Dialectic, Contradiction, or Double Bind? Analyzing and Theorizing Employee Reactions to Organizational Tension

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Drawing from qualitative data gathered at two correctional facilities, this paper empirically illustrates employee reactions to organizational contradictions in a total institution and advances a theoretical model positing that organizational tensions may be framed as complementary dialectics, simple contradictions, or pragmatic paradoxes— each accompanied by attendant organizational and personal ramifications. The analysis suggests that organizations can create structures in which employees are more likely to make sense of organizational contradictions in healthy ways and avoid the debilitating reactions associated with double binds. Specifically, through metacommunication about organizational tensions (for instance, manifest in role play enactment of contradictory occupational goals), employees are better able to understand the paradoxes that mark work life and make sense of them in emotionally healthy ways.

Keywords: Burnout; Contradiction; Correctional Facility; Double Bind; Emotion; Gender; Paradox; Total Institution

Popular press articles and business consultants alike suggest that when employees juggle divergent work priorities (Goldhar, 2002), balance competing work and life concerns (Tyre & McGinn, 2003), or hold multiple roles in organizations (Brenner, 2004), they can become bewildered and stressed out in the job. Indeed, role

ambiguity and conflict have long been associated with burnout in a number of different job settings (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Lait & Wallace, 2002; Putnam, 1986), suggesting that unclear and incongruent messages are organizationally and personally problematic. Regardless, workplace dilemmas (Tracy, 1997), contradictions (Hatch, 1997), ironies (Trethewey, 1999), and paradoxes (Stohl, 1995; Wendt, 1998) appear to be quite common and, in some cases, potentially productive (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). This suggests that it is not contradiction or paradox, per se, that is productive or unproductive, good or bad, liberating or paralyzing, but rather, that employees can react to contradiction in various ways, and that their framing techniques of workplace tensions can have various personal and organizational effects.

I explore these issues through an analysis of qualitative data gathered among prison and jail correctional officers. This data set provides a powerful context for understanding contradiction given the dilemmatic nature of correctional work (Blau, Light, & Chamlin, 1986; Tracy, 2003a, 2003b, 2004) and the ways that gendered and raced correctional structures give rise to paradox (Britton, 1997b, 2003; Tracy, 2004). This context is also appropriate given that contradiction in the form of role conflict has been linked to burnout (Katz & Kahn, 1966), and a high level of organizational burnout and stress characterize correctional environments (Cheek & Miller, 1983; Drory & Shamir, 1988; Huckabee, 1992; Lindquist & Whitehead, 1986). A better understanding of contradiction among correctional officers has potential practical implications for an employee group marked by significant emotional challenges. While role conflict has been correlated with burnout (Katz & Kahn, 1966), we have little empirical data on the ways employees react to organization tensions in practice and why some organizational situations allow employees to manage contradiction better than others.

This essay opens with explanations of potential responses to contradiction and a discussion of the dilemmatic nature of correctional environments. Qualitative data and methods are explained before turning to a case analysis that illustrates employees' reactions to organizational tensions. I then propose a theoretical model that delineates three ways employees may frame organizational tensions—as simple contradictions, complementary dialectics, or as paradoxes—each accompanied by various organizational and personal repercussions. The essay closes with theoretical and practical implications.

Contradictions and Corrections

Organizations have traditionally been considered rational enterprises, preferably with little ambiguity, tension, or emotionality (Eisenberg, 1984; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). From this point of view, contradiction has been considered to be a barrier to productivity and a sign of organizational weakness (Wendt, 1998). Katz and Kahn (1966) suggested that when employees face unclear or contradictory expectations and, thus, experience role ambiguity or role conflict, they are susceptible to burnout and stress. Likewise, as early as 1938, organizational theorist Chester Barnard warned

that when organizational "codes" of "equal validity" conflict, an employee is subjected to a "serious personal issue" (1938/1968, p. 264).

While much early research suggests problems associated with contradiction, more recent literature suggests that contradictions are inescapable, normal and, in some cases, to be embraced (Trethewey & Ashcraft, this volume). Hatch (1997) contends that paradoxes allow organizations to maintain mutually exclusive structures, such as stability/instability, without incapacitating the organization. Putnam (1986) claims that, "contradictions and conflicts, as ruptures in the current social fabric, function as opportunities to change prevailing practices" (p. 153). Stohl and Cheney (2001) argue that paradox is "almost inevitable" in the context of workplace democracy and employee participation. Furthermore, there is a growing body of literature that analyzes how feminist forms of organizing are rife with contradiction and paradox (e.g., Ashcraft, 2001; Buzzanell et al., 1997; Trethewey, 1999). Ashcraft (2001) suggests that feminist theory is uniquely poised to offer fresh alternatives to management studies precisely because of its paradoxical form; she coins the term "organized dissonance" (p. 1304) to refer to the strategic merger of hierarchical and egalitarian modes of power that marks feminist organizing. This suggests that a normal function of organizing is finding ways to hold together "necessary incompatibles" (Ferguson, 1993) and that contradiction can be active, purposeful and worthwhile, rather than just a problem to be fixed (Buzzanell et al., 1997).

While this research is helpful for revealing various organizational structures and discourses that continually (re)construct organizational tensions, we know less about the ways people actually respond, in situ, to dialectical or opposing organizational mandates. Several theoretical strains lay groundwork for understanding individual responses to organizational tensions.

Response to Contradiction

One of the most popular communication theories to examine contradiction is dialectical theory developed by Leslie Baxter and her colleagues (Baxter, 1988, 1990; Werner & Baxter, 1994). Although designed to explain the stages of personal relationship development, it is helpful to review dialectical theory here because it provides a conceptual framework that may help elucidate reactions to tensions in organizational interaction.

Baxter (1988, 1990) explains that people manage and respond to tensions in their romantic relationships—such as the simultaneous desires to be autonomous but also connected to the other—through one or more of the following techniques. The most simplistic management technique is to *select* one pole to be dominant to the exclusion of the other condition. People can also *separate* the poles through simply alternating the attention paid to them or topically segmenting varying activities to correspond with the two different poles. People can also *neutralize* the intensity of each contradiction through small talk. Last, they can *reframe* the tension, which is characterized by a perceptual transformation of the elements so that the two contrasts are no longer regarded as opposites. Reframing, although more cognitively

advanced and difficult than the other techniques, is correlated with higher relationship satisfaction than the other management techniques (Baxter, 1988, 1990). It would be interesting to know whether employees manage and frame the tensions inherent in their work life in similar or different manners. While Stohl and Cheney (2001) provide a thoughtful theoretical discussion regarding the efficacy of dealing with organizational paradoxes through reframing and synthesis, we have little empirical data that illustrate these tactics in day-to-day work.

Contradictions, from the vantage of dialectical theory (Baxter, 1988, 1990), are not considered inherently harmful; tensions are never resolved but rather just manifest differently during the course of a relationship (Baxter, 1988; Goldsmith, 1990). However, another theoretical lens—that of family systems theory—suggests that contradictions in close relationships can be problematic, especially when they are heard as "pragmatic paradoxes" (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). While a simple contradiction offers two mutually exclusive alternatives (such as "stop" or "go"), a pragmatic paradox "bankrupts choice itself" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 217), for to obey is to disobey and to disobey is to obey. For instance, the mandate "be spontaneous" is paradoxical (Putnam, 1986). If one *plans* to be spontaneous, then one cannot by definition *be* spontaneous. On the other hand, if the mandate is disobeyed, it is paradoxically obeyed, because refusing to comply with the mandate "be spontaneous" is spontaneous.

Pragmatic paradoxes are considered especially debilitating when they become double binds—a process requiring three interactional ingredients (Watzlawick et al., 1967). First, the interactants must be involved in an intense relationship; second, the message must be structured as a paradox (so that to obey is to disobey and vice versa); third, the recipient must be "prevented from stepping outside the frame set by this message" (p. 212). In other words, the recipient must not be able to escape the message by either metacommunicating (commenting) about it or by withdrawing physically from the scene.

Double binds are connected with several debilitating response patterns. It comes as no surprise that one unifying consequence of all types of paradoxical messages is that the recipient responds with some combination of confusion, displeasure, and anxiety (Putnam, 1986). However, because of the complex structure of double binds, only a few reactions are pragmatically possible (Watzlawick et al., 1967), all of which are illogical and problematic themselves. First, "faced with the untenable absurdity of his situation," a person faced with a double bind "is likely to conclude that he must be overlooking vital clues" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 217). This person will be obsessed with finding these clues in order to make sense of the situation and may become paranoid. Another response is to "comply with any and all injunctions with complete literalness and to abstain overtly from any independent thinking" (p. 218). This behavior, in which the actor treats trivial and important commands with equivalent reverence, seems foolish to outside observers. Third, a person could choose to withdraw from all human involvement either through physical isolation or through conceptually blocking input channels of communication—e.g., through becoming unapproachable or by becoming so hyperactive that "most incoming

messages are thereby drowned out" (p. 218). In short, family systems theory thus suggests that people faced with double binds may respond through paranoia, a lack of complex thinking, and withdrawal.

Diffuse feeling states that appear to be similar to these have also been posited in relation to employees faced by contradictions in organizational atmospheres. Barnard (1938/1968) highlights the personal costs burdening employees who must attend to multiple, equally valid and powerful, yet conflicting goals (or "codes"), suggesting that doing so results in one of three potential results:

> 1) either there is paralysis of action, accompanied by emotional tension, and ending in a sense of frustration, blockage, uncertainty, or in loss of decisiveness and lack of confidence; or 2) there is conformance to one code and violation of the other, resulting in a sense of guilt, discomfort, dissatisfaction, or a loss of self-respect; or 3) there is found some substitute action which satisfies immediate desire or impulse or interest, or the dictates of one code and yet conforms to all the other codes. (p. 264)

As described, Barnard suggests that employees faced with conflicting tensions may be paralyzed, and feel frustration, uncertainty, and guilt.

Organizational tensions may also lead to emotional ambivalence, or "the association of both strong positive and negative emotions with some target (such as, a person or object/symbol)" (Pratt & Doucet, 2000, p. 205). Employee behaviors associated with emotional ambivalence include fanatical commitment, frustration and derogatory humor, and escapist behaviors including denial and evasion (Pratt & Doucet, 2000). Similar to dialectical theory (Baxter, 1988, 1990), Pratt and Doucet (2000) found employees to respond to contradictions in simple ways such as cyclically altering attention to various poles. Furthermore they theorized, like Barnard (1938/1968) and Watzlawick et al. (1967), that another potential response could be extreme indecision or paralysis. However, they were at a loss to find empirical data to illustrate this reaction and suggested that employees who were paralyzed would probably soon exit or be terminated from their position.

As reviewed above, past theories discuss a variety of responses to and ways to manage tensions, some of which are associated with problematic emotional reactions including shades of guilt, paranoia, frustration, withdrawal, and anxiety. Nevertheless, a number of employees manage contradictions without these accompanying problematic reactions (Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Trethewey, 1999; Wendt, 1998), illustrating flexibility, negotiation and thoughtful discretion. This suggests that it is not tension, per se, that automatically causes such reactions. Rather, the problematic emotional responses associated with organizational role conflict may depend on the ways that employees frame tensions and react in practice.

Contradiction in Correctional Institutions

The work of correctional officers—the watchers and keepers of prisoners—is dilemmatic and contradictory in nature. Role conflict and ambiguity in correctional facilities have been attributed to several different phenomena including poor

communication among line and supervisory personnel (Cheek & Miller, 1983; Lombardo, 1981), inconsistent instructions from supervisors (Lindquist & White-head, 1986) and a lack of standardized policies in dealing with inmates (Cheek & Miller, 1983). Saylor and Wright (1992) review a number of studies and point out that role ambiguity has been linked to a punitive orientation (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980), tedium (Shamir & Drory, 1982), and burnout (Dignam, Barrera, & West, 1986; Holgate & Clegg, 1991; Manning, 1983). These challenges are evident among employees both at jails, which hold inmates until they are sentenced (e.g., Dignam et al., 1986), and prisons, which hold convicted criminals (Blau et al., 1986).

Foucault (1977) maintains that, from the outset, the penal imprisonment system has been designed to have two central, but disparate, goals: to deprive inmates of liberty and technically transform or correct individuals. One prime difficulty is that administrative rules and bureaucratic policies dictate every aspect of prison work; yet working effectively with inmates requires flexibility, latitude, and discretion (Blau et al., 1986; Sykes, 1958). In other words, officers face a dilemma of rigidity and flexibility (Cheek & Miller, 1983). Another central contradiction stems from the fact that officers must control inmates but simultaneously serve as role models and rehabilitators (Blau et al., 1986). As such, officers must maintain an orderly prison life, yet still treat prisoners in a humane manner. These two competing narratives for prisoners—one based on punishment and another based on rehabilitation—have trickled down into the everyday processes of today's correctional institutions.

Indeed, analyses empirically demonstrate these and other dilemmatic norms constructed through intersections among correctional philosophies, organizational structures and the everyday practice of officers and inmates (Tracy, 2000b, 2003a). Officers are encouraged to be respectful of inmates (e.g., by calling them by a title or holding open the door) yet also consistently suspicious of inmates and wary of being sucked in by inmate games. Therefore, officers manage a tension of *respect vs. suspect*. Second, officers feel torn between nurturing inmates and the institutional expectation that they refrain from "getting personal" and instead be tough, unattached and "not a chocolate heart" (Tracy, 2003a, p. 91). These norms thus construct a tension of *nurture vs. discipline*. Third, officers face a tension of *consistency vs. flexibility* given that officers are formally told to be "firm, fair, and consistent" even though most employees indicated they prefer "laid-back" officers who know how to use their judgment and make exceptions in the "gray areas" (p. 91). Last, officers are encouraged to rely on their comrades for backup, yet both formal and informal organizational messages instruct officers to avoid being "too needy." Therefore, officers carefully walk a tightrope in balancing a fourth tension of *solidarity vs. autonomy*. These four families of tensions illustrate how contradiction not only manifests itself in officer-inmate interaction, but also marks officers' day-to-day practices with colleagues and administration.

While gender has not been an explicit focus of past examinations of correctional contradictions, Britton's (1997a, 1997b, 2003) analysis of correctional officers suggests that researchers should carefully consider the gendered foundations of corrections, and how such foundations may find their way into today's organizational

dilemmas. Prisons were originally designed to reform the rational, middle class man through silence, obedience and labor, whereas "cottage" systems were designed to rehabilitate and change the female wrongdoer. According to Britton (2003), an "ingrained, if ambivalent" (p. 41) reformatory ideology remains among women's prisons today. Rehabilitation ideals have also found their way into male prisons in the form of kinder and gentler philosophies (e.g., Knippenberg, 2000). Given the extant research, it appears as though historically gendered correctional philosophies create ongoing ambivalence—between kindness and control, flexibility and rigidity, solidarity and autonomy—in facilities that employ both male and female officers and hold both male and female inmates.

Given the gendered foundations of correctional dilemmas, it may not be surprising that females face unique challenges in effectively managing correctional officer work. Female correctional officers regularly face harassment and sexual banter, both from other employees and inmates (Jurik, 1988; Tracy, 2004; Zimmer, 1987), and organizational discourses perpetuate the myth that female officers are easily tempted into sexual relations by male inmates (Britton, 2003). In order to manage these two issues, female correctional officers often adopt a rigid, detached, rule-based approach to their work (Owen, 1988; Zimmer, 1986), which can create an unfortunate paradox given administrators' desire for flexible officers. Likewise, officers of color face a type of "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903/1989, quoted in Britton, 2003, p. 218); they are "more likely than their white colleagues to have experienced discrimination at the hands of the [correctional] system, [yet] they are also responsible for enforcing its dictates" (Britton, 2003, p. 218). As such, officers of color often face ambivalence between a strong belief in rehabilitation and pessimism that such goals will ever be reached.

This past research provides a picture of the contradictory norms and structures in the correctional scene, and correlates perceived role conflict with various problematic emotional reactions. However, a mere focus on role conflict glosses over the way officers continually *negotiate* aspects of their job and perpetuates the assumption that a clear-cut role would magically cure organizational complexities. This study lays bare officers' *reactions* to role conflicts and work tensions in practice, illustrating how they are manifest in ongoing negotiations that are embedded and constructed within organizational micro-practices, day-to-day activities, and mundane talk. Based upon the findings related to this issue as well as past literature, I then posit a theoretical model that suggests employees frame tensions in one of three primary ways. Additional empirical data illustrates how these framing techniques are associated with various organizational and individual effects. Indeed, Pratt and Doucet (2000) suggest that a key, but as yet unanswered, question is whether some organizational characteristics encourage more constructive approaches to handling workplace ambivalence and contradictions. This analysis suggests that workplace contradictions are exacerbated in institutional contexts that limit metacommunication. I conclude with several recommendations about the ways organizations might encourage their employees to manage and make sense of organizational tensions in emotionally healthy ways.

Method

Over the course of 11 months, I shadowed correctional officers, participated in training sessions and conducted interviews with correctional staff, logging 168 total research hours and yielding 722 single-spaced typewritten pages of raw data. In line with typical qualitative research protocol, I immersed myself in the field (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), recorded the scene using various points of view and pieces of data—a process Richardson (2000) terms "crystallization"—and self-reflexively accounted for my presence and researcher role (Eastland, 1993). Human subjects approval was received and approved data collection procedures were followed. The following provides background information on organizational sites and subjects, and discusses data sources and methods of analysis.

Organizational and Employee Background

This study is based upon qualitative data from two correctional facilities, a state Department of Corrections women's prison in a large western city and a mixed-gender county jail located in an adjacent suburb. During the time of study, Women's Minimum Prison (WM) held about 250 convicted inmates, most minimum security who held keys to their own rooms, but about 30 who were maximum security and were locked down for 23 hours per day. Nouveau Jail (NJ) held an average of 385 inmates at any one time, about 92% male. Approximately 60% of NJ's inmates were convicted and sentenced (for generally two years or less), while about 40% were awaiting trial.

I studied both male and female officers who worked 8 and 12-hour shifts and who represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds but were primarily white, black, and Hispanic. Officers' primary duty entailed *watching* inmates and keeping count of inmates to ensure they did not engage in behavior against facility rules (e.g., sexual activity, fighting, or transferring contraband). Officers also regulated inmates' bodies, through standing watch in bathroom facilities and regularly giving pat-down and strip searches. As they described it, officers also served as "glorified maids"—delivering food, water, toiletries, mail, and laundry to locked-down inmates. Furthermore, although officers were told they were not "counselors," they spent more time with inmates than any other class of correctional employee, often chatting with inmates about their daily struggles in the prison, past crimes, and future goals.

Data Sources

Data from participant observation fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and organizational documents form the basis of the analysis.

Participant observation

One primary source of data is 149 pages of single-spaced typewritten fieldnotes from about 80 hours of participant observation. I shadowed correctional officers, usually several over the course of four-hour stints, and took scratch notes in the field that I developed into typewritten fieldnotes within 36 hours. Early notes recorded general *goings-on* in the facility, and gradually began to focus on issues that officers found frustrating and emotionally taxing. I used recording and elaborating practices commonly suggested in methodological discussions of participant observation (e.g., Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), such as bracketing out pre-analytic memos from thick description, attempting to record verbatim quotations from workers in situ, and self-reflexively noting my own influence on the scene.

As a researcher, I was not invisible. I appeared to inmates as an officer-in-training or some sort of standards keeper, which may have encouraged inmates to be "better-behaved" around me. My presence probably also affected officers. Supervisors often suggested that I shadow officers they considered "best," and given my often-present notepad and officers' high level of paranoia, research participants probably engaged in extra effort to perform successfully in my presence. In an effort to understand officers' regularly recurring activities and behaviors, I repeatedly shadowed several officers who became more comfortable and open with me over time. Furthermore, I repeatedly assured officers of confidentiality and the fact that I was not beholden to management or any other outside group.

Formal interviews

The second primary source of data was 22 in-depth recorded and transcribed interviews—19 with officers and 3 with organizational administrators. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours, with a mean length of 1 hour and 10 minutes, and yielded 398 pages of single-spaced typewritten transcripts. Information gathered during participant observation was used to suggest the direction of the interviews. Queries that elicited information particularly relevant to understanding officers' responses to contradiction included questions about good and bad officers, whether officers could be themselves with inmates, how officers attended to various organizational norms as well as inmate abuse, and which parts of the job officers found to be more and less difficult. Furthermore, I asked officers to reflect upon contradictory organizational tensions I had observed.

Training session participant observation and document analysis

In both facilities, I was granted research access via becoming an organizational volunteer. Volunteering encompassed research activities, as well as my returning to the scenes to provide a series of seminars for officers and administrators about the findings (a method that also allowed for member checks). I served as a full

participant in 10 hours of training for jail and prison volunteers—sessions that covered information on the inmate mentality, institutional rules of conduct and what to do in an emergency. Furthermore, I engaged in about 33 hours of correctional officer training and examined training guides on topics including the following: working with the female offender, professionalism, effective communications, managing stress, inmate mental health, court procedures, direct supervision, inmate management, and physical defensive tactics training. In day-to-day participant observation with officers, I reflected upon training sessions and recorded the ways that formal rules were enacted and resisted in practice.

Data Analysis

I initially entered the scene to examine how correctional officer burnout interacts with emotion labor (Tracy, 2001). The salience of contradiction emerged about halfway through the data gathering. Exemplars about responding to contradiction were initially recorded as part of officers' daily activities. Through a grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it became clear that issues of contradiction were significant to the correctional scene and that reactions to contradiction related to officers' emotional well-being.

To develop grounded theory via the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2001), I read and reread fieldnotes and interview transcripts for emergent themes. I wrote analytic memos about the themes, defined by Glaser (1978) as "the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding" (p. 83). I then went back to the data and further refined categories in an iterative fashion. Furthermore, I regularly returned to existing research on the ways that people respond to contradiction. Researchers often use this two-level analysis scheme, alternately using more etic-level categories drawn from past research and more specific emic-levels that emerge from the data and participants' voices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Based upon this iterative method, codes of responses to contradiction emerged including selection, vacillation, avoiding inmate backgrounds, reframing tensions as complementary, and balancing the empathetic line, among others. As the process moved forward, the various reactions came together into three basic categories, and are organized as such in the following discussion of findings.

Findings

The following data illustrate the various ways officers responded to opposing norms in their work. To review, past research suggests that officers face tensions including suspect vs. respect, nurture vs. discipline, flexibility vs. rigidity, and autonomy vs. solidarity (Blau et al., 1986; Cheek & Miller, 1983; Foucault, 1977; Tracy, 2003a, 2003b). While employee responses to organizational tensions are necessarily negotiated and processed over time, and also overlap in practice, a grounded analysis suggests that reactions can be conceptually separated into three general categories of

selection/vacillation/splitting, attending to multiple organizational norms simultaneously, and withdrawal.

Selection/Vacillation/Splitting

A common way of dealing with organizational tensions is through separation and vacillation. Analogous to responding to a slowly spinning stop and go sign, some officers reacted to organizational tensions as if they were simple contradictions, sometimes choosing to attend to one pole and sometimes choosing the other. Vacillation came in several different forms that I have termed *selection*, *vacillation* (*temporal*, *target*, and *topic)* and *source splitting*.

Selection

Perhaps the simplest way to deal with contradictory tensions is through *selecting* one norm to uphold in favor of another. For instance, some officers focused on discipline and ignored mandates that they be nurturing. Others would just focus on upholding the rules, and avoid trying to be flexible. As WM Officer Luke Gollett said:

> My job is to make sure the inmates obey the rules, stay safe, keep the other officers safe, that everyone's paying attention to the rules and to make sure the inmates stay where they're supposed to be. . . . We're there to just make sure they obey the rules.

In this description of the job, this officer makes three references to rules and equates safety with obeying rules. He does little in this utterance (and throughout his interview) to suggest that his job is also about respect, nurturance, and interaction. Rather, the officer *selects* the poles of consistency and discipline.

Vacillation

Another way to deal with work tensions is through *temporal*, *target*, or *topic vacillation*—switching between opposing organizational norms depending on the time, person being worked with, or the topic/context. Some officers dealt with the tension of flexibility vs. consistency, for example, by being flexible and easygoing at some points with some inmates, and strict and controlling at other times with other inmates. For instance, I observed WM Officer Stan Gonzalez ignore the rule that he tightly belly-chain a certain segregation inmate when accompanying her to a location outside of her cell. Gonzalez justified this reaction based upon his history with and estimation of the inmate, saying, "She's really cool. We never have any trouble with her." This same officer would not let another inmate that he described as "crazy" out of her cell until she had been tightly cuffed. Depending on the inmate (target) or time, he was more or less flexible.

Officers could also vacillate between organizational tensions depending on the issue, context or topic at hand. *Topic vacillation* is similar to conceptually drawing a line in the sand wherein officers might identify some issues where it is important

to weigh in on one side of a contradiction. In regard to the solidarity vs. autonomy tension, for instance, employees largely chose to trust and have solidarity with one another during inmate take downs, but tended to be autonomous and keep private personal mental health issues such as visiting the employee assistance program. The following fieldnote illustrates WM Officer John McNeese's effort to draw a line of strictness vs. flexibility depending on the issue at hand.

> Some things you just let slide. If I see a staff member [officer] wanting to buy their whole [inmate] work crew a pop, it's not a big deal. Now if he's bringing them all in T-bone steaks from outside, then something should be said. It's really discretion. … If they can get it on canteen or buy it out of a vending machine, pop, whatever, then I don't have a problem. If they have normal means of getting it, I don't have a problem giving it to them. But if it's something that they cannot get, then they don't need it and that's where I draw my line at.

Even though it was formally against the rules to buy inmates anything, McNeese used discretion, ultimately deciding that he would be flexible on some types of purchases and strict on other types—a form of topic vacillation.

Source splitting

Last, *source splitting* served as a practice wherein officers divided organizational tensions among themselves, each attending to varying expectations. NJ Officer Kyle Johnson called this practice the "Mutt-and-Jeff game," while others referred to it as playing "good cop-bad cop." In playing this game, one officer would purposely act angry and mean while another would act nice, a practice that is regularly employed in law enforcement settings (e.g., Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989). I frequently observed this behavior in NJ's booking room, an organizational context in which officers worked in pairs and small groups. Fieldnote data illustrate a particularly poignant example: A female officer assisted a frightened teenager with the phone, a practice that attends to organizational expectations that officers be nurturing and helpful. Simultaneously, another female officer mocked the girl behind her back through an exaggerated mimicking of her crying—a performance that attended to the expectation that officers are tough and unaffected. By engaging in these source-splitting activities, officers individually acted consistently, but collectively attended to divergent organizational expectations.

Simultaneous Attention to Multiple Goals

Another family of reactions to organizational tensions indicates simultaneous attention to various organizational norms. First, data illustrate that officers used self-talk to do what I have analytically categorized as behavior that "walks the empathetic line" with inmates. A second tactic is illustrated through officers acting as if divergent norms are various priorities that just need to be balanced. Third, some officers engaged in creative performances that attended to various organizational norms at once.

Walking the empathetic line

Many officers said they originally entered the correctional officer field because they wanted to help rehabilitate inmates. Indeed, past research suggests that correctional officers' greatest source of satisfaction is "having a positive effect on inmates' lives" (Britton, 2003, p. 208). However, strong organizational penalties discouraged officers from becoming personally attached to inmates, and both NJ and WM facility administrators eschewed a blatantly rehabilitative philosophy. Many officers thus felt a tension between detachment and empathy as illustrated by comments such as, "You want to turn a sympathetic ear, but you don't want to make it seem like you want to be his best friend," and "Sometimes you really feel sorry for them. And you really can't do that because that's seen as a weakness in you."

Officers walked the empathetic line through a curious type of self-talk that was structured in a two-way self-mandate, wherein officers would empathize, but then denigrate inmates in the second part of their utterance. For instance, WM Visitation Officer Lara Huanes said, "You see the women with their little kids and it's so sad. . . . They love 'em so much when they're here. But then again, they leave 'em when they're at home." This comment launched several officers into discussing how the prison is "a revolving door."

While officers usually engaged in this empathetic line technique in order to ultimately convince themselves that inmates deserved their imprisoned lot, occasionally they would tip in favor of empathy. For instance, NJ Officer Fred Jones said,

> There's this one guy in here who just wrote a kite [note] saying he wants to work outside the jail. . . . However, the nurse said that he's not healthy enough to leave the facility and, therefore, he's got to work as a trustee inside. He's not happy, but he's done this to himself. I guess at the same time, you gotta think that these guys have been burned so many times, that they just don't know better anymore.

Even though the inmate did this "to himself," Jones still tried to understand why the inmate may have landed in jail.

The complexity of the tension between nurturing and maintaining detachment is illustrated in officer statements that alternated back and forth three or more times between talk that paints inmates in empathetic and non-empathetic lights. The following single interview excerpt, all from NJ Officer Karen Campbells, illustrates the alternating nature of empathetic (Emp) and non-empathetic (NEmp) talk.

NEmp   There's two main things with this job. First, you gotta keep saying to yourself, all the time, that these people are criminals. As a deputy, we have to draw the line at the relationship, because they won't.

Emp   Like Jack (an inmate who shot several police officers), he's really nice. I actually kind of like him.

NEmp   But I have to remember that he put a couple rounds in a van, trying to shoot officers. When I talk to him, I have to remember in the back of my mind that if I were between him and a door, he'd have no trouble shooting me to get by it.

Emp At the same time, you gotta treat 'em like human beings—they're easier to manage that way anyway. You have to be there, be nice.

NEmp But you have to constantly remind yourself that many of these people are the scum of the earth.

Comments such as these illustrate the officer's consistent ambivalence and suggest her attempts to be simultaneously empathetic and detached. While I found both male and female officers to walk the empathetic line, the ambivalence exemplified in such self-talk may be particularly pronounced for women. Females are generally expected to show more empathy and nurturing emotions than are their male counterparts (Hochschild, 1983; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). However, because correctional discourses suggest that females are more likely to be "sucked in" (sexually or personally) by inmates than are men (Britton, 2003), female officers must walk a careful line between illustrating an expected feminine emotional front, yet maintaining detachment and distance from inmates.

Layering organizational priorities

Some officers viewed their job as being able to prioritize, layer and balance various organizational norms. When asked the interview question, "Imagine that I am an actor preparing to play your role. Describe to me how I would have to act and feel in order to accurately portray you as an officer at NJ/WM," answers indicate that some officers desired simultaneously to uphold various (divergent) organizational norms. WM Officer Stephanie Jones said:

> You have to go in there acting like Arnold Schwarzenegger but having a little bit of Robin Williams in you, because you have to have a sense of humor and a little bit of compassion. I don't know a good example for that—Mother Teresa maybe. I think all three of them in combination; you're doing okay in your job.

Another female officer thought about her role in terms of being a "Sally Field with a Tom Jones mentality." The curious mix of characters offered—ranging from Schwarzenegger to Mother Theresa—indicates the opinion that good officers performed a wide breadth of characters.

Indeed, some officers judged organizational norms as a set of compatible priorities or, as one officer described, "hats." NJ Officer Dan Robbins said, "We still have an overall mission, is the jail secure? Are the inmates being taken care of? Are their needs being taken care of? Are we answering their questions?" Robbins' comment indicates that it is just a matter of prioritizing the organizational norms—first security (suspicion/discipline), then nurturance, then respect. Others viewed the job as a balancing act. For instance, WM Officer Stephanie Jones said that she would tell new officers that, "The most important thing is finding a balance between the rules and being a human being." In this way, many officer comments indicated an understanding of the norms as complementary layers of goals.

Attending to multiple organizational expectations

Data also illustrate that particular employee performances could attend to divergent organizational goals simultaneously. This is noteworthy given that officers' training sessions and manuals did little to acknowledge the multi-layered (and often contradictory) nature of their work and therefore neglected to provide substantive suggestions on ways to attend to multiple organizational expectations in practice. However, some officers were able to improvise performances that attended to various, potentially divergent, organizational norms. A performance that attends simultaneously to flexibility and consistency is typified in the following officer's explanation of giving inmates candy:

> My favorite thing to do, because inmates give you candy all the time and they don't take no for an answer, and instead of being rude, I usually take it, stick it in my pocket and get rid of it later. And a lot of times what I'll end up doing, I get candy given to me and if I have some inmates doing something for me, working hard, I cycle it right back to them. "Oh, he's cool, I got some candy," I'm like well, yeah, cause I'm not going to eat anything an inmate gives me.

Gifting or accepting *anything* to or from inmates, including candy, was officially against organizational rules. However, this officer's creative strategy of recycling inmate-gifted candy back to other inmates enabled him to attend to various organizational norms at once. The officer avoided "being rude" to inmates who offered candy and was "cool" for giving out candy. He followed the rules by not taking inmate gifts (because he returned them), but was also able to maintain flexibility, respect, and civility. In short, the creative performance attended to various organizational norms at once.

Withdrawal

A third family of employee reactions to workplace tensions may best be categorized under the umbrella label of *withdrawal*. In the correctional atmosphere, withdrawing from the scene came in the form of avoiding inmates' records, being "laid back," and ignoring the rules.

Considering the relative boredom of correctional officer jobs (Lombardo, 1981), one might assume that learning about inmates' backgrounds would serve as an interesting distraction for correctional officers. However, many officers avoided gaining knowledge about inmates and the crimes that landed them behind bars—a technique that also allowed them to withdraw from the organizational contradiction that they simultaneously be respectful but tough. By purposefully ignoring inmates' backgrounds, officers felt they would be less likely to become frightened or intimidated, and could therefore better maintain toughness and control. Simultaneously, by avoiding knowledge about inmate crimes that officers deemed disgusting or aberrant (e.g., sexual molestation), officers were better able to sustain performances of respect. As WM Officer Nick Axel explained, "If I read everybody's file. . . . I couldn't go in as open as I go in and deal with these people."

Some officers managed the divergent organizational norms that they be flexible yet follow the rules, by engaging in withdrawal behavior that can be valanced positively as being "laid back" or "carefree." Such dispositions allowed officers to overlook minor inmate rule infractions and avoid hassles, as typified in the following example recorded in fieldnotes:

> An officer in segregation repeatedly tries to convince an inmate to give up her towel for laundry. The inmate keeps resisting and the officer continues to say things like, "Come on, don't you want it washed?" Finally, the officer's partner says, "Dude, just pass on her. If she wants dirty towels, that's her own problem."

In this situation, withdrawal through being laid back seemed to work fine. The officer followed the rules in asking for the towel, and by not caring if he got it or not, he was essentially able to be flexible.

However, being laid back also lent itself to ignoring the rules more blatantly, as typified in one officer's frustrated commentary on his efforts to enforce the rules:

> If they're gonna smoke, sneak cigarettes in, *fine*, go ahead if they want to. Sex is a big issue. Sexual misconduct. We catch it all the time. But if we catch them, we have to do something about it. . . . The way I look at it, if I don't catch it, I don't have to do anything about it, and I'm not going to go looking for it. It's gonna happen anyway. I can't stop it. I figure . . . if they're in their room and they're by themselves, then leave 'em alone! They're not botherin' me.

By actively trying to *avoid* catching inmates in wrongdoing, this officer avoided confrontation, and thus he could feel as though he attended to the idea that he should be respectful, nurturing, and flexible. At the same time, by actively not looking for sexual misconduct, he effectively avoided seeing it, and thus technically still attended to the idea that he should enforce rules and regulations. While this withdrawal reaction seemed to work, such responses could also be seen as inappropriately complacent. Therefore, it is of little surprise that most officers did not "go running" to their supervisor about their "creative solutions" or their active desires to avoid inmates who were breaking the rules.

A Theoretical Model of Framing Techniques for Organizational Tensions

In summary, the data suggest three families of reactions to contradiction in the workplace: splitting or vacillation, attending to multiple organizational norms simultaneously, and withdrawal. These reactions, coupled with additional data on officers' expressed emotions in the workplace and past research on contradictions, provide the groundwork for a theoretical framework of the ways tensions may be heard and understood in organizational settings. Table 1 summarizes three ways employees may frame organizational tensions—as simple contradictions, complementary dialectics, or as pragmatic paradoxes or double binds.

Table 1. Possible Ways to Frame Organizational Tensions

Organizational tension	Framing the tension as a contradiction—cannot do two actions at once, but can *alternate* or *choose one*	Framing the tension as complementary dialectic—not viewing the tension as a tension through *reframing*	Framing the tension as a paradox or double bind—to obey is to disobey and to disobey is obey
Respect *vs.* suspect	Sometimes respect inmates, sometimes suspect inmates (or split duties among different employees)	Treat inmates with respect because it provides better narks, which makes it easier to maintain suspicion and security	Be respectful to inmates by treating them as scum-sucking liars
Nurture *vs.* discipline	Sometimes listen and interact, sometimes be detached and tough (or split duties among different employees)	Discipline inmates in order to show them that you care	Be empathetic by not caring
Consistency *vs.* flexibility	Some cases call for following the rules, others require flexibility (or split duties among different employees)	Follow the spirit of the rules by being flexible and viewing issues on a case-by-case basis	Do not do what we tell you to do
Solidarity *vs.* autonomy	Sometimes you have to rely on fellow officers and sometimes you've got to be wary of them (or split duties among different employees)	You do not have to be friends or like the other officers to trust them to back you up	Be self-reliant because you want to, not because you know you will be stigmatized if you are needy

Framing Tensions as Contradictions

As discussed, my data illustrate that organizational norms can be split apart through *selecting* one pole as dominant, *vacillating* between various organizational norms depending on the time, target or content, or by *source-splitting* through playing "good cop-bad cop." These reactions suggest that organizational tensions are often framed as simple contradictions—analogous to a slowly spinning stop or go sign. While hearing mandates as simple contradictions does not paralyze action (Watzlawick et al., 1967), contradictory organizational norms are associated with anxiety and confusion (Putnam, 1986). Furthermore, my data suggest that reacting to organizational tensions through splitting/vacillation is accompanied by several problematic, if unintended, organizational and personal effects. First, *selection* is problematic because officers who just attend to one set of organizational tensions ignore half of their responsibilities, and essentially do not do their job. Indeed, I did not find selection to be a common technique, probably because officers who chose such a response either were quickly terminated or otherwise chose to exit the organization.

Target, *temporal*, or *topic vacillation* also had problematic repercussions because it could manifest in behavior that appeared inconsistent or haphazard. The following fieldnote excerpt illustrates.

> WM Officer Don Seanan checks inmate IDs in the chow hall. He tells one of the inmates that she needs to get a new ID, because part of it is worn off. A nearby case worker says, "I am giving you a direct order to get a new ID in the next week. If you don't, you'll be written up." Several seconds later, another inmate walks up and her ID is broken in two. She says with a big smile, "I got a split personality." Seanan laughs and says, "Try some tape and you should be able to put it back together." Neither he nor the case worker says anything about having to get a new ID.

Officer Seanan's vacillation between attending to the rules at one point with one inmate and being flexible at another point with another inmate manifests itself in behavior that probably appears inconsistent and haphazard to inmates who overheard these two interchanges. This is problematic given that officers, inmates, and administrators alike repeat the mantra that good officers are "firm, fair, and consistent."

Reacting to tensions through *source splitting* also has several interesting personal and organizational ramifications. Data illustrate that officers largely enjoyed playing the good cop-bad cop game. Officers joked with each other (out of inmates' hearing range) about their ability to play it, and in interviews, officers proudly boasted about their acting abilities. Their glee is not surprising given that source splitting provides an opportunity for officers to feel as though they have tricked inmates, and therefore serves as an avenue for feeling power in a profession marked by feelings of powerlessness (Hepburn, 1985). However, while source splitting allowed officers to act consistently as individuals, this technique was usually impossible given that officers worked independently the majority of the time. Furthermore, as NJ Officer Max Simpson explained, being good cop is "easier to work, easier to be . . . it takes all the pressure off" compared to being bad cop. While several younger male officers

indicated initial enjoyment in being bad cop by, for instance, "rattling inmate cages," they also indicated that the thrill was fleeting, and that acting angry and mean had problematic emotional consequences. Therefore, reacting to organizational tensions as if they are simple contradictions is a common tension management technique, but has several problematic organizational and personal repercussions.

Framing Tensions as Complementary Dialectics

Another potential way to frame organizational tensions is through reframing them as complementary edicts. As discussed, some officers attended to various norms simultaneously, through creative rule-following techniques, layering of goals and balancing the empathetic line in their talk. These behavioral reactions suggest that some officers understood tensions as interrelated and non-mutually exclusive. Indeed, several officers explicitly discussed how they were able to view one pole of an organizational tension (e.g., respect) as a *means for achieving* the other pole (e.g., suspicion or control). This perceptual transformation is illustrated in the following officer comments: WM trainer Linda Riesling said, "Giving them respect eventually helps you accomplish your goals." Likewise, NJ Officer Bobby Jo Herria remarked:

> I choose to see the inmates more as clients than inmates. . . . If you treat people with some level of respect even though you may not always want to or they may not even be deserving, it goes a lot smoother.

WM Officer Nick Axel sums up this point of view saying, "If you treat inmates like people, they'll do stuff for you."

These comments indicate the employees' ability to perceptually transform, or "reframe," contradictory organizational tensions into complementary edicts. While it may be distasteful to think that correctional officers may be nice only as a strategic ploy, such a process nevertheless allows multiple organizational norms to be upheld simultaneously. Furthermore, past research indicates that hearing tensions as transcendable dialectics is individually advantageous. Dialectical theorists have found reframing to be correlated with higher satisfaction than other ways of managing contradictions (Baxter, 1988, 1990). Furthermore, according to the idea of faking in good faith (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), individuals are less likely to feel psychologically painful emotive dissonance when they are able to see the useful nature of faking emotions. Therefore, officers who were able to see how respecting inmates ultimately made their job easier probably also did not find the norm to be as difficult or painful to uphold.

Framing Tensions as Paradoxes or Double Binds

Last, as presented earlier, a number of officers withdrew from workplace tensions by avoiding inmate backgrounds and ignoring rules. Withdrawal is also a common response when individuals hear injunctions as paradoxes (Watzlawick et al., 1967). To review, a pragmatic paradox is an injunction, such as "ignore this sentence," in

which to obey is to disobey and to disobey is to obey. Paradoxes are particularly problematic when individuals hear them as double binds. Family systems researchers argue that recipients of double binds react in a combination of three ways: through withdrawal, a lack of complex thinking/literalism, and paranoia and overanalysis (Watzlawick et al., 1967). These reactions also appear salient in the correctional atmosphere.

As discussed previously, many officers appear to manage tensions through withdrawal and past research paints a picture of correctional officers as withdrawn and unquestioning in their everyday endeavors. I observed multiple training sessions in which officers did not ask questions or pursue confusing or disturbing issues with supervisors. For instance, when asked during Nouveau Jail's in-service training if officers had questions, one yelled out sarcastically, "No questions 'cause we're so satisfied sir!" Supervisors just laughed, shrugged their shoulders, and proceeded with the meeting. Furthermore, I observed repeatedly that officers did not interrogate supervisors about organizational norms that seemed contradictory.

My data also illustrate a lack of complex decision-making among many of the officers. An example that typifies was an officer who discussed his repeated efforts to enforce a rule that dictated that inmates from other floors of the housing unit could not enter his floor until his group of inmates had been called to "chow." As he taped up a little sign reading, "Do not enter" on the door to his floor right before dinner one evening, I asked him *why* this rule existed. He shrugged his shoulders and said he did not know. Considering the difficulty of managing the organization's contradictory expectations of consistency and flexibility, however, one can begin to empathize with why an officer would follow a rule without understanding it. While a small minority of officers were skilled at manipulating organizational rules—in ways that allowed them to feel consistent while maintaining flexibility—many officers had been "burned" in the past by creatively following the rules in the "wrong" way. Following rules "by the book," even if it meant a lack of complex thinking, could keep officers out of trouble.

In addition to withdrawal and literalism, officers also evinced the third response common to people who hear contradictions as double binds: paranoia. Officers were extremely mistrusting of inmates, administration, and co-employees, as illustrated in these various officer comments heard during participant observation and interviews with both male and female employees:

> You're constantly on the look-out. You're constantly wondering whether the inmates are going to have a bad day, react, and jump on you.

> You never know from one day to the next whether you have a job or not. You can do a great job for ten years, then you screw up once and you get fired.

> They [the administration] can find out anything about you and that makes it very scary;

> [Inmates] know if you do one thing wrong, they know exactly where to go and who to talk to. You've got to watch everything you do, everything you say.

> I find myself fighting to not be so paranoid.

This construction of paranoia, like literalism, makes sense in relation to the organizational tension of following the rules yet being flexible. In order to manage this tension, a number of officers engaged in their own personal brand of creative rule following (a technique that was largely organizationally condoned). However, there was always some uncertainty in whether officers' creative solutions would be judged by administrators as creatively *flexible* or as creatively *inappropriate* and, therefore, paranoia is understandable.

Thus, officers evidence the emotional reactions associated with double binds— withdrawal, literalism/lack of complex thinking, and paranoia. Could it be that some correctional officers perceive themselves as caught in double binds? To answer this question, I return to family systems theory (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Organizational structures that encourage double binds

As highlighted in the opening of this paper, a key but as yet under-analyzed question is whether there are certain organizational structures that are more likely to encourage problematic reactions to tensions in work life (Pratt & Doucet, 2000). My data suggest that some officers may be framing organizational tensions as debilitating double binds, which leads one to consider whether certain structures of correctional institutions serve to constitute the interactional ingredients associated with double binds. First, double binds require an injunction that could be heard as a paradox. Past research suggests that the correctional atmosphere is dilemmatic in nature, and Table 1 iterates how the organizational tensions that mark the correctional environment could be structured and thus heard as pragmatic paradoxes. For instance, as highlighted in the table, the respect-suspect inmate tension could be framed as a paradox in hearing it as a mandate to "be respectful to inmates by treating them as scum-sucking liars." Complying with such a mandate is impossible—to obey is to disobey and vice versa.

Second, double binds require an intense relationship (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Considering the fact that recent research indicates that many people are more identified with their work role than with their family role (Hochschild, 1989, 1997), we also should consider the fact that intense relationships can occur at work. I found a number of official organizational messages that encourage correctional officers to strongly identify with the job; furthermore, supervisors framed officers who "just did the job for the money" as undesirable employees. Indeed, many officers respected their superiors and spoke of themselves as "lifers" in the industry. Therefore, the double bind requirement of an intense relationship is plausible.

Third, a double bind requires that recipients be unable to step outside the frame set by the message, either by physically escaping the message or by metacommunicating about it. My data indicates that officers faced barriers to metacommunicating about tensions *within* the corrections atmosphere. Organizational paradoxes were presented as straightforward, complementary edicts and officers were discouraged

from asking questions. However, unlike inmates, officers *could* physically leave the barbed wire of the correctional institution and go home, and thus they potentially had the opportunity to discuss organizational tensions with people outside work. Indeed, some have argued that the double bind theory cannot be applied to organizational settings precisely because employees can "escape physically and psychologically from the scene" and, thus, "perceive their predicament" and "comment upon it" (Putnam, 1986, p. 159).

However, I would argue that, because of the "total institution" atmosphere of prisons and jails, correctional officers are not afforded the same productive opportunities to discuss work with family and friends compared to many other types of workers. Total institutions are "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life" (Goffman, 1961, p. xiii). Correctional facilities are completely separate—literally locked off—from the community. Because of this, correctional officers rarely take family members to visit work; neither do they go home with their problems (Cheek & Miller, 1983; Lombardo, 1981). In fact, correctional officers mention that the pace of prison life is so different from the outside that family members would not understand their problems and, even if they did, stories would only serve as cause for worry (Blau et al., 1986). Indeed, Blau and his colleagues concluded:

> What are generally viable social support systems for individuals do not serve that purpose for personnel who work in isolated total institutions . . . apparently, the regimen and isolation of prison work weakens the significance of marital support and community-based ties for emotional well-being. (p. 139)

Because officers work within an organizational structure that effectively limits metacommunication, and because the total institution aspect of their work makes it difficult to discuss work issues outside with friends and family, it appears as though the third ingredient of a double bind—being unable to step outside the frame set by the message—may be applicable.

The organizational presence of the three double bind ingredients, coupled with the fact that many officers evidence feeling states common to people who hear double binds—overanalysis/paranoia, withdrawal, and a lack of complex thinking—suggests that it is quite possible some officers perceive work tensions to be double binds. Certainly, the intention of this study was not to *prove* the existence of certain cognitive understandings of the ways employees hear tensions, and future researchers may want to delve further into this issue. Rather, this study builds upon past research by empirically illustrating the ways employees react to tensions in practice, and tentatively links these reactions to several individual and organizational ramifications.

Summary and Implications

To summarize, this analysis indicates that members react to organizational tensions through vacillating/splitting divergent poles, attending to multiple organizational expectations simultaneously, and through withdrawal. Based upon these findings and past research, a theoretical model was proposed that suggests employees may frame organizational tensions as simple contradictions, complementary dialectics or pragmatic paradoxes. The findings and theoretical model offered indicate that it is not contradictions, per se, that are a problem in organizational settings, but rather that different framing techniques are associated with various organizational and personal ramifications. Framing organizational tensions as complementary dialectics has been correlated with individual satisfaction (Baxter, 1988, 1990) and allows for attention to various organizational expectations simultaneously. Reacting to organizational tensions as if they are simple contradictions does not appear to have negative personal emotional effects (Watzlawick et al., 1967). However, it does result in behavior that appears inconsistent and haphazard, something that is not preferable in most organizations, especially in organizations that specialize in consistently serving, disciplining, or rehabilitating clients (such as prisons and jails). Last, framing tensions as pragmatic paradoxes is problematic in that it paralyzes action, especially when other organizational structures, such as a lack of metacommunication and an intense organizational relationship, serve to transform paradoxes into double binds.

Practical Applications

Considering the debilitating consequences associated with framing tensions as double binds, organizations may want to engage in practices that encourage employees to frame tensions as complementary dialectics rather than as paradoxes or contradictions. This can be accomplished by a strategic (re)consideration of the three ingredients associated with the paralyzing reactions of double binds; that is, hearing tensions as paradoxes, having an intense relationship and lack of metacommunication.

First, organizational leaders can acknowledge and explain the tensions that mark their institutions in an effort to encourage employees to frame tensions as complementary dialectics rather than as contradictions or paradoxes. In doing so, employees would know they are not alone in experiencing contradictions and would be able to share coping techniques. Furthermore, organizations could explain how some organizational expectations (e.g., the norm that officers respect and nurture inmates) can actually play a role in assisting with other organizational expectations (such as suspicion and discipline). As such, employees would also be more likely to understand the useful nature of doing the emotion labor of respecting inmates, and thus avoid the painful emotive dissonance associated with faking emotions in "bad faith" (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987).

Second, an intense relationship is associated with double binds. Past research suggests organizational identification has many advantages, including increased loyalty and likelihood that employees will make decisions in line with the organization's norms (Cheney, 1983; Tompkins & Cheney, 1983). Therefore, it may not be in an organization's best interest to blatantly discourage identification. However, correctional administrators might want to reconsider their strong suggestion (through training sessions and myriad informal comments to officers) that officers should highly identify with the job or, for instance, view themselves as "professionals," a label that connotes long-term identification with a career's values and goals. In a study of temporary workers, Gossett (2002) suggests that a highly identified workforce may not be appropriate in all organizational settings with all types of workers. Albeit for different reasons, the findings from the current study also question the unmitigated benefit of high identification; an intense relationship can hinder employees' ability to react to workplace tensions in emotionally healthy ways.

Third, I would argue that the easiest and most productive way to go about discouraging the creation of double binds would be for organizational leaders to create an environment in which officers are able to conceptually escape the binds of the paradox. While correctional organizations are, by definition, total institutions, administrators can nonetheless provide a paradox escape route: Individuals can free themselves from the discursive prisons created by paradox through metacommunication, or commenting about the message process. By metacommunicating, a person steps outside the paradox frame and describes the dilemma and, thus, avoids hearing tensions as double binds. Again referring to Table 1, talking about the workplace tensions could help officers step outside of a pragmatic paradox (such as hearing the consistency-flexibility tension as, "Do not do what we tell you to do") and may even provide an avenue through which employees could reframe such a tension into a complementary edict such as, "Follow the spirit of the rules by being flexible and viewing issues on a case-by-case basis." Certainly, some tensions may be more difficult to reframe than others, and I am not suggesting that administrators attempt to deny the complexity of dealing with multiple, sometimes autonomous goals. Indeed, denial of contradiction merely exacerbates an individual's experience of it. Rather, I am suggesting that talk can enhance awareness of one's existing organizational conditions and that awareness, in turn, provides alternate avenues for collective management, understanding and practice.

Unfortunately, as it stands, the correctional atmosphere does little to acknowledge, let alone discuss in detail, the contradictions that mark correctional officer work. Throughout my research, I only came across one blatant acknowledgement of role conflict involved in the job: a WM training manual listed "role conflict" as a potential professional stressor. However, it equated role conflict with "Is this job right for you?" In other words, role conflict was described as a tension between the employee and the organization—not a tension among various norms within the organization. As one officer said in response to my research, "None of this [contradiction] is brought up in training so it's all a total surprise when you start work."

One way correctional administrators might approach inclusion of meta-communication about organizational tensions would be to introduce role playing of dilemmatic scenarios (e.g., wherein an officer must be respectful yet still be watchful) in training sessions. Together, trainers and officers could discuss several different ways these dilemmas might be handled. To encourage questioning and an acknowledgement of the complexities inherent to the job, scenarios should not have a "right" answer, but rather illustrate the range of ways that officers can deal with similar situations effectively. This approach would also encourage a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of different paths of action.

In addition, given the gendered nature of such contradictions, it may also make sense for administrators to provide employees with a narrative about correctional history. Through increased knowledge about prisons' historical struggle between the divergent goals of rehabilitation and custodial control, and how these goals have been tied to gendered notions of discipline and organizing, officers would probably better understand how and why remnants of seemingly contradictory correctional philosophies trickle down into current policies and practices. I suspect that further scholarly examination could also better tease out the gendered dynamics of employee response to contradiction. Future research could specifically analyze how officers' roles as male or female employees, working with male or female inmates, affect employees' experience of workplace tensions. Such an analysis may reveal a more multi-layered theoretical model of contradiction response. Armed with such research, correctional administrators could more specifically advise employees about the ways gendered dynamics imbue everyday practices.

As I have attempted to illustrate here, a variety of behaviors constitute potential responses to organizational tensions. In turn, these reactions provide a window into the ways officers frame organizational tensions, whether as simple contradictions, complementary dialectics, or debilitating double binds. Past research, coupled with the empirical findings of this qualitative study, suggest that reframing tensions into complementary dialectics is associated with positive organizational outcomes as well as with emotional well-being. Meanwhile, framing tensions as contradictions does not appear correlated with incapacitating emotional reactions; however, contradictions are associated with anxiety (Putnam, 1986) and can lead to organizational problems in the form of erratic or haphazard behavior. Last, framing tensions as double binds (Watzlawick et al., 1967) is associated with debilitating emotional reactions including paralysis, literalism, withdrawal, and paranoia. Given this, it is in both the organization's and employees' best interests for managers to take measures that encourage members to reframe tensions into complementary dialectics and discourage the framing of tensions as contradictions or double binds. While talk will not dissolve work tensions, "individuals can transcend their existing social arrangements through an awareness of their condition and through changes in their organizing process" (Putnam, 1986, p. 153).

Note

[1]   Names of facilities and subjects are pseudonyms.

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