

CHAPTER 3

THE PRISON

Power, Paradox, Social Support, and Prestige: A Critical Approach to Addressing Correctional Officer Burnout

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Many critical ethnographers choose their research foci based on a fundamental belief that issues of power and struggle underlie most social behavior. Whether or not you are convinced by this tenet, however, I think the critical approach is an excellent way to make sense of everyday problems and injustices. Simply, critical theory provides a deep and plentiful toolbox for helping understand and undermine situations that are “not nice.”¹ In particular, I have used a critical poststructuralist approach to explicate and make sense of everyday dilemmas employees experience with emotion labor and organizational burnout. As such, my aim has been not only to ask “what is?” but also “what could be?” – to study organizational cultures not only for reasons of description, but also for the opportunity to provide a window of transformation.

This chapter uses a critical poststructuralist viewpoint to unpack problems experienced by correctional officers (also known as prison officers) as they deal with emotion labor and organizational burnout. In the course of officers’ formal duties of watching over inmates and enforcing jail and prison rules and regulations, they also must engage in a range of emotional fronts and confront high levels of emotional exhaustion. Before I begin this discussion, however, I want to provide a brief explanation about how and why I became interested in a critical poststructuralist approach. In the Foucauldian genealogical spirit,² I provide this “backstory” not for history’s sake, but because it provides an important context for evaluating my continued use of this approach today.

Moving Toward a Critical Approach: The Backstory

My early emotion labor research with 911 call-takers – which provided ethnographic detail on the ways employees use communication to manage emotion work when in crisis – was almost paradigmatically interpretive in nature.³ It was not until I tried to make sense of my (auto)ethnographic work on a cruise ship that I began a foray into

critical theory. Over the course of eight months, I served as assistant cruise director on the *Radiant Spirit* luxury cruise liner (a pseudonym). My job was to smile, make conversation, lead activities, greet passengers, and generally be an ever-cheery hostess on the ship. Uniforms and nametags were required in all passenger areas and I worked every day, up to 15 hours a day, without a single full day off. Not only were cruise staff expected to be emotionally on stage in passenger areas, they also did emotion work in the cruise staff office, the officer mess, crew bar, and sometimes even on the street or in restaurants in port cities. As such, the only consistent backstage areas were our 10 by 12 foot (windowless, shared) cabins. During my reign on the *Radiant Spirit*, I personally experienced high levels of burnout, stress, emotion labor, and self-alienation.⁴

My burnout and difficulty with emotion labor was perhaps no more poignant than in the following situation. During an afternoon off in Cabo San Lucas, I stood waiting in line behind other crew members at one of the few payphones. Just before the ship was to leave port, I made a static-filled call to my father in Wisconsin. While I envisioned a quick and lighthearted hello, I instead learned that my grandmother had died the evening before. As I raced back to the ship to prepare for the evening on stage, I tried to make sense of the somber and surprising information. However, with little time for contemplation, I hurried to my cabin, hastily shared the news with my roommate, showered, and changed into the night's festive costume. Immediately after the stage show, I jumped into pajamas and ran up to the passenger disco to host the pajama party theme night. I went ahead and held up a pretty convincing performance for the entire evening, which also included sitting and chatting with a couple of passengers who said they *had* to buy me a drink.

Later that night, I wrote in my journal about the range of emotions I experienced that evening – including happiness at helping passengers enjoy themselves, sadness for my father, irritation that work seemed to be a higher priority than personal life, and confusion as to how I should best jump among these conflicting emotions. To ease my conflicted emotional state, I had intermittently run over to a couple crew member friends sitting in the disco, who knew about my grandmother's death, and explained how "I'd rather be doing anything right now but dancing." I felt proud of my performance, but also somewhat guilty that perhaps I should be showing more sadness.⁴ These intermittent disclosures to my friends represented a desperate attempt to manage the expectations about the various emotions I should be performing.

Six months later, when I got off the ship (and back to graduate school), I tried to figure out why this particular situation, and why emotion labor in general, was so difficult and stressful on the *Radiant Spirit*. I naturally turned to the existing literature on emotion labor and burnout. What I found, though, was somewhat disappointing. It focused primarily on the individual – how the employee could better deal with burnout through things like deep breathing; how an individual's acting method related to self-alienation. Extant theories, as I'll discuss in more detail below, would suggest that the preceding situation was difficult because I was faking one emotion (cheeriness) while *really* feeling sadness. However, given the range of *real* emotions I experienced that evening, I felt unsatisfied with the "emotive dissonance" explanation. At the time of the incident, I had the intuitive sense that, surely, the organizational

structure and norms on the *Radiant Spirit* had something to do with the difficulty of doing emotion work. However, I found very little in the existing literature that focused on larger organizational issues that played a role in exacerbating issues of burnout and emotion labor.

During this time, I also happened to be taking my first class in critical and postmodern theory in organizations from Stanley Deetz at the University of Colorado. In short, over the next few months I learned that a critical poststructuralist approach, inspired by Michele Foucault, would help to usefully explicate how structural issues and discourses of power exacerbated issues of burnout and emotion labor.² For instance, a genealogy of the cruise industry helped to explain why emotion labor was normalized and unquestioned. The total institution aspect of the cruise ship made it difficult to escape its suffocating norms.⁵ The lack of a backstage made it all but impossible to express important (but not organizationally prescribed) emotional facets. Cruise ship employees' lack of power and self-subordination discouraged any questioning of the organizational expectations. Indeed, as illustrated in the above example, I never even entertained the idea that it might be appropriate to ask for an evening off. Critical poststructuralist theory helped explain how employees regularly self-subordinate to organizational norms and make panoptic control structures their own.⁶

So, I turned to a critical approach not because of an a priori goal to examine injustice and power. Rather, I found it simply to be a great way to better shed light on problems with emotion labor and burnout that the existing literature had not yet thoroughly explored. In what follows, I discuss the limitations of examining emotion labor and burnout from individual and psychological approaches. I then turn to a case study of correctional officers that aims to illustrate the utility of a critical poststructuralist approach.

Limitations of Extant Burnout and Emotion Labor Literature

Taking a critical approach means that commonsense assumptions must be questioned and used for social change. Furthermore, critical theory alerts us that things aren't always what they seem. Here I provide an overview of important concepts in the emotion labor and burnout literatures as well as question several past assumptions about these issues.

Emotion labor

Emotion management is generally considered to be the effort people put into making sure their private feelings are expressed in a way that is consistent with socially accepted norms, such as looking happy at a party and somber at a funeral. When emotion management is commodified as something to be bought and sold in the workplace, it becomes *emotional labor* – or what many scholars including myself have shortened to call *emotion labor*.⁷ Employees engage in emotion labor when they create an emotional “package” through their facial and bodily display that serves as part of the

organizational product. Emotion work has a number of faces⁸ – bill collectors create alarm, supermarket cashiers cheerfully greet customers, theme park employees exude excitement, and caregivers show concern. Emotion work not only involves the inflation of emotions, but also the suppression of organizationally inappropriate feelings.³ Call-takers at 911 suppress anxiety and alarm; high-beam steel workers hide fear; professors camouflage distress; healthcare workers swallow disgust; and police officers conceal weakness.⁹

Emotion work is important to organizations for several reasons. For many employees, such as waiters or flight attendants, a cheery emotional front is part of the product bought and sold. For other professionals, emotion labor is an embedded activity that facilitates their service; by hiding their fear, for instance, doctors are better able to deliver medical treatment. Researchers have examined how emotion labor can affect sales, influence clients, improve customer service, increase receptiveness to organizational change, and create emotion or calm in others.¹⁰ For these and other reasons, emotion labor is considered integral to the success of many organizational endeavors.

Some research suggests that emotion labor can be emotionally healthy, pleasant, and even fun.¹¹ However, the lion's share of research links emotion work with a number of negative psychosocial effects.¹² Research has connected emotion labor with burnout, depression, cynicism, role alienation, emotional numbness, job tension, and emotional exhaustion. Why can emotion labor be so difficult?

The majority of research focuses on *individual psychological* causes for this pain, suggesting that the discomfort of emotion labor arises due to “emotive dissonance” or a clash between *actual* inner feelings and outward expression.⁷ From this point of view, emotion labor obstructs an employee's ability to reconcile *true* feelings with an organizationally mandated *false* display of emotion. This viewpoint suggests the pain of emotion work is primarily about employees' individual acting methods. *Deep acting* – when members internalize the prescribed emotions and make them their own – supposedly leads to alienation and burnout. *Surface acting* – in which employees do not change their inner feelings, but change their outward emotional expression to fit organizational norms – is not supposed to lead to feelings of estrangement, but may make employees feel phony. Workers who believe that offering certain prescribed emotions should be part of the job, or *fake in good faith*, purportedly do not feel as much psychological discomfort as those who do not believe the false emotions should be part of the job, or *fake in bad faith*.¹³ Other researchers have argued that emotive dissonance results in less emotional exhaustion and higher job satisfaction when employees internalize their work duties and make the role their own.

These theories provide a strong basis for understanding the discomfort of emotion labor. However, I argue that the concept of emotive dissonance suffers from an over-reliance on individual and psychological explanations.¹⁰ It suggests that feelings are individual, personal, and internal and are then made fake either through surface acting or deep acting – processes considered to be ultimately separate from a real self.⁷ The presumption that emotion has a “truer” existence before it is constructed and constrained through organizational norms is problematic because it underestimates the role of communication in constructing emotion.¹⁴ Emotion develops in light of com-

munication terms operative within the local moral order. Indeed, it is difficult to feel and express emotions for which there is no word or label. Societal and organizational discourses shape the very notions of emotions.

A critical poststructuralist point of view maintains that identities, including emotional identities, are not singular or dichotomous, and not real or phony. While individuals may talk in terms of having a real self vs. a fake self, a poststructuralist viewpoint suggests that the self is “crystallized” with a number of facets.¹⁵ The identities and emotions of employees are constituted through overlapping discourses of power. As such, emotions are neither wholly real nor fake, which in turn suggests that we must look beyond individuals’ emotive dissonance and different methods of faking it to understand the discomfort associated with emotion work. Rather, discourses of power and prestige mark some emotional expressions as more powerful than others. Certainly, different organizational environments foster different notions of the most powerful or preferred emotional states. However, in many Western cultures, feminized emotional expressions such as nurturing, caring, and serving are seen as less powerful, and less preferred than those of toughness, stoicism, and emotional detachment.¹⁶ A critical approach suggests that researchers go beyond a focus on internal psychological states to consider how external discourses and norms affect the difficulty of emotion work.

Burnout

Burnout is a three-dimensional concept characterized by: 1) emotional exhaustion (or a “wearing out” from a job); 2) depersonalization or a negative shift in responses to others, such as clients; and 3) a decreased sense of personal accomplishment.¹⁷ As we enter the twenty-first century, burnout and stress – terms that are often used interchangeably – seem endemic to work. Burnout management training sessions are commonplace and the popular press is filled with articles about how to avoid, beat, and handle stress. However, stress and burnout are fairly recent concepts. Much of the stress research developed during World War II to test and select soldiers who would be the most “stress fit.”¹⁸ The primary concerns of early researchers in this area were with instincts, the fight-or-flight response, and the individual physiological reactions when certain stressors were placed on people. While today’s organizational stressors are quite different and more varied than those faced by soldiers, this early research set the stage for later work.

As such, it perhaps should be of little surprise that most organizational research and training still treat burnout and stress as *individual* pathologies rather than organizational, structural dilemmas. Employees are trained to identify and tackle their stressors using tactics such as biofeedback, meditation, and relaxation techniques. Furthermore, when workers are considered to be too stressed out to do their work effectively, they are often referred to employee assistance programs (EAPs). These individualistic stress interventions may assist with personal coping, but they often-times miss the *working patterns* that contribute to and define stress.

In contrast, a critical poststructuralist approach treats stress and burnout as *organizational structural problems* – having much to do with collective social support,

discourses of power, and larger organizational work structures. Individual remedies such as meditation and muscle relaxation do more to focus on the *symptoms* of burnout rather than to critically examine the *job stressors* themselves. Furthermore, individual approaches often relegate the working out of emotional difficulties to back-stage or off-stage areas (such as EAPs). In doing so, the organization effectively seals off issues of stress and burnout from the larger organization. This makes collective coping more difficult. Furthermore, EAPs unfortunately tend to be stigmatized and, thus, underutilized. This is due to their privatization and because, historically, EAPs have been associated with alcoholic or deviant employees.¹⁸

Ironically, individualizing these issues is largely disempowering to practitioners who actually want to do something about stress and burnout. Organizational administrators have very little control over employees' ability to apply meditation, biofeedback, or exercise advice. However, they do have some control over certain organizational structures that play a role in creating stress and burnout in the organizational atmosphere – things like organizational contradictions, limited opportunities for employee social support, or organizational cultures that make employees feel powerless. This does not mean that individual differences are completely irrelevant. However, it does suggest that we need to do more to analyze the collective nature of people's adaptation to the work environment. As illustrated in the following case study of jail and prison correctional officers, organizational burnout and the pain of emotion labor are exacerbated by structural issues including discourses of power and prestige, organizational contradictions and paradoxes, and a lack of social support.

The Case of Correctional Officers

Over the course of 11 months – May 1999 through March 2000 – I researched the work life of correctional officers. I interacted with 109 research participants (72 male, 37 female) who were employed at a county mixed-gender jail, Nouveau Jail, and a state women's prison, Women's Minimum. I engaged in a "tracer" form of ethnography, where the investigator follows people and their movements over time, *in situ*,¹⁹ and immersed myself in the correctional scene, observing everyday activities and collecting in-depth narratives and explanations from officers. A guiding research question was "why are correctional officers burned out, and how is this related to expectations for emotional control in the workplace?"

The primary source of data was fieldnotes from 80 hours of shadowing correctional officers in their day-to-day work and 33 hours of serving as a participant or participant-observer during training sessions. Additionally, I examined a number of training documents and conducted 22 in-depth recorded interviews with correctional employees: 10 with Nouveau Jail officers, nine with Women's Minimum officers, and three with organizational supervisors, including the prison warden, jail captain, and Nouveau city sheriff. I logged a total of 171 research hours yielding 722 single-spaced, typewritten pages of raw data.¹⁰ I conducted a grounded interpretive analysis of the data, reading and rereading fieldnotes, documents, and transcribed interviews for recurring patterns. Emergent themes included emotion labor norms; emotional per-

formances; and issues that mitigated the difficulty of emotion labor and contributed to burnout.

Pictures of burnout behind bars

As a population, correctional officers are burned out.²⁰ Past research, most based on one-time survey studies, suggests that officers experience role conflict, danger, strained relations with inmates, administration, and co-employees, lack of influence, overcrowding, inadequate staff, and a negative personal image.²¹ About half of officers view their jobs as stressful, and about a third report having problems with burnout. Part of my quest in doing ethnographic immersion research was to paint a picture of what burnout can look like in a correctional setting. Among other ways, I found that burnout manifested itself in correctional officers through symptoms of paranoia, withdrawal, literalism, toughness/coldness, an us–them mentality, and embarrassment of the job and themselves.

First, I found that many employees were paranoid, and largely for good reason. Not only did officers mistrust inmates, but also they mistrusted administrators and each other. As discussed in more detail below, they were afraid because administrators often took inmates' word over their own. Officers also cited confusion over whether or not they could trust their fellow officers. This paranoia traveled with them outside of the workplace and into private life as they visited discount stores, fast food places, and football arenas. While I heard no evidence of officers being assaulted outside of work, they were consistently wary that an ex-inmate might seek revenge. One officer explained, "I find myself fighting to not be so paranoid. I'll go to the store. I'll go to Kmart or Target . . . and I'll look at somebody and think, 'he looks like an inmate.' I have no idea where it comes from."

Officers were also largely withdrawn, quiet, and unquestioning of organizational norms. In the training sessions I attended, the leaders did not encourage participation, and when trainers did ask if officers had questions, they would usually remain quiet. One officer yelled out after a particularly long training session, "No questions 'cause we're so satisfied sir!" Indeed, many officers evidenced a literalistic "I'll just do what you tell me" mentality. As such, they sometimes evidenced a lack of complex thinking, and arbitrarily followed the rules. An interview excerpt with a correctional officer illustrates this:

They want someone who's like a robot. . . . If you think, you get into trouble. The one who would make a perfect officer . . . is the one that can stare at a wall for five hours and it won't phase him. You have to follow the rules . . . if you don't know what it is, look it up. It's right there. "What do I do?" It tells you what to do in every situation, so there's no room for you to think.

Officers also developed an us–them mentality. Officers exuded excitement when they caught inmates in wrongdoing, saying things like, "There's nothing better than a good bust." Indeed, they often saw an inmate "win" as a correctional officer "loss." For instance, visitation officers expressed disappointment on Christmas Day for the

nice weather, as it would bring out a lot of visitors and make their job more hectic. Officers' comments and behaviors also reinforced an us–them boundary even in scenarios in which it was not obvious that an inmate's gain was an officer's loss. The following example is typical. I once observed an officer sorting out the inmates' dinner and filling up their Kool-Aid glasses. He tasted one of the batches of Kool-Aid and said, "Yuck, this one doesn't have sugar in it." Then he muttered to himself, "Do you think we should give them [inmates] the good Kool-Aid or the bad Kool-Aid?" He continued, "I think the good stuff for us, the bad stuff for them." The inmates' loss was the officer's gain – even though there was enough of the good Kool-Aid for both the officers and most of the inmates.

Furthermore, over time, officers appeared to become increasingly cold and dismissive, not only to inmates, but also to other outsiders and in personal situations. One officer explained how, since taking the job, she was much less phased by violence, whether in the prison or on the street. A Nouveau Jail officer explained how officers became cold over the course of their career:

When they're hired as a new recruit, it's "I'm so happy to be here and I love everybody." And then after a couple of years, it's "Everybody's an asshole but me and the sergeant and you guys and the sheriff." And a year or two later, it's "Everybody's an asshole except me and the guys and the sheriff." The sergeant's an asshole too by that time. And then it's just "me and my partner." And that's a pretty normal progression.

Another officer near retirement appeared somber and regretful as he summed up how his emotional demeanor had changed because of the job, saying, "I guess I grew hard and cold about a lot of things. The biggest thing that doesn't affect me is injuries and death. I just don't have the same feelings I used to have."

So, in summary, past research as well as my ethnographic research, suggests that officers are largely burned out, manifested in a correctional mentality that is paranoid, withdrawn, literalistic, and hardened. This, in turn, can lead to a number of organizational and personal problems. Organizationally, when employees have an us–them, bossy mentality toward inmates, they are less likely to be interested in rehabilitation and care. On the flip side, if they feel alone and depressed, they may be more easily swayed to go to the inmate side and seek inappropriate relationships with the criminals they are supposed to be watching. Furthermore, when officers are literalistic and withdrawn, it is more difficult to be flexible in the workplace, and inflexible officers cannot deal with the day-to-day details of watching over inmates.

Officers also cite difficulty in being able to turn off their institutionalized personality when they go home. As one officer told me, "This job will change your mindset. My ex-wife used to tell me I was a jerk. She said that, about an hour before work, when I would get into my uniform, I'd start *telling* rather than *asking* and get louder and totally unsympathetic." Officers have a divorce rate that is twice as high as the average worker, tend to have elevated problems with domestic violence and alcoholism, and a life expectancy of 59 years.²² This is not only problematic for the officer, but also for the organization because it leads to increased sickness, absenteeism, and turnover.

Toward a structural remedy

So, the question arises, why are officers so burned out, and what might be done to remedy the problem? The current practice in most correctional organizations is to deal with burnout as a personal problem, teaching employees to engage in individual relaxation techniques when they get stressed out. And when employees get too burned out to do their job, they are directed to the (oftentimes stigmatized) employee assistance program. While these approaches might be helpful for meeting the effects or symptoms of stress, they do little to tackle its causes. A critical poststructuralist approach would suggest that these problematic pictures of burnout are fruitfully addressed by examining structural issues that exacerbate burnout and make it difficult to provide emotion labor to convicted criminals. Here, I point to four such issues: low prestige, correctional contradictions, feelings of powerlessness, and a lack of social support.

Battling societal discourses of low prestige

During the course of my research, it became very clear to me that correctional officers do extremely important but very difficult work. Unfortunately, officers tend to hold their job and themselves in fairly low esteem. Punishment is the most hidden part of the penal process, and facts about prison life are largely silent and invisible.² When information about jails and prisons is covered in the media at all, it is usually only when something goes wrong, such as an escape or sexual abuse. Correctional officers feel misunderstood and denigrated by a variety of audiences, even by other law enforcement professionals.²³ Officers said: “We are considered the dregs of the police department,” “Police officers don’t consider us to even be in their same category,” and “Corrections is like the crappiest job in the criminal justice system.” Many officers compared themselves to “babysitters” – a label that connotes low-status, feminized work.

Officers also dealt with the “contagion” effect.²⁴ The stigma associated with criminals rubs off onto workers, and correctional officers are sometimes regarded by outsiders to be not so different from the population they control. As one officer explained, “They think that we’re part of the punishment, that we’re uneducated, big mean people barking out orders. You know, I’ve even had people ask me if we *beat* people!” Another said, “In movies, they depict us as brutal, disrespectful to them. We hurt them, we beat them up.”

This low regard also emanated from friends and neighbors who assumed correctional officers were stupid and that the job was easy and mindless. As one officer said, “A lot of times my family thinks I get paid for doing nothing. . . . They say, ‘God, you get paid all that money and you watch TV and play video games all night.’” Another officer said her friends thought she got paid for “pushing buttons and doors are sliding and that’s all there is to it.”

Because of this public misunderstanding and denigration, officers are unable to go home and make sense of their jobs in the same ways as do other employees. Therefore, they oftentimes try to leave “work at work” but, by doing so, are prevented from making sense of their world in the same ways as are offered to people who work typical

nine-to-five type jobs. Some correctional officers internalized the low opinions of their job and felt depressed about their work. Others felt emotionally frustrated and exhausted in the battle to continually combat negative opinions and misunderstandings, trying to prove to others (and themselves) that the job was indeed significant and moral.

Managing low status emotion labor in a tension-filled organizational environment

Officers also felt strain as they attempted to provide the expected emotion labor to inmates.¹⁰ They were expected to be respectful by calling inmates by a title and opening their doors. While not hired as counselors, officers were also expected to be nurturing, listen to inmates, help them think through problems, and prepare them for life outside the barbed wire. Furthermore, they were expected to use their judgment, and be fair and flexible. Officers who strictly followed the rules were negatively labeled as “badge happy.”

At the same time, officers received even stronger norms that they should never trust inmates, and that they should be tough, unaffected, and unemotional. Training manuals warned officers in no uncertain terms that they should not “get personal” with the inmates. Officers reiterated the importance of toughness in their informal talk, making fun of those who got “sucked in” by inmates. A good officer was described as “not a chocolate heart” – a metaphor that suggests that officers should not melt or be sweet-talked by inmates. Rather, good officers were described as strict, disciplined, and consistent. One officer proudly described herself as “just like a drill sergeant.”

Most officers did an admirable job of holding up these emotion labor expectations, at least to some extent. However, officers (especially male officers) appeared more able to be tough than be nurturing – especially when they were required to engage in subservient activities such as serving food or picking up laundry. Similar to how I experienced tension on the cruise ship when my grandmother died, officers expressed conflict about negotiating contradictory emotion displays, such as being respectful, but suspicious, and nurture, yet discipline. While all organizational environments are marked with tension and contradiction, when discourses of power dictate two different emotional performances, employees evidence confusion about how best to attend to both expectations.²⁵

In the case of correctional officers, larger societal discourses (as well as some discourses within the organization) suggest that men should be strong, tough, and better than a convicted criminal. However, in the moment, these officers are expected to provide feminized service (e.g., laundry pick up, Kool-Aid delivery) to criminals – people that society has hidden away and marked as deviant. In these paradoxical situations, in which officers were expected to show low-status emotional fronts, they could become sarcastic, detached, and caustic. This difficulty associated with the emotion labor, though, is not necessarily caused by emotive dissonance (feeling one *real* emotion such as toughness and having to show another *fake* emotion like respect). In fact, when asked whether they had to fake emotions, correctional officers mentioned that acting like a jerk oftentimes required a fair amount of emotional effort. Rather, a

critical poststructuralist approach suggests that it is difficult to perform a nonpreferred low-status emotion in the face of discourses of power that define the preferred officer as tough and “not a chocolate heart.” It is no wonder that, in such situations, officers sometimes engaged in practices that would “accidentally” punish inmates – such as serving them the “bad” Kool-Aid.

It is also difficult to navigate contradictory emotion labor norms. Officers must respect inmates, but also be continually suspicious. They must nurture, yet be tough and maintain detachment. They must follow the rules, yet be flexible. Unfortunately, correctional officer training does little to nothing to address these dilemmas, or provide a space where administrators and employees can acknowledge their existence and try to work through them.

Past research suggests that, when confronted by contradiction, people usually respond with a combination of confusion, displeasure, and anxiety.²⁶ This is exacerbated when contradictions are not talked about and individuals feel as though they cannot “escape” or make sense of the contradiction through talk.²⁷ Jails and prisons are “total institutions”⁵ and separated from most people’s life paths. Furthermore, the routine and pace of prison life is so different from the “outside” that few correctional employees feel comfortable bringing their work home with them. As such, employees can find these contradictions suffocating and impossible to avoid. In these cases, employees can feel like they must be misunderstanding something, or that they are crazy. Indeed, past “family systems” theory research tells us that the emotional reactions of paranoia, literalism, and withdrawal (pictures of burnout among correctional officers) are common in children who are faced with paradoxical messages from a parent.²⁷

So, we see that pictures of burnout can be connected to the contradictory atmosphere and larger societal discourses that paint correctional officers as low status. Furthermore, their work asks them to be respectful to alleged criminals. Therefore, when discourses of power ask for emotion labor that counters a nonpreferred identity, it becomes difficult.

Creating spaces for social support and communication about the contradictions

How can we help officers avoid framing organizational tensions as paradoxes and evidencing unhealthy emotional reactions? How might we provide a respite that could attend to issues of low prestige and the threatening nature of showing low-status emotions? My research suggests that correctional organizations should do more to acknowledge and help employees make sense of organizational tensions, and create spaces and places in which officers can have more camaraderie and social support from each other.

Currently, officers are largely left to make sense of the organizational tensions on their own. Communication theory tells us that talking with others about contradictions is one way to “escape” paradoxes.²⁷ Communication does not reconcile or eliminate contradiction – it just allows people to make sense of it and make it less of a mystery. Discussion allows people to realize they are not the only ones experiencing

these tensions in their work. One way correctional administrators might approach inclusion of metacommunication about organizational tensions would be to introduce role playing of dilemmatic scenarios (e.g. wherein an officer must be nurturing, yet still watchful) in training sessions.²⁵ To encourage questioning and an acknowledgment of the complexities inherent to the job, scenarios could illustrate the range of ways that officers can deal with similar situations effectively. This approach could also encourage a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of different paths of action.

As noted, officers often face disdain and lack of understanding about their work. This can be particularly problematic because research suggests that extra-organizational factors – such as the views of family, neighbors, and the community at large – are at least as important as intra-organizational factors in determining people's attitudes to their jobs.²⁸ Unfortunately, the regimen and isolation of correctional officer work exacerbates the potential utility of support from family or friends. Traditional external sources of social support may not ameliorate employee stress when these groups do not understand or have a negative perception of the work that employees do within total institutions. As we can see, officers have a difficult time trying to get social support from traditional sources such as friends and family. Unfortunately, officers also face obstacles to receiving social support within the correctional atmosphere.

Correctional officers work within an environment of wariness and mistrust. While they are hired to be watchers, they are ironically the most watched of any group in the penal system. They are gazed at, and thus disciplined, by inmates, administrators, and each other. Because of this structural feature of the job, officers largely mistrust management and sometimes each other as much as inmates. Officers said things like: "You can do a great job for ten years, then you screw up once and you get fired," "They can find out anything about you and that makes it very scary," and "Lots of times, management will trust an inmate's story over your own." One officer even discussed how this lack of trust permeated her dream world: She shared a dream in which she fell on some ice and, when she called for help, the sergeant on duty refused to come because he was in a meeting. Many officers also seemed wary of each other, and various shifts of employees were almost combative and competitive with one another.

In addition to this lack of trust, the mere structure of most correctional organizations makes it difficult, if not impossible, for employees to talk to each other. The only time they are all together is during the announcement-saturated, 15 minute pre-shift briefing. Furthermore, most officers work on their own as they watch over a certain housing module or pat-down inmates as they enter various areas of the facility. The fact that employees are largely cut off from one another is especially unfortunate considering that social support is considered to be most effective when it comes from like-minded others.

So, officers work in an environment of mistrust and face a situation in which they have difficulty gaining social support from their family and friends, their managers, and their co-workers. This is problematic in any job, but may be especially devastating when employees must do low-status "dirty work" work that threatens their identity.²³ In contrast to flight attendants, for instance, who are able to retreat briefly to the galley

to collectively make fun of a rude passenger, or in contrast to paramedics, who can together decide it is not their fault if they cannot convince a whacked out drug addict to go the hospital, correctional officers have few opportunities to commiserate with like-minded peers and re-create their self-image in preferred ways. This helps to explain why engaging in low-status emotion work can be so difficult among correctional officers – they are asked to be respectful and nurturing to clients that societal discourses paint as deviant and bad. And, then they face the additional burden of structural obstacles that make it all but impossible to rebuild a secured and preferred sense of self.

Given these challenges, correctional organizations need to consider how they could provide officers with more backstage, collective spaces for peer social support. This might include increasing the amount of time of spent in pre- and post-shift briefings or providing collective break times. Organizations should also consider ways officers might be able to work in pairs, at least for part of their shift. I found that when employees worked together, they were better able to provide the respectful and nurturing emotional performances required of their job. In such situations, officers were able to vent about the low-status performances and communicatively reconstruct themselves in preferred ways.

In contrast, when employees work without peer support, they often feel limited by the options available to deal with the paradoxes, emotion work, and low prestige that characterize their everyday work. First, and most common, they can absorb and internalize the identity threats of their work, and process them on their own. However, my data suggest that, over time, doing so can deteriorate employees' sense self-worth, lead to a cold dismissive mentality, and ultimately result in burnout. Another (problematic) option is for officers to garner social support from the only other audience available to them – inmates. Of course, confiding in inmates is completely against the rules and can result in costly repercussions; when officers turn to inmates for social support, they are more liable to get sucked in by inappropriate relations or ruses. In turn, the organization may be faced with lawsuits, officer hearings, and increased turnover. Given these costs, it makes sense to consider creative organizational changes that would allow officers to more often work with one another.

Providing opportunities for power

Another issue that exacerbates challenges with burnout and emotion labor is officers' feelings of powerlessness. As mentioned, officers face societal discourses that paint their job, and correctional institutions in general, in a negative way. Given that officers talk about themselves as "glorified babysitters," the "scum of law enforcement," "maids," and "camp counselors," it is clear that many of them have internalized the idea that they hold low-status, low-power positions. This is only worsened by the ways internal structures preclude officers from feeling powerful in their work environment.

While we might presume officers have legitimate power due to their formal position and their badge, this is not necessarily the case. Although inmates agree with officers' rights to give orders, inmates generally don't feel an obligation to obey.²⁹ Furthermore,

officers oftentimes feel as though their ideas are not heard or appreciated by managers. As one said:

I think your frustration comes out when you . . . see that there might be a better way to do it. You present it, and it's like, "You fool, what do you mean 'a round wheel'? We've been using the square wheel for years. Are you crazy?" You're hated for bringing it up.

Second, despite the brutality portrayed in sensationalized, Hollywood depictions of prisons and jails, today's penal institutions do not condone punitive (or punishment) correctional philosophies.³⁰ In moving toward "kinder and gentler" correctional approaches, however, officers have lost punishment and coercive power. One officer discussed his frustration with the lack of coercive power. He summed up the worst part of the job, saying:

Dealing with some of the assholes and not being able to strike back . . . If I don't do anything, then I look like an idiot, and if I *do* do something, then I'm a badge-heavy jerk who just wants to beat people up. That's not me and sometimes you just need to swallow whatever they're giving you and you've got to take it and just say, "you son of a bitch," and there's nothing you can do. That's very, very frustrating.

Officers not only are limited in their power to punish. They also have very little power to reward inmates. Correctional administrators and a faceless "system" make decisions about inmate classification, privileges, and early release. As such, officers often feel as though they serve merely as messengers and enforcers.

At the same time, officers feel quite frustrated with their inability to enforce rules. For example, an officer caught an inmate with contraband tobacco in her cell, but because he forgot to write her cell number on the write-up form, the bust was thrown out by management. This officer expressed irritation saying, "Why bother with it? If they're going to throw it out for some thing like this, you know, when we found the tobacco right on her, what is going to get busted?" Another explained, "It's frustrating because you write them up and then they just let it go. And then the inmates just laugh at you . . . Why should I care? But then that's not good for us to get . . . lax in our work." For this officer, there was no easy answer – he did not want to be lax, but he also did not like feeling embarrassed and powerless when his write-ups were thrown out.

Furthermore, officers are told they are not inmate counselors and should not act as experts or give advice to inmates. This strips away from officers any potential feelings of power and satisfaction that come from being an authority or specialist. Indeed, a number of the correctional officers took the job because they hoped to make a difference, and became disillusioned when they learned that they were not formally allowed to give advice. Furthermore, because inmates live in the institution 24/7, and officers cycle in and out during three shifts, inmates often know more about the (ever-changing) rules and regulations of the institution than do officers. As such, officers also have very little expert power.²⁹

Last, let's look at referent power granted based on respect and admiration. My data supported past research that suggests that officers who are fair and evenhanded in their

relations with inmates, who display respect, and fulfill their promises do garner some respect. However, because officers are *expected* to be respectful to inmates, doing so no longer necessarily triggers surprise, admiration, or affinity, thus mitigating it as a space for referent power.

To address correctional officers' feelings of powerlessness, correctional administrators could consider several different practices. First, from a critical poststructuralist viewpoint, it is important to remember that power is a fluid process, not a product. From this point of view, administrators need not believe that by creating organizational practices that provide officers with more feelings of power they must give away their own power. For instance, officers would likely feel more expert if administrators simply provided explanations of rule changes and why, for example, a particular inmate was not punished for a certain offense. This would allow officers to at least seem "in the know" when they had to enforce different policies. Administrators might also consider placing several correctional officers on administrative boards – if nothing else, so inmates feel as though officers do have a say in creating rules. As it stands, officers' relative feelings of powerlessness lend themselves to decreased respect from inmates, and officers feeling burnout and a lack of pride in the job.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained the ways that burnout and the pain of emotion labor are usually treated as individual employee problems that workers should try to tackle on their own. Typical "cures" usually include meditation, muscle relaxation, biofeedback, and siphoning off the "sick" employees to employee assistance programs. While examining burnout and stress as individual problems may be helpful in some ways, it is problematic considering that EAPs are oftentimes stigmatized by workers and thus are underutilized. Furthermore, focusing on the individual obscures the ways stress and burnout are largely due to organization-wide practices and norms. In contrast, a critical approach sheds light on larger discourses of power and structural issues that exacerbate emotion labor and burnout. By taking such an approach, organizations are better able to address some of the root causes of employee stress and burnout.

As illustrated in this case study, correctional officers face several structural issues connected to burnout. They face societal discourses of low prestige that denigrate correctional institutions. They also work in total institutions, marked with contradictory organizational norms; they are asked to do low-status service work for convicted criminals, feel powerless, and face significant challenges in garnering social support. These issues help explain why so many officers feel alienated, depressed, perplexed, and burned out with their work. Clearly, officers themselves have very little control over these matters. They cannot, for instance, solve structural contradictions or low prestige by going home and taking a hot bath, or by talking it out with an employee assistance counselor. However, the good news is that, by identifying structural concerns that contribute to burnout, administrators and societies can begin to address ways that institutions might be changed so that their employees could have more fulfilling and functional jobs. Whether it be a correctional institution or cruise ship, it is

important to recognize that there are a number of organizational practices that can be shifted in order to help employees feel better and less burned out in their work. These include providing space for like-minded peer employees to communicatively construct a preferred identity, engaging in practices that educate clients and outsiders as to the worth and morality of employee work, and acknowledging and helping employees make sense of the tensions that mark their organizational endeavors.

This case also extends theoretical understandings of emotion in organizations. A critical approach suggests that the difficulty of performing emotion is largely based on societal and organizational discourses of power. Emotion norms are easier to uphold when they prescribe emotions that discourses condone as part of employees' preferred identity. This is why emotion labor can be fun and electrifying in some situations (e.g. when officers get to act tough around inmates), and degrading, alienating, and miserable in other situations (e.g. when officers have to engage in low-status, feminized activities like serving Kool-Aid). Faking low-status emotions that contrast with a preferred identity is much more difficult than feigning those that paint an employee in ways that align with dominant organizational discourses. Furthermore, members can more easily feign low-status emotions when they can also interact with one another backstage and rebuild their identity through interaction with their peers.

I believe there is still much to explore in regard to how larger societal and organizational discourses affect burnout and emotion labor. A critical poststructuralist viewpoint suggests that discourses of power are central to the ways that identity and emotion are constructed, constrained, and interpreted. Indeed, employees' "feelings and emotions . . . are tied to the patterns, tensions, and contradictions of the varied role, power, and structural arrangements."³¹ Identifying and making sense of these structural challenges is an important first step in moving toward transformation and disrupting organizational practices that constrain employees' identities in emotionally unhealthy ways.

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