I was a gay man. I found school difficult and played the part of the straight boyfriend to a girl who was a year older than me. Looking back, I feel guilt for having played that part so well. In the 1980s and 1990s I had a fear of rejection, coupled with the fear of being targeted. For many years, I convinced myself that I would never come out and that I would have to lead a 'straight' life. I came out to my family and friends when I was 28. I had been building up to this point for quite some time and I felt scared that I would be rejected by some. The day arrived when I was to make the big announcement. I was standing in the kitchen with my mum, who was making a cup of tea, and without any warning I just said, 'I'm gay' to which her reply was short and swift, 'I know.' 28 years of inner turmoil about coming out as gay and it turns out that my friends and family had already guessed years before! So, my big coming out announcement was more like a fallen souffle, flat and a disappointment. I think I had thought about it for so long and worried about it, that their reactions felt flat to me. I didn't expect people to just say, 'we have always known'. I think I expected a shocked reaction, but I didn't get one. Until this point, my mental health had suffered badly. I made two attempts at taking my own life and neither attempt had any chance of success, although I didn't know that at the time. For many years I felt so alone, and I was not able to see any kind of positive future for myself.

Jonathan: 'Coming out' for me was a huge thing. My parents did not know how to deal with it. We never talked about it again after they found out I was gay at the age of 18. They referred to my partners as 'friends.' They didn't reject me, but they definitely swept my sexuality under the carpet.

Scott: The fear of 'coming out' was overwhelming. Inside prison is like stepping back 20 or 30 years and reminiscent of being back in the playground at school. There have been taunts, teasing and blatant humiliation, simply because people assumed I was gay. I quickly made a conscious decision not to 'come out' in prison. Running back into the closet felt safe. My decision was founded in fear and not wanting to stand out from the crowd. The fear of 'coming out' was overwhelming. It brought back thoughts of my early years at high school.

Jonathan: I had the same fear of 'coming out' when I was in secondary school, and when I started teaching in schools. It is incredible how conservative school environments can be and my own research with teachers highlights the fact that some teachers are required to

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'tone down' their sexual identity when working in schools. There is definitely a heteronormative discourse that is prevalent within schools.

Scott: It was clear that the prison officers were aware of my sexuality. When I arrived in prison, I was asked to complete some documents, with one question asking me about my sexuality. I ticked the option which said 'prefer not to say' because I guess I was hoping I could keep my gay identity a secret. Eventually some of the prisoners found out the reason for my sentence and they treated me like I was famous. Others asked me if I was gay and without any hesitation I said 'yes' and began the next phase of my life as an openly gay man in prison.

During the first months of prison, I was the victim of rape. It was immediately on entering [his] cell that I knew my life would take a drastic turn. Although I didn't know at the time, the events of that day played a significant part in building my determination and focus that has served me well for the rest of my sentence. It took me a few years before I could say the word, but I no longer have any shame when I say that I was the victim of rape. I did report the incident to the police and the prison, and even though the police had collected forensic evidence to support what I was saying, I ultimately had to withdraw my statement because of intimidation from men on the wing. I have also been the target of homophobic attacks and abuse. I recall the first attack only days after being sentenced. Two lads walked into my cell, one of them put his hand around my neck and pushed me up against the wall. Both proceeded to shout in my face verbal homophobic abuse. One of the lads spat in my face before they both decided to walk away. I was left in a heap on the floor, crying and the feeling of loneliness was overwhelming. Staff on the wing turned a blind eye to much of the bullying that was taking place. It was, on reflection, an accepted part of prison life. Little did anyone know the inner turmoil that I felt inside. Being in prison is difficult enough, but being gay adds a new layer to the harsh environment in which I live.

Jonathan: I haven't experienced sexual assault. That is horrifying. I have experienced physical abuse and verbal abuse. I have been exposed to far too many micro-aggressions during my life, even as a lecturer in higher education.

Scott: Yes, after that, I found that I became isolated in my cell for much of the first year following sentence. I was given angry looks and people would shout abuse at me during the night. I was not the only person to get the abuse, but I didn't want to go and spend time with other gay men, even though we could have supported each other. Because I felt I didn't want to be gay! If I could have taken a pill to turn me straight, I would have done.

Jonathan: I don't want to situate myself as a victim. Much of the LGBT+ literature positions us as tragic victims. According to Taulke-Johnson 'The constant re(telling) and reiterating of those stories which catalogue pain and misery … provides only a particular pathologised and partial understanding of and insight into their lived experiences' (2008, p. 123). I think it is important that research also focuses on agency and resilience in relation to minoritized individuals.

Scott: Later in my sentence, I became a Samaritans Listener. I supported other prisoners 24/7. I helped them to deal with the crises they were experiencing, and I am proud of the support I have given my peers. I know that I have saved lives. I am employed as an Offender Management Unit (OMU) Rep which is a trusted position within the prison. The role is to provide advice and guidance to all men in prison about matters concerning their sentences and progression. People look up to me because of these roles and I have a level of respect afforded to me due to the long sentence that I am serving. On the plus side, my sexuality has become less of an issue for many of my peers, but I do still encounter hostility at times.

Cultural Transitions

Jonathan: My difficulties with 'fitting in' and experiencing a sense of belonging have always been a continual challenge for me. I struggled to fit in when I went to university. As an academic from a working-class background, I don't always feel that I fit into the Academy. As a queer person, I didn't 'fit in' as a child in my community and I didn't always feel that I belonged in my family.

Scott: Looking back, the feeling of belonging in prison was a slow process. Finding my place and a way to fit in was a slow process. I don't think that I have ever become 100% settled. That, in part, is a conscious decision as I fear becoming institutionalised. The sense of belonging is

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something that I found difficult during the first few years of my sentence, but over time I began to feel more comfortable in my surroundings. Meal times are something that are part of the daily routine, and often something that prisoners complain about. The food is okay, but I have been in prisons where the food is horrid. The culture of prison has changed over time. When I first came to prison the regime was strict and the officers were also strict. This was good as everyone was aware of the rules and what was expected. Now the officers are known by first names and the lines are blurred. It didn't used to be like this in the early stages of my sentence. The regime is now flexible, and the result of this softer culture is that violence and disorder has increased considerably. I am now settled in my own sentence. Chaos can be taking place around me, and I just carry on with what I am doing. I do wonder when things will calm down and when people in charge will take back control. I do worry what may happen to make the balance shift.

If I am asked do I belong in prison, the answer is yes. I belong in prison because a selection of my peers, made up of the public, found me guilty. I must respect that. However, the question of whether I feel comfortable in prison is a more difficult question to answer. I would say, on reflection, that my time on remand was perhaps the worst time in my prison sentence to date. It was when I came out as a gay man, two years into my sentence, that I began to find my feet. Education soon became my means of escape from the often immature and, at times, hostile environment of the prison. I also became known amongst staff and prisoners as the 'go-to' person to help to write complaints, representations for category reviews and even letters from peers to their loved ones. This gave me a sense of worth and I became of value to others, which afforded me protection during the early years. Now, because of the time I have spent in prison, I am respected by many of my peers and staff. Those who have committed more serious crimes, like me, are at the top of the hierarchy amongst the criminal fraternity. Once you have been in prison over ten years the respect widens to recognise the long stretch without freedom. I did struggle with the respect afforded to me, given that I have been convicted of a crime, but when I was in the early years of my sentence, I was glad to be around some high profile and notorious criminals and that took the focus away from me.

The masculine environment would seem like a gay man's dream, but it does take a while to adapt to the surroundings and masculine behaviour of most prisoners and staff. I view 'tough men' behaviour that is displayed as being a front that most of my peers put on. Most have a 'hard man' mask that they put on. However, once you talk to some of the 'hard men' you soon realise that they are vulnerable inside. I have become used to the gang culture, and I have met many men who say that my 'normal personality' is scary to them. In prison if you have a brain and appear to be not one of the thugs then you stand out from the crowd. I am often approached for advice in prison, and this is how my whole sentence has been. I have defaulted into the 'go to' person for sensible advice. It is not just peers who seek my help and advice but also staff. Only last week I helped a staff member to write a job application for promotion. It did take time for me to get used to the masculine environment and even now, when I transfer to another prison, I get uncomfortable about walking on a new wing with all eyes looking at me and trying to work out what kind of person I am. I would now see myself as settled in my own sentence and very focused on my future beyond the gate.

Social Transitions

Jonathan: It took me a long time to enter romantic/intimate relationships. My sexual identity has been relatively stable, but this is not always the case for others. I see sexual and gender identity as fluid rather than something that is fixed and I think context can also influence our personal identities.

Scott: At first, I was held in a three-man cell for about a month, then a two-man cell for several more months, before being given a single cell. I tried very hard to keep myself to myself, not wanting to engage in conversation with anyone about why I was on remand or the fact that I was a gay man. It took me several months before I could come out of my cell and talk to other men.

Eventually I formed social relationships but that opened the next issue for me – 'do I tell them that I am gay?' This question troubled me during the whole 18 months that I was held on remand, and I never did confide in anyone about my sexuality during that time. I did bat off some questions about being gay, but it never caused me any trouble.

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Sexual relationships for me have developed from knowing the person first. I have had sexual relationships, but due to the transient nature of prison they don't last very long. The last relationship I had was with a man 15 years younger than me and it lasted for three years. We even shared a cell together which was great fun! I have always been open with the prison managers about the sexual relationships I have in prison. The prison doesn't have any specific rules on forming sexual relationships, although you can get in trouble if you are caught having sex.

Being 'jail gay' is interesting. The term is used by 'straight' men who claim to be gay for the stay. I get to pick and choose the best of the bunch. You can't often pick them out from the crowd, but I am getting better at it over time. I guess it is the dream of many gay men to have sex with 'straight' men. Well, I have ticked that box many times. I have lost count of the number of times men have come to me asking if I will have sex with them. I have indulged some men and said no to many others. It reminds me of my cruising days. The interesting thing is that some 'jail gay' men think, and at times expect, that I will want to pay them for sex. I will never pay a man in prison for sex. Plus, if I am giving them the pleasure, should they not be paying me?

Establishing friendships is difficult in prison. Trust is a big issue, and the starting point is that nobody trusts anyone. People don't stay in the same prison for long. I keep in contact with three men I have met in prison who have all since been released. People gravitate to those they have something in common with, I guess the same as on the outside world. It can feel like a 'Big Brother' social experiment. Being forced to share a living space with people you have never met before, and people that you would not normally associate with is strange, but I have quickly adapted to it.

Contact with people in the outside world is very important to me. I lost contact with 50% of my family when I came to prison, so I value the 50% I do have contact with. I communicate with family and friends by telephone almost every day and since I arrived at this prison, I have been able to use the text messaging service. I also have a growing network of academics I am in communication with, and this is a fantastic way for me to build a body of work that will assist me on release. Some of the academics are also becoming friends, and this is great in building a social network that will, I hope, assist me to reintegrate back into society. Contact with the outside world is the most important thing for me. I am however aware that some of my peers don't have any contact with the outside world, and I have met men who have been given whole life orders and know they will never be released from prison. Many long-term and life sentenced prisoners don't talk about or want to know anything about life beyond the prison gate.

Psychological Transitions

Jonathan: I guess I have struggled with my mental health for most of my adult life. This is partly due to my sexuality. Meyer's (2003) model helps us to understand the association between minoritized identities and poor mental health and the factors which cause this. However, being in a same-sex relationship where I experienced emotional, physical and financial abuse, significantly negatively impacted on my mental health and the effects of this lasted for decades. This is why I welcome the critical perspectives on resilience which challenge the concept of 'bounce-back.'

Scott: When I arrived at prison, my mind, body, and soul were consumed with the events that had led me to this place. Education has really saved my life. This has become the focus of much of my sentence. I have had to adapt my education journey at every prison because each prison has different rules and barriers in place. My mental health has had ups and downs in prison. I think this is normal, even for people on the outside. I have been through some dark times in prison. I never seek help when I am feeling low, in part due to the fact that the prison service is not great at dealing with mental health, and it is often viewed as a risk factor in terms of reoffending. I learn to deal with the dark times myself. I see men experiencing mental health crises and they are just left alone or told to put an application in to see mental health support, which can take weeks or months. On the outside people can go to A&E or call 999 but this is not possible in prison. I guess this is why so many of my peers turn to drugs.

Jonathan: There is more awareness of mental health now and more general acceptance of it across societies. Access to support is problematic because mental health services in England are underfunded and cannot meet the demand. It must be important for prisoners to maintain some contact with the outside world as a way of supporting their mental health.

Scott: At first, following the sentence, I decided that I was not going to contact the outside world. This was my way of trying to forget the circumstances of my arrest. I guess I was in shock. I went through a period of grief. I eventually accepted my actions and then I began to open up about what had happened and why. Communication with the outside world took several weeks. The first telephone call home was very difficult for me. But this was the start of building the 'new me.' I have been through some dark times in prison and always deal with those periods by just shutting myself away for a few days and letting the darkness pass. I often write down what my thoughts are, and I find that writing down what is going on in my head really helps. I have noticed a 'new me' emerge which is positive and level-headed. I have never used helplines during my dark times. Many of my peers turn to drugs to help them with mental health issues but I think it is really sad to see the impact that illegal drugs have on prisoners. The prison staff are not able to deal with the huge issue of drugs and often turn a blind eye to the dealing, offering no help to those under the influence of illicit substances.

'New me' is something that has emerged over the years. I have accepted the circumstances that led to my arrest. I used to be a 'people-pleaser' and I always put other people before me. The people-pleaser 'old me' was not great for my mental health. I understand now what went wrong in my past and this has allowed me to accept and move on, and I have developed skills and awareness which have made me a better person. This is the first prison that has this kind of messaging service, so this is a new thing for me. Communication with you and others on the outside world is priceless. Listening to and understanding other people's issues through my role as a Samaritans trained Listener has helped me to work through my own issues and to believe that I can build a new life when I am released. I know now what I want and what my priorities are for life. I see the future as bright. The 'new-me' has plans for the future that are realistic and flexible.

Physical Transitions

Jonathan: As I have got older, I have got better at adapting to physical transitions, for example, moving towns or cities, moving home and visiting new places. I found physical transitions harder when I was younger.

Scott: It is easy to become settled in a prison, but my fear of institutionalisation makes me push myself to transfer prison. Within the high security prison estate, where I was held for the first 10 years of my sentence, peers didn't really talk about life beyond the gate, and I found myself drifting into a mindset with no hope for the future. It is easy to forget life outside. However, having no sense of reality of life beyond the gate is, for me, the definition of being institutionalised. I don't like feeling too comfortable in prison and push myself to transfer prison every few years and try new things which take me out of my comfort zone. As much as it is always daunting to walk onto a new wing, where all eyes turn to look at me, the transfer process keeps me focused. The process of settling into a new prison takes a couple of months, finding my place in the established social dynamic takes time. The positive aspects of moving prison, are the new opportunities that become available. Every prison offers new opportunities and I make an effort to find them. l have now been in prison a long time, and l am hoping that the next transfer will be my last before getting released back in to the community where I will begin a new and exciting adventure.

Multi-dimensional Transitions

Jonathan: In line with MMT theory, (Jindal-Snape, 2016) our transitions do not only impact on us, but on other people that we are connected to, such as family and friends. My family struggled when I 'came out' to them. My decision to disclose my sexual identity was, I guess, a transition for me because it was the start of me living a more authentic life. However, I know it also affected them. I think they experienced a sense of shame and disappointment. I think that going to prison must also be a transition for prisoners that also affects other people, for example the families of prisoners.

Scott: I think of it as a grief process. The impact was huge on the family. But, over time the wound has started to heal and life on the outside goes on. In prison, in some respects, time stands still. So, lots has changed with the family and my place in the family dynamic does not exist now. This is why I want to create a new life in a new area of the country when I get out. Exciting times ahead.

Prison Routines

Jonathan: Establishing a sense of routine has always been important to me and I think that it must be important for prisoners too.

Scott: I think a stable prison routine is key to protecting mental health in prison. I have adapted to changes in routine, but other people do not adapt as well. For example, some cannot cope if we go into 'lock down.' A typical regime for this prison is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Prison Routines.

PRISON REGIME	
TIME	**EVENT**
0730	Unlock
0730–0800	Access to fresh air/exercise
0830	Movements to work/education
1130	Return from work/education
1145	Collect lunch
1215	Lock up/roll check
1320	Unlock and movement to work/education
1630	Return from work/education
1700	Lock up/roll check
1730	Collect evening meal
1800–1900	Access to fresh air/exercise
1930	Lock up/roll check

I have lots of free time and don't have to report to a specific workplace each day. This allows me to do my studies as and when I want and can get daily access to computers to complete my work. My trusted position also allows me much more time in the fresh air/exercise during the day. I could walk, and often do, for two or three hours, and find that this is a great way for me to think and relax. The trusted role of Offender Management Unit (OMU) Rep allows me to have free movement around the prison. I am classed as a 'trusted prisoner.' Today is a strange day as we are all on 'lock-down' meaning that we are all locked in our cells. This will mean that there is an incident in the prison, or they are doing a controlled search of the prison or a section of it.

Resilience

Jonathan: We have already touched on resilience and socio-ecological factors which impact on resilience, but there is limited literature (if any) on resiliency in LGBT+ prisoners.

Scott: I think my resilience comes down to my personality. I have always known my own mind, but determination and positivity are the two big things in my life. A pivotal moment for me was being told at the end of the trial how long my sentence would be. It was at this point when all hope drained from me. It took me many years to build up any kind of hope for the future. I am now being held in a Category C prison, predominantly with prisoners serving shorter sentences, many of them returning to prison time and time again. This gives me a feeling of hope for my own future. In terms of my resilience, I always have a clear focus on the future, but education has given me opportunities in prison that have made my life a little easier. I have been able to get prison jobs that are classified as 'trusted positions.' I have developed a peer support scheme that is still running at another prison. I think, for me, that filling my time

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with things that engage the brain is the way forward. I find that communicating with people outside and doing my studies takes my mind outside the prison walls, and this feels like a moment of freedom for me. I stay positive and that helps my self-esteem. I believe in being positive, although I am human and I do have down days and setbacks. Prison has taught me that anything is possible. Prisoners create their own future, and I am developing a bright future, with the help and support of personal and professional friends and acquaintances.

REFLECTIVE THINK PIECE: SCOTT

The chance for me to co-author this paper is an example of the opportunities that have come to the fore as a result of my education journey in prison. I hope that my lived experience as described in the communications l have had with Professor Glazzard will add a new perspective that will contribute to the academic knowledge base. I often read academic papers that offer theory about life in prison and become frustrated at what seems to be a lack of auto-ethnographic narrative which provide a real-life account to complement or challenge the academic standpoint and fuel the debate.

Life as an openly gay man in prison comes with a unique set of challenges that must be navigated carefully. The prison officers and managers play lip service to minority groups, and I have been shocked to learn recently that new prison officers don't receive any training about the needs, rules and rights of the LGBT+ prisoners. Having been in prison for a long time it is clearly evident that the needs and rights of all minority groups are not a priority. However, I would say that it only takes one member of staff with a vested interest in, for example, the LGBT+ community, for there to be more prominent support, advice and awareness within the prison. Out of the eight prisons I have been held in during my sentence, only one prison was actively acknowledging LGBT+ prisoners' needs, and not as is usually the case, just ticking a box.

My advice to the prison service would be to create appropriate training for staff of all grades, which includes the lived experiences of prisoners from the LGBT+ community. In terms of academic literature, l feel that much more research needs to be carried out looking specifically at the hypermasculine discourses in prison and using more real-life narratives to help inform the findings.

REFLECTIVE THINK PIECE: JONATHAN

The opportunity to co-author this paper with Scott has provided me with a unique and privileged insight into his lived experiences, as well as providing me with the opportunity to reflect on my own experiences. His communications with me were insightful, at times raw, and sometimes painful to read. The dialogue which took place illuminates the multiple transitions that Scott experienced before and throughout his time in custody. These transitions were synchronous rather than linear and triggered transitions for others, including his family and friends (in line with Jindal-Snape's (2016) MMT theory). Rather than crafting a narrative of despair, the dialogue that we have presented presents a narrative of hope. Scott's educational transitions during prison have given him hope and fuelled his resilience (in line with Greenfield, 2015). His collaborations with academics and others 'on the outside' have also kept him firmly grounded in life beyond the prison gates. Scott's optimistic outlook, combined with the multiple roles and responsibilities that he holds in prison, have also helped him to stay resilient and had numerous positive impacts on others, including his peers and prison staff. Scott's social, academic, cultural and physical transitions have largely been positive. His status, shaped by being a prison volunteer and someone who has been convicted of a serious crime, affords him a remarkable degree of protection within what is usually a very dangerous and hostile environment, particularly for those who are LGBT+.

Nonetheless, not everything is positive. In line with Meyer's (2003) model, Scott's experiences of minority stress, sparked by fear of disclosing his sexuality before and during his time in prison have resulted in him experiencing poor mental health. His experiences of physical and sexual assault led to social isolation and had adverse effects on his mental health. For Scott, transitioning from one prison to another is a gradual process of adaptation and triggers new transitions and proximal stressors.

CONCLUSION

We have presented extracts of dialogue which illuminate Scott's and Jonathan's educational and life transitions. Scott has experienced multiple, synchronous transitions which have also triggered transitions for others. In addition, he has been exposed to proximal and distal stressors which arose because of his sexual orientation. His exposure to physical and sexual assault during his time in prison impacted adversely on his mental health. However, not all transitions for Scott were negative. His decision to invest in his academic studies and to undertake trusted roles within the prison have resulted in growth, personal development, and optimism. Scott's willingness to act, maintain focus, positivity and hope have fuelled his resilience. Although we agree that '...it is necessary to find ways to make the prison system less rigid and dehumanising and to enable staff and people in custody to have increased level of autonomy and voice' (Fernandes et al., 2020, p. 17), we have presented a largely positive account of Scott's transitions, particularly during his time in prison, and therefore this paper advances the field beyond the tragic narratives which dominate the literature.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The raw conversations cannot be made available due to the highly sensitive nature of the content.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

His Majesty's Prison and Probation service (HMPPS) and HMPPS National Research Committee ethical approval and research clearance was not required as this article does not constitute an independent empirical study of prison staff or people detained in prison. Lengthy discussions were held between the authors before, during and after writing this article, with the aim of ensuring that informed consent of both authors remained throughout the whole process and to address any issues that such raw narrative could expose.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally to producing documentary evidence, reviewing the letters, e-mails, and messages and to the writing of the paper.

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