

# Locking Up Emotion: Moving Beyond Dissonance for Understanding Emotion Labor Discomfort

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*Using qualitative data gathered among correctional officers and a post-structuralist theoretical lens, this study suggests that emotion labor—the instrumental use and suppression of emotion—is more difficult when societal discourses and organizational processes limit employees’ ability to maintain preferred understandings of identity. The paper provides rich description of the complex web of emotion norms faced by correctional officers and then makes the case that identity, power, hidden transcripts, role distancing behaviors, strategic interaction, and organizational identification affect the ease of emotion work. The analysis moves beyond extant research’s focus on emotive dissonance, or a clash between “true” feeling and “false” emotional display, to highlight the roles of macro discourses and everyday organizational practices in understanding the discomfort of emotion labor.*

*Keywords: Emotion Labor; Identity; Correctional Officers; Qualitative Methods*

Increasing numbers of scholars in organizational communication, management, and sociology have analyzed issues of emotion formation, expression, and control in the workplace (Fineman, 2000; Sturdy, 2003; Tracy, 2000). Hochschild’s (1983) groundbreaking study of Delta flight attendants introduced “emotion labor”—the organizationally prescribed display of feeling—as a central concept for understanding how employees package emotion to fit organizational norms. Since that time, questions have remained regarding factors that ease emotion labor and those that

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tend to make it more difficult, psychologically painful, or less likely to succeed. While emotion labor is not, by definition, harmful (Conrad & Witte, 1994), it has been linked to a number of negative psychosocial effects (Wharton, 1999). The majority of extant research blames “emotive dissonance”—or a clash between “real” feelings and “fake” display—for this discomfort. However, this concept is based upon an idea of an essential self, and when identity is conceived in post-structuralist terms, other issues emerge as impacting the pain of emotion labor.

Based upon qualitative data gathered at an American county jail and state women’s prison, I analyze the difficulty associated with emotion labor through a grounded analysis of correctional officers. As a profession, correctional officers are burned out, facing a number of obstacles including lack of influence, negative personal and social image, and strained relations with inmates, administration, and co-employees (Brodsky, 1982). Furthermore, the expression of feeling in correctional atmospheres is seen as an occupational hazard and low-status “women’s work” (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991). While a wealth of empirical survey data report the existence of officer burnout (Huckabee, 1992), little qualitative research is available that explains *how* and *why* officers face emotional challenges (Tracy, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, “contextually rich, ‘real time’ emotion studies of organizational life are still relatively rare” (Fineman, 2000, p. 14). While there are notable exceptions (e.g., Miller, 2002), concepts of emotion have largely been subsumed by seemingly more “rational” categories, such as employee *morale*, *attitude*, *affect*, or *job satisfaction* (Fineman, 1996). This, in turn, has encouraged scholars to measure emotional states rather than to examine the nuanced interactions and communicative processes that make up contextualized emotional experience.

A qualitative study of emotion work provides the potential for extending emotion labor theory in transformative ways. As illustrated herein, correctional officers must provide an array of emotional fronts, including the expression of pleasant and nurturing feelings, the display of anger and toughness, and the suppression of fear, weakness, and disgust. While researchers have examined emotion labor among a range of employees (Waldron, 1994), the theories that explain the *discomfort* of emotion labor have largely emanated from studies of traditional service workers (e.g., Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987, 1989). Examining the discomfort of emotion labor among correctional officers, who are expected to provide an array of emotional expressions, has the potential to illustrate factors besides emotive dissonance that affect the ease of emotion labor.

In addition, the corrections context is well poised to highlight the role of macro discourses in managing emotion. Understanding the relative success of emotion labor cannot be divorced from broader social relations (Sturdy, 1998), and correctional officers face discourses that paint them as brutal, stupid and sexually deviant “dirty workers” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Negative mass media portrayals (such as the HBO series *Oz* and movies like *Shawshank Redemption*), coupled with the fact that prisons and jails are total institutions cut off from most people’s life paths (Goffman, 1961a), create a situation in which officers regularly face misperceptions about their job. Correctional officer stigmas and stereotypes serve as discourses of power, and in doing so, mediate the difficulty of emotion work.

Using *in situ* qualitative data, the study begins with a rich description of emotion norms and performances among a largely misunderstood and understudied population. The piece then makes use of a post-structuralist theoretical lens to empirically demonstrate the ways in which emotion labor is more difficult when organizational processes and societal discourses constrain employees from framing their identity and work in preferred or successful ways.

### **Emotion at Work: A Review and Critique of Emotive Dissonance**

Emotion labor plays an instrumental role in many organizational processes. For service professionals, such as Disney ride operators (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989) or cruise ship staff (Tracy, 2000), a pleasant emotional facade is part of the commodity bought and sold. For other employees, such as firefighters (Scott & Myers, 2005) or 911 calltakers (Tracy & Tracy, 1998), emotion labor is an embedded activity that facilitates provision of service; by staying calm in the face of tragedy, employees facilitate emergency response. Additionally, emotion can serve as a condition of control; strategic emotion display is instrumental to effective negotiation and discipline in organizations (Fineman & Sturdy, 1999; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989) and individuals purposefully control emotions in an effort to appear more powerful, masculine, and rational (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003; Mumby & Putnam, 1992).

While emotion labor can be enjoyable, emotionally healthy, and even fun (Conrad & Witte, 1994; Shuler & Sypher, 2000), it has also been associated with a number of negative psychosocial effects (Wharton, 1999) such as burnout (Wharton, 1993), stress and self-alienation (Hochschild, 1983), depression, cynicism, and role alienation (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Fineman, 1993), emotional numbness (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989), job tension (Abraham, 1999), and the stripping away of individual experience, relational context, and intimacy (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). The majority of research suggests that the discomfort of emotion labor is due to “emotive dissonance” or a clash between inner feelings and outward expression (Hochschild, 1983). From this point of view, emotion labor interferes with an employee’s ability to reconcile one’s “true” feelings with an organizationally mandated “false” display of emotion. Such dissonance is thought to “lead to personal and work-related maladjustment, such as poor self-esteem, depression, cynicism, and alienation from work” and, ultimately, turnover and organizational exit (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, pp. 96–97).

A number of researchers have extended this line of inquiry, analyzing issues that may mitigate emotive dissonance. A primary strand of this research suggests that dissonance is especially problematic for employees who have not internalized organizational emotion norms or role expectations (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Rafaeli and Sutton (1989) suggest that employees who believe 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*. Likewise, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) note that employees who cognitively perceive oneness or

belongingness with their work feel more “authentic” when adopting organizationally prescribed emotion display rules. Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) go a step further, arguing that emotion labor is less likely to result in dissonance when it is “consistent with the display rules of a specific identity that one has internalized (or wants to internalize) as a reflection of self—*regardless of whether the expression genuinely reflects one’s current feelings*” (p. 195, emphasis in original).

These arguments have been fruitful for opening up examination of emotion labor and its attendant psychosocial effects. However, as noted by Tracy and Trethewey (2005), “a consequence of theorizing emotion labor in terms of authenticity and emotive dissonance is that it perpetuates the assumption that psychological discomfort arises when fake selves and real selves clash” (p. 175). Such an understanding rests upon an essentialist notion of the self; it suggests that emotion is something individual, personal, cognitive, and internal that is then made fake, for instance, through “surface acting” or “deep acting” (Hochschild, 1983)—processes considered to be ultimately separate from a real self. This is problematic because a presumption that emotion has a “truer” existence before it is constrained through organizational norms underestimates how mundane practice and communication continually (re)construct emotion and the ways societal and organizational discourses shape the very notion of “real” feelings (Waldron, 1994). In other words, a focus on emotive dissonance and individual framing techniques distracts researchers from examining larger discourses of power and everyday social interactions that impact how and why emotion work may be difficult.

A post-structuralist understanding of identity, in contrast, highlights the ways in which emotion and subjectivity are fundamentally behavioral and interactional processes; “it is in our habits, our everyday actions where belief, subjectivity and hence power resides” (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, p. 170). A post-structuralist viewpoint suggests that identities are continually (re)created, constrained and interpreted through discourses of power (Trethewey, 2001; Weedon, 1997). The self is overdetermined and fragmented (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996), and consists of myriad “sub-individuals” (Foucault, 1980). Feelings of (in)authenticity and emotive dissonance are therefore, like all aspects of identity, socially and interactionally constructed—embedded in and moderated by multiple and contradictory discourses (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Unlike past research that has focused upon emotive dissonance, this study considers the ways that discourses of power and organizational processes enable and constrain certain constructions of identity and how these issues, in turn, impact the difficulty of emotion work.

## **Examining Emotion Behind Bars**

### *Women’s Minimum Prison and Nouveau Jail*

The study draws from qualitative research with officers at two correctional facilities, Women’s Minimum Prison (WM), and Nouveau Jail (NJ), both located in a western state of the United States (names of facilities and participants are pseudonyms). I was

in contact with 109 participants—68 correctional officers and 41 administrative employees—67 of whom I observed for an extended period and/or formally interviewed and 42 of whom I briefly observed or informally interviewed. About two-thirds of the employees were male, and about 85% of them Caucasian. This gender and racial breakdown underlines the enduring masculine nature and White dominance of correctional facilities.

WM, located on the outskirts of a large metropolitan city, houses about 400 convicted female inmates. Most are classified as “minimum security,” hold keys to their room, and are allowed to walk the prison campus at will. The average inmate stay is 33 months. WM correctional officers are hired and work for the state’s Department of Corrections (DOC). NJ, located in a suburb of the same city, houses about 385 inmates, with about 92% male and 8% female. Approximately 60% of NJ’s inmates are convicted and sentenced, while about 40% are incarcerated while waiting for court dates—because they either were denied bail or did not pay it. Inmates’ stay at NJ ranged from a half hour to two years, with a mean stay of 12 days. Inmates are separated into different “pods” based on security level. Some are locked in their cells for the majority of the day, while others exit their cell and hang out in their pod’s “dayroom.” NJ officers work for the Nouveau County Sheriff’s Department.

Past scholars cite difficulty gaining access to conduct qualitative research behind bars (Conover, 2000; DiIulio, 1987). When meeting with gatekeepers, I referred to officers’ high levels of turnover, job dissatisfaction, divorce, psychological distress, and a life expectancy of 59 years (Cheek, 1984) as justifications for further understanding the emotional dilemmas of officers. NJ and WM both espoused humane correctional philosophies and, thus, gatekeepers may have felt they had little to hide. After gaining access, I introduced myself to correctional officers during pre-shift briefings and explained an interest in telling “their story.” Past research has consistently glossed the key role of correctional officers in the penal equation (Brodsky, 1982), a population as much “disciplined” by the prison industrial complex as its inmates (Foucault, 1977).

### *Procedures*

I gathered data over an 11-month time period (May 1999 through March 2000), logging 171 research hours, which yielded 722 single-spaced, typewritten pages of data. Data sources included analysis of participant observation fieldnotes (244 pages), organizational training documents (120 pages), and transcribed interviews (398 pages). The research passed human subjects review and participants gave informed consent.

A primary source of data was fieldnotes from 80 hours of shadowing correctional officers and engaging in informal interviews. I observed 68 different officers, usually several during a four-hour time period, taking down notes and engaging in “ethnographic interviews” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I focused observations on officers who interacted directly with inmates, and barring the hours of 3 a.m. to 5:30 a.m., observations spanned all hours of the day. In the attempt to observe “special

events,” I also conducted fieldwork on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. In the field, I took scratch notes that I typed up into detailed fieldnotes within 36 hours of the observation.

Second, I observed training sessions and examined a number of training documents. I was a full participant in two training sessions designed for prison/jail volunteers. They covered volunteer rules of conduct, the “inmate mentality,” and what to do in an emergency. In addition, I observed and “played” as a participant (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) in 33 hours of correctional officer training that covered issues on working with the female offender, mental health, court procedures, direct supervision, inmate management, and physical defensive tactics (e.g., practicing hits and kicks on each other). Fieldnotes recorded the training content, reactions from officers on how the topics were covered, and notes about how information from training was assimilated and resisted in day-to-day practice. In addition, I examined training manuals on professionalism, effective communications, and managing stress.

Last, I conducted 22 in-depth recorded interviews: ten with NJ officers, nine with WM officers, and three with organizational supervisors, including the WM Warden, NJ Captain, and NJ Sheriff. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, with a mean length of one hour and ten minutes. The interviews were designed to elaborate issues and inconsistencies noted in participant observation. They included questions on how officers manage their emotions, what parts of the job are stressful, and whether they feel as though they are acting in order to play their role. The interview schedule was used as a loose conversational guide—attentive and flexible to the ongoing exchange—rather than as a strict agenda (Mishler, 1986). I transcribed one-fifth of the interviews myself with the rest prepared by a professional. I listened to all tapes as I reviewed (and occasionally modified) transcripts. This served as another layer of analysis and increased assurance that transcripts accurately represented interviewees’ words.

### *Methods of Analysis*

I relied upon a two-level analysis, alternately using emic-level categories that emerged from the data and participants’ voices and etic-level categories based on extant research and theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As such, I read and reread fieldnotes, documents, and transcribed interviews for recurring patterns, while frequently returning to the literature for issues that merited additional examination. I did not enter the field with specific hypotheses about emotion norms; nor did I originally aim to use post-structuralism to re-theorize the discomfort of emotion labor. Rather, these foci emerged through a grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which I classified data texts into categories, wrote analytic memos about the meaning of these categories, and added new incidents to categories until they became “theoretically saturated.”

A number of categories emerged in regard to types of emotion labor norms and performances (e.g., “respect inmates”). The analysis of these comprises the first half of the findings. Through an examination of this grounded context, coupled with a re-

analysis of past emotive dissonance research, it became increasingly clear that a post-structuralist theoretical lens highlighted heretofore under-analyzed explanations for how and why emotion labor is difficult. The second part of the findings identifies these factors and demonstrates how they transpired in the correctional setting.

### **Emotion Labor Norms and Practices among Correctional Officers**

Correctional officer work is marked by contradiction, tension and paradox (Foucault, 1977; Tracy, 2004). Officers must focus alternately on rehabilitation and discipline; respect, yet suspect inmates; be flexible in an institution marked by strict rules and regulations; and maintain solidarity with co-workers while appearing emotionally independent and unneeded. The following qualitative picture of correctional officers' emotional performances—ranging from inflated cheeriness, to suppression of fear, to the creation of an angry, tough demeanor—demonstrates the complex web of emotion labor expectations central to managing this tension-filled job.

#### *Be Warm, Nurturing, and Respectful*

Similar to the emotion work required of service personnel, correctional officers are expected to express pleasant and warm emotions, and suppress irritation in their mannerisms, facial expressions, and language. This expectation is consistent with correctional facilities' shift in ideology—from a focus on punishment to kinder and gentler philosophies that decry inmate abuse (Schlosser, 1998). NJ Sheriff Charlie Robinson explained that the best officers are parents, ex-flight attendants, and ex-teachers. Indeed, he coached new officers to “treat these people . . . as if they were a family friend,” a mandate eerily similar to flight attendants' emotion labor decree to think of a passenger as if he/she were a “personal guest in your living room” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 105). In compliance with America's shifting correctional ideology, WM and NJ officers were instructed to, “Speak [to inmates] as you want to be spoken to,” open doors for inmates and address them by titles such as “Ms.” or “Mr.” Furthermore, officers were expected to appear upbeat when they led “occupy and pacify” skills classes, recreation events, and entertainment activities (such as a Christmas card-making contest and bingo tournament).

Correctional officers were also expected to express emotions that suggested they truly cared for inmates, similar to the emotion work of nurses (Morgan & Krone, 1999). NJ Captain Henry McMaster insisted that the best officers were those who “truly took this job because you want to make a difference.” Likewise, WM Warden J. C. Jackson indicated he looked for officers who would “change people, help deal with their behaviors, someone that could be a role model and also mentor them.” WM Lt. Bernie Sands passionately appealed to officers in training:

For eight hours, I don't care what your personal feelings are! You have a second family here. You can take five minutes to listen to an inmate vent. . . . I don't care what your feelings are for the rest of your life, but in here, you need to listen.

Similarly, the WM “being professional” training manual claimed that “interacting with inmates” is “essential for the development of a positive climate.” Such mandates indicate the larger institutional emphasis placed on officers’ stifling their “personal” feelings and treating inmates kindly.

Officers echoed this nurturing expectation in their talk and everyday behavior. WM Officer Diane Pratt described a good officer as “Someone who’s willing to actually talk to and listen to the inmates.” Indeed, officers listened patiently when inmates discussed problems with family, employees, or other inmates. Officers gave advice and conducted extra welfare checks on depressed or sick inmates. In a “life-skills” class, the leading officer repeatedly and patiently tried to engage inmates in a serious discussion about goals even as they made fun of the program. As I shadowed WM Officer Tina Herring, she spontaneously explained, “We take care of them . . . they would get hurt on the outside.”

### *Be Suspicious*

While organizational norms espouse an expectation for kindness, a primary part of the correctional officer job revolved around maintaining suspicion. Suspicion is unlike “pure” emotions like happiness or anger that have a clear object and a corresponding facial expression (Ekman, 1982). Nevertheless, it is associated with action readiness, physical arousal, and mental preoccupation, which indicates that suspicion is an “emotional process” (Frijda, 1993). Furthermore, officers had to engage in specific verbal, bodily, and facial displays to engage in suspicion.

To carry out the “be suspicious” expectation, officers avoided direct eye contact and physical contact with inmates. NJ Officer Rick Neod said he purposely dodged shaking inmates’ hands because it would just give them something “to grab and break.” Trainers told officers to never turn their backs on or stand within six feet of inmates. Officers also consistently watched their surroundings and tried to avoid distractions. Before WM Officer Nick Axel agreed that I could shadow him during “rounds” of inmate cells, he warned, “You’ve got to be careful, because they’ll try to distract you so that someone can go warn someone else that I’m coming.” Just as he predicted, inmates distracted us twice. While Axel was able to deflect the distraction, an inmate who complimented my shoes sidetracked me. After the incident, I noted in my research journal, “It’s this line between not doing what inmates tell you, but joking/throwing them off without being rude. I haven’t learned it—but most officers are experts at it.” Officers also maintained suspicion by hiding personal information. One said, “I never talk about my personal life.” Another refused to disclose his first name. Rather, he told inmates that the “E” on his nametag stood for “Everywhere; that means I’m everywhere you are and I see everything.”

This emotional posture of suspicion served as a method of control (Fineman & Sturdy, 1999)—not only for inmates, but also for each other. Officers made fun of co-workers who were “sucked in” by inmates, or served as “carriers” for inmate contraband, referring to these fallen officers as “fish” or “mules,” respectively. This type of ridicule underlines the strength of the suspicion norm compared to the

expectation that officers respect and nurture inmates. Rarely, for instance, did I hear an officer disparage a peer for not being caring or nice enough to inmates. This is not surprising considering larger societal discourses that associate nurturing emotions with low-status, feminized positions (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989) and regard inmates as deviant human waste (Davis, 1998).

### *Suppress Weak Emotions and Be Tough*

While correctional administrators espoused a “kinder and gentler” philosophy and instructed officers that they should not try to be “Mighty Mouse,” formal and informal organizational practices encouraged and rewarded officers for suppressing feelings of weakness and fear, so that they could appear tough, stoic, and impenetrable. The toughness expectation was formally manifest in the institutional intimidation process used for inmate takedowns; necessary, for example, when inmates blockaded themselves in a cell or held a weapon. A group of four or five officers—dressed in riot gear, with black body protection, facemasks, and shields—marched with stern faces from the facility reception area toward the inmate’s cell, chanting and stomping their feet in the hope they would intimidate the inmate into submission. Because everyone in the facility could hear the pounding feet and chanting, the ritual served as a performance that accentuates officers’ toughness and power over inmates.

The toughness norm was also exemplified in hours of physical training that instructed officers how to “take down,” hit, kick, handcuff, and apply pressure points to inmates in ways that created maximum pain with minimal long-term repercussions. Occasionally during these training sessions, officers would volunteer to be sprayed with mace or hooked up to inmate restraining devices. WM Officer Stephanie Jones explained how she tried out the facility’s electric shock “reactor belt” (designed so that inmates can be electrically shocked via remote control) and received “signature marks” (burns) on her back to “prove it.” Her motivation? According to Jones, “If those men [male officers] think that you can’t do the job, you’re done.” This comment not only speaks to local emotion norms, but the ways that officers’ everyday behaviors reflected and reified larger discourses of power; to fit in, she would, of course, control feelings of pain and fear, and try to act like a man. While increasing numbers of correctional officers are female, correctional facilities are still sedimented in masculine and patriarchal ideals (Britton, 2003). This creates a double bind in which, to be accepted, female officers must “go along,” but in doing so, perpetuate discourses that privilege traditional notions of masculinity.

Indeed, across a variety of circumstances, officers’ talk and behavior mirrored the expectation that officers should be emotionally stoic. “Good co-workers” were described as “hard” and “not a chocolate heart.” NJ Officer Michael Martinez explained, “It’s a louder voice. It’s standing up straight. It’s direct eye contact. It’s facing your inmate.” WM Officer Carrie Lewis said she tried to act “just like a drill sergeant,” while WM Officer John Anderson remarked, “I just bark out orders. I think tough” and explained unapologetically, “I don’t put up with a lot of crap off of

them. . . . I'm not an asshole one day and nice the next. Most of the people say I'm an asshole every day."

Officers stigmatized co-workers who did not appear tough. NJ Officer Bobby Jo Herria said that after the death of an inmate on her shift, she decided to keep her sad feelings to herself, saying that if she had talked with colleagues, "other people I worked with would have been judging me, [saying] 'she can't handle it.'" Likewise, WM Officer Stephanie Jones indicated that her most disturbing work experience was "taking down" an inmate who was wielding a pair of handcuffs as a weapon. During the takedown, the female inmate kept screaming, "Yeah, you hurt me . . . hurt me . . . fuck me, fuck me hard." The inmate's disquieting behavior upset Jones so much that in the standard "use of force" hearing, Jones admitted to her superiors that she would be a "happy woman" if she never again had a similar experience. To Jones' horrific surprise, this comment led correctional superiors to summon her with a mental health referral. Given America's disdainful discourses about the mentally ill (Whitaker, 2002), such an action would be identity-threatening in most any work venue. However, in the correctional setting, the insult is magnified because it suggests that the officer is "just as crazy" as the inmate. Jones said, "[The referral] pissed me off. . . . Is this what we're coming to? Because you have somebody that's got some good common sense, that doesn't really want to be in there, hurting people? You know? And I need a mental health referral? Hello!" The incident reinforced the norm that officers lock up their emotions—not only around inmates, but also as they dealt with co-workers' panoptic and disciplining gaze (Foucault, 1977).

Officers were expected to suppress emotions of anger and fear as a general rule. One officer said, "According to the [facility regulations] officers aren't supposed to get angry." In regard to fear, an officer explained, "If you're scared, you better swallow those emotions and not let it show . . . because they hone in on that big time and they'll use it against you." Another said her advice to new employees would be, "Don't give them a chance to see that you have a weakness. If you have one, you better not show it, because somebody's going to play on it." Indeed, a WM training manual asserted, "Remember you are in control of your emotions, if you are unable to control them, your judgment may be clouded."

Officers also had to hide negative emotions such as disgust when dealing with inmates who, for instance, would swallow razor blades, visibly masturbate, rape each other with curling irons, shatter their food platters by banging them against the wall, urinate out of their cell doors, throw pop, juice, or urine in officers' faces, play with their feces, and flood their cells. NJ Officer Derrick Garcia, for instance, discussed an encounter with an inmate who was writing on the cell wall with feces. Garcia dealt with the situation by developing rapport with the inmate and appearing calm rather than shocked. Garcia explained, "If I would have said, 'Oh God, you freaking sick dude. What the hell's wrong with you man? Wash your hands off.' How would he have reacted?" NJ Officer Rick Neod referred to the same incident, saying, "Some people, their behavior is completely an attention grabber. . . . If you cater to their wanting attention then that kind of reinforces the fact that they should do it." Officers said that, by suppressing disgust, they could calm and control inmates as well as stunt

inmates' hope to grab attention. An alternative explanation, yet curiously absent in officers' comments, is the possibility that officers' stoic emotional control actually motivated and perpetuated inmates' efforts to "win the shock game."

The officers' espoused motivation for emotional control was reinforced through formal mandates. Administrators suggested that suppressing disgust and fear was a key part of officer training and socialization: During NJ's annual in-service training, correctional officers watched a slide show depicting various gory murders in the county. The trainer gave no explanation for the show and provided no rhetorical space for officers to voice disgust or uneasiness. The series of "dead guy" photos essentially told officers they should get used to tragedy, maintain detachment, and become tough. In other words, officers should expect inmates to be gross, violent, and disgusting, but simultaneously be able to suppress these feelings in themselves.

As illustrated, correctional officers must navigate an intricate set of emotion labor expectations. On the one hand, they are required to express nurturing, caring, and respectful emotions to inmates. Nonetheless, both formally and informally, officers are pressured to uphold and rewarded for enacting emotional norms of suspicion, being tough, and suppressing feelings of fear, pain, anger, and disgust. This picture of emotion labor norms and performances provides a context for teasing out how and why various structural and interactional issues may affect the ease of emotion labor.

### Theorizing the Difficulty of Emotion Labor

A key part of my interviews with correctional officers revolved around issues of acting and putting on a performance. For instance, I asked, "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 portray you accurately as an officer at NJ/WM."<sup>2</sup> In response to this question, several officers indicated that they acted as "themselves" and did not put on a facade. WM Officer Carrie Lewis said, "You can be yourself. It's just you don't divulge information that they can use." NJ Officer Rick Neod agreed, saying, "I'm not going to come across as someone completely different than who I am because I can't. . . . I'm not an actor and I can't play that role." The majority of officers, however, indicated that part of being a good correctional officer was constructing an emotional facade. For instance, WM Officer John Anderson said, "You have to act tough, but feel not so tough, because they all know, you're not as tough as you try to act." Shy and soft-spoken in his interview, NJ Officer Michael Martinez said, "I'm very in tune with not pushing myself onto other people, so in order to put on the uniform, it's like putting on a separate personality. You have to be ready to be aggressive at any time." NJ Officer Fish Tyler said, "I'll purposely act calmer to calm them down. . . . It's a little bit of faking it. You act to get your way."

These responses not only reinforce the central role of emotion labor in the correctional officer job, but also suggest that employees, at least occasionally, differentiate between an "internal" self and an "external" performance. This is consistent with past research indicating that "people tend to *believe* they have an authentic self" (Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000, p. 184, emphasis in original) and

individuals often “experience a sense of interiority, a phenomenological space that we feel to be our very own” (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, p. 169). Indeed, “employees may talk about a ‘real’ self, cut off from organizational discursivities, but this may only be an attempt to keep from feeling as though they are lying to themselves or being brainwashed” (Tracy, 2000, p. 120).

While employees may feel as though they have a “real” self of their own choosing, a post-structuralist lens suggests that the self (and these feelings of interiority) are constructed in relation to larger discourses of power that encompass an organizationally and socially prescribed ideal. Such an identity is marked by contradiction (Kondo, 1990) and layered through interaction, organizational processes, and societal discourses (Collinson, 2003). As Tracy and Trethewey (2005) note, “replacing the words real, core, or authentic identity with the word ‘preferred’ sense of self . . . emphasizes the way identity is ideological, constructed, negotiated and constantly shifting” (p. 18). Indeed, the variety of emotional expectations for officers makes it difficult to pinpoint a static characterization of an ideal correctional officer. Nevertheless, many discourses and organizational processes converged to define a preferred officer as tough, rational, masculine, savvy, smart, and a “special breed.”

Considering this, it may be of little surprise that officers found emotion labor to be more difficult when it implied that they were feminine or tainted servants to undeserving clients. As illustrated, formal organizational mandates and everyday practices encouraged officers to nurture, respect, and extend pleasantries to inmates. In many professional settings, doing so implicitly communicates that the service recipient is important, deserving, and generally of higher status than the provider. The problem of a “customer is the boss” attitude in the correctional atmosphere, however, is that officers’ “customers” are people charged and convicted of crimes that range from petty theft to rape, murder, and child abuse—people who society has thrown away and made invisible (Davis, 1998). Officers often echoed societal discourses that malign inmates, for instance through repeatedly calling inmates the “scum of the earth.” As one extrapolated, “You’re dealing with the scum of society. You’re dealing with people that have never probably told the truth in their entire lives. You’re dealing with people that would rather slice you up than talk to you.” Officers who felt this way also complained about the expectation that they nurture and respect inmates. WM Officer Luke Gollett, for example, bemoaned the responsibility of having to sit up one night with a 60-year-old inmate who was having bad dreams, saying that he really just wanted “to sit there and laugh.”

The discomfort of serving and nurturing inmates, therefore, is not just about being forced to “fake” emotions. Rather, when macro discourses imply that service is usually performed for the high status by the low status, and when inmates are socially classified as deviant (Davis, 1998), it is no wonder that officers find it difficult to muster up the emotions associated with nurturing and respecting inmates. Doing so can imply that officers are, themselves, tainted and dirty (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999)—scum serving scum. Indeed, correctional officers said that street cops referred to them as the “scum of law enforcement.” Unlike firefighters, for instance, who are viewed as American heroes (Scott & Myers, 2005), correctional officers must face

societal discourses and mass media portrayals that paint them as deviant and brutal. Furthermore, officers remarked with chagrin that they served as “babysitters,” “glorified maids,” and “camp counselors”—positions that society largely classify as insignificant, feminine, stigmatized, and out of the realm of any “tough guy.”

The concept of emotive dissonance would suggest that psychological discomfort results when emotional performances conflict with “real” feelings. Indeed, officers said they often “acted” tougher than they felt. However, in contrast to the difficulty of performing respectful and nurturing emotions, many officers viewed “being tough” as a way to manage their boredom and even have fun. An example that typifies this is when I observed NJ Officer Billy Stone, who was assigned to the visitation post for the evening, breeze through the booking room of the jail and mention to another officer, “I’m bored. I hate visitation just for this reason. At least if I’m in the cage I can go around and yell, ‘Hey, what you doin?’” Acting tough upheld an identity that reiterated this officer’s power. Whereas past research has suggested that expressing negative emotion is more likely to result in emotional dissonance, job dissatisfaction, and turnover (Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000, p. 200), this study’s data suggest that when negative, tough, and stoic emotions uphold an identity that is organizationally and socially reinforced, then doing so may be easier than expressing prescribed positive emotions.

Of course, employees did not always aim for the stereotypical tough, male, threatening persona; “masculinities are by no means homogenous, unified or fixed categories but diverse, differentiated and shifting across time, space and culture” (Connell, 1995; cf., Collinson, 2003, p. 534). While various discourses layered upon one another to define correctional officer identity as tough and rational, competing discourses insinuated that good officers should help nurture and rehabilitate inmates—an ideal that occasionally found its way into officer talk. NJ Officer Rick Neod said, “A great day is when you feel like maybe you made a difference in inmates’ lives.” WM Officer Dean Everlast said about female inmates, “They’ve been treated badly by their own men, so that’s one thing I think, maybe if I show them a little bit of [respect], they’ll see that men [are] some good.” By listening and treating inmates nicely, officers like Everlast could frame themselves as positive role models. When officers were able to view themselves as patient and unique—as saviors or heroes that society could depend on to accomplish work that was beyond the ability of others—the nurturing aspect of emotion labor appeared to be less difficult. Four factors, in particular, emerged as salient in connection to identity and the ease of emotion work.

### *Powerlessness*

Correctional officers are “dirty workers” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Unlike police officers and firefighters, who are featured as heroes in television shows, correctional officers are largely absent and “locked away” from public view. Officers say that police officers refer to them as the “scum of law enforcement” and indicate that they receive little admiration from friends and family about their work. In short, larger societal discourses diminish correctional officers as dirty, and perhaps as tainted and aberrant

as those they watch (Brodsky, 1982; Foucault, 1977). One might think that to make up for this lack of external admiration and confirmation, officers might receive more power on the inside of prisons. However, in the 21st century, this is not the case for several reasons.

Shifts in corrections philosophies have altered resources of power for officers. Administrators desire officers who can compassionately monitor inmates. This “warehousing” corrections philosophy is contrasted with past punitive (punishment) or rehabilitative (repair) philosophies (Schlosser, 1998). In abandoning punitive approaches, however, officers have lost punishment and coercive power, and from relinquishing rehabilitative philosophies, officers have left behind much of their therapeutic and expert power (Hepburn, 1985). Furthermore, when officers are *expected* to be nice to inmates, doing so no longer triggers surprise, admiration, or respect, thus mitigating it as a space for referent power. Indeed, bureaucratic correctional approaches place officers among the most powerless entities within the system. Officers’ behavior is watched, and thus controlled, from below by inmates, above by administrators, and laterally by peers. This hierarchical location thus also mitigates officers’ enactment of referent, punitive, and reward powers and threatens a preferred identity—that of the independent, powerful, masculine officer. Both NJ and WM officers decried their lack of power, citing that inmates oftentimes garnered more respect than officers.

Myriad situations illustrate the interconnected nature of power and emotion work, but none better than the following. During a fieldwork session in the WM segregation unit, I observed that after officers delivered food or laundry to inmates through the mini “cut-out” slots of their cells, officers would slam the slot door back into place, creating an excruciatingly loud clang that resounded through the entire pod. The little doors did not always latch after the first slam so, occasionally, the officers banged the door three to four times. After one such instance, an inmate inside the cell began screaming frantically, “Stop, STOP, STOP! Why do you do that?” As the offending correctional officer and I walked down the hall, he turned to me and said with mock innocence, “It wouldn’t lock.”

Why would officers engage in such a practice? Slamming the doors is more than just a fun distraction or a result of sheer laziness. The performance also illuminates the intersections of power and emotion labor: When correctional officers work in segregation, they basically serve as “glorified maids” or “flight attendants” delivering inmates’ food and laundry. In most organizations, this type of activity communicates the idea that the server (officer) is of lower status than the people being served (inmates). During such service activities, officers found performances of respect to be especially taxing and, therefore, sought out alternative avenues of power. The practice of slamming the little doors allowed officers to “inadvertently” irritate inmates and thus exert punishment power (and, in doing so, confirm a strong, controlling identity). Yet, because doing so does not explicitly constitute an offense, the performance still allowed officers to work within the framework of the “respect” norm. This is similar, for instance, to Disney ride operators who punish irritating customers through a passive-aggressive “seat-belt slap” (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989).

Several months later, I brought up the door-slamming incident in an interview with the officer involved. Although initially reticent and embarrassed, he eventually became quite animated in his reliving of the performance. With a mischievous smile on his face, he said,

BOOM!! You slam that thing and it's a way to show them to shut up and leave you alone. And it's loud, really loud in there. I've had someone do it to me when I've been inside the cell, and inside those brick walls, and it just reverberates. BOOM!

Further, he explained that the doors' design allows officers to use their key if they desired to latch them more quietly. However, he shrugged his shoulders and explained, "I don't feel like doing that all the time, especially when inmates are irritating me." While control systems and correctional philosophies discouraged blatant acts of inmate punishment, slamming a little door while delivering food could be viewed as "accidental." Seemingly innocent and simple actions like this, in which punishment is exerted precisely through acts of service, provide correctional officers with a fleeting opportunity to enact paradoxical emotion norms (e.g., nurture but be tough) and simultaneously reconstruct themselves as powerful and in control. The officers' "door slam" practice ingeniously worked within the organizational structure yet mitigated the discomfort associated with emotion work.

Whereas some officers found power through creative punishments, other officers found avenues for "expert" or "referent" power by having a special skill, knowledge, or expertise and/or being able to garner respect or admiration. Inmates repeatedly targeted some officers, who appeared especially skilled at conflict management and counseling, for advice and expertise. Examples include WM Sgt. Dianne Pratt who came to the job after working in a high school mental health department and WM Officer Nick Axel who was working on his master's degree in educational psychology. In contrast to the officer described in the door-slamming incident (who previously was employed as a grocery store clerk), I observed Pratt and Axel repeatedly and convincingly express positive, respectful emotions to inmates. When employees were rewarded with positive inmate attention because of their expertise power, they appeared less likely to hold back pleasantries or exert "accidental" punishment. This suggests that alternate resources of power, in this case, counseling skills and knowledge that accords with the ideal of the compassionate officer, can bolster preferred understandings of identity and, thus, ease emotion work that may otherwise be identity-threatening.

#### *Lack of Interaction with Similar Others*

This study also indicates that the availability of spaces for employees to associate with similar others affects the discomfort of emotion labor. Especially when it is outside the gaze of superiors or clients, peer interaction allows employees to co-construct preferred identities through "hidden transcripts" and "role-distancing behaviors." Hidden transcripts characterize "discourse that takes place 'offstage' . . . beyond the direct observation of power holders" (Scott, 1990, p. 4). Such moments are powerful

because they offer space for resistance, social support, venting, and, potentially, organizational change (Murphy, 1998). Role distance is a process through which an individual denies “the virtual self that is implied in the role” (Goffman, 1961b, p. 108) through self-deprecating comments and mocking behavior. Goffman notes that, “the immediate audiences figure very directly in the display of role distance” (p. 109).

Hidden transcripts and role-distancing behaviors appeared to ease emotion labor among officers who worked as a team, such as was the case in the WM visitation post. During visitation activities, three different officers could gather, hang out, and chat in a glassed-in observation booth. I observed a frequent pattern in which officers would wave and smile to inmates, and then make comments to another officer like, “I don’t trust her,” or “Put that inmate up front so we can watch her.” This sequence of activities allowed officers to maintain performances of respect while simultaneously convincing themselves and each other that they were informed, savvy, and wise. Likewise, officers moderated the distaste associated with strip searches through joking about how they must be a “special breed” in order to do the job. Such role-distancing activities provided opportunities for officers to feel good about themselves with colleagues, thus mitigating the identity-threatening nature of subservient emotion work. Furthermore, collectively discussing their roles as “societal saviors,” helped officers inoculate themselves from larger discourses that deemed correctional officer work as “tainted” and “dirty” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Unfortunately, most officers’ opportunities to interact with each other were severely limited. Few posts (except for visitation, segregation, and the booking room) allowed for extended contact among officers. Most officers worked alone supervising inmate pods, and interacted with each other only during their ten-minute, pre-shift briefing or when they took several breaks. Adding to the physical separation between officers, organizational norms suggested that officers be wary of turning to other officers for emotional support. As illustrated earlier, officers were stigmatized for showing weakness or concern, and quickly learned to keep those feelings to themselves.

Coupled together, officers’ physical separation from one another and work norms that discouraged “personal neediness” created a situation that largely deterred social support, hidden transcripts, and role-distancing performances. Unlike flight attendants, for instance, who can frequently gather together to collectively frame problem passengers as spoiled children (Hochschild, 1983), correctional officers, after fetching toilet paper for a convicted rapist, cannot immediately joke with another employee. The emotion work of being respectful and nurturing is more difficult in such situations that limit backstage interactions with similar others.

### *Identification with the Work Role*

Organizational identification has been linked to feelings of belonging and increased commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and researchers have suggested that role internalization diminishes the discomfort of emotive dissonance (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). However, Gossett (2002) questions the unmitigated

desirability of organizational identification, and Ashforth and Humphrey argue that, “the more central a given role or group is to one’s identity, the stronger the association between one’s emotional well-being and the perceived successes, failures, and demands of the role of the group” (1993, p. 106). This suggests that, while identification might create good feelings for employees who view their work positively, the same force of identification can be detrimental when employees perceive their employing organization or own role performance as failing. As the following discussion fleshes out, “success” for correctional officers is elusive, if not paradoxical.

The lion’s share of correctional officer work is spent monitoring inmates. However, officers only occasionally *catch* inmates in wrongdoing and, thus, they rarely see tangible “fruits” of their monitoring efforts. As one officer said, “Unlike a carpenter or even a computer worker, at the end of the day, you have nothing to show for your work.” Considering this, it is no surprise that catching inmates in wrongdoing served as a thrill for officers. Doing so was “proof” that the never-ending, monotonous “maintaining suspicion” routines were actually important. As one officer said, “You want to make a bust so bad. It’s a wonderful thing to find something.” Therefore, inasmuch as an inmate “bust” affirmed employees’ monitoring activities, it also embodied “success.”

Paradoxically, busting inmates also represented failure, because it proved officers must not be successful in rehabilitating inmates. Myriad organizational messages suggested officers should help change inmates. WM Trainer Linda Riesling, for instance, told trainees, “If you treat them with respect, they might not come back.” Unfortunately, the inmate recidivism rate (percent age returning within two years) was estimated at 45–50%. Of these, more than 80% of inmates returned more than once. Therefore, if rehabilitation and discouraging recidivism constituted primary goals, then correctional facilities “failed” more than half of the time.

My data indicate that employees who highly identified with the correctional setting were more likely than those who viewed it as “just a job” to experience confusion and frustration as they searched for power and meaning in an organizational setting in which success was elusive, if not paradoxical. For instance, an officer—who was deeply invested in the job and called herself a “lifer”—was frustrated with her lack of influence and was rumored to transfer contraband to inmates. In contrast, a number of the well-respected officers who appeared to repeatedly and successfully express respect and care to inmates did not view work as a central part of their identity. For instance, WM Officer Nick Axel (noted previously as an officer who provided excellent emotion labor) said that while he originally entered corrections because “I thought I could make a difference” he found that “it didn’t turn out that way.” This did not upset him. He explained, with a smile and shoulder shrug, that he stayed because “I make a lot of money.” The salary (more than \$30,000 in 1999) allowed Axel to focus on what he called his “real interests”—running an outside business, spending time with his family, and attending graduate school part-time. Another officer explained, “I own my own business with collectible art, designing athletic

equipment, and then my karate. . . . If you don't have something to do outside of DOC . . . you can get caught up in it and be stressed out."

The officers who viewed their position as "just a job" and found confirmation of their identity and success outside of work appeared to more successfully engage in the expected emotion labor without undue discomfort. This finding supports Fleming and Spicer's (2003) contention that, "when we dis-identify with our prescribed social roles we often *still perform them*—sometimes better, ironically, than if we did identify with them" (p. 160, emphasis in original). In this case, employee dis-identification appeared to lubricate and facilitate emotion labor expectations.

### *Viewing Emotion Labor as Strategic Interaction*

Last, it appears that officers found emotion work less laborious when it was framed as a type of strategic interaction; that is, as a favor that would provide them something in exchange. Many officers spontaneously discussed how providing respect made inmates more docile and, thus, made the job easier. NJ Officer Terry Nixon remarked, "If you treat them as people instead of as criminals, you seem to get along better with them. If you show them a little bit of respect, they show you respect." WM Trainer Linda Riesling told officers, "Giving them respect eventually helps you accomplish your goals."

Suppressing emotion also was used strategically. Most officers agreed they should avoid showing "true" anger. However, many said they liked to play "good cop, bad cop" as a strategic method for control and coercion. As one officer explained, "If it's calculated behavior on your part, or a result that you want out of the inmate, yeah, but if you lose your cool . . . you've lost the ball game." Officers also masked anger, fear, and disgust because they did not want to "allow" inmates to "push their buttons." As WM Officer John Anderson said, "If you show them that you're mad, they'll probably just keep doing it again and again." By using emotional expression and suppression strategically, officers framed themselves as powerful, knowledgeable, and in control of making a trade: they did emotion work in exchange for inmate manageability.

### **Conclusions and Summary**

This qualitative study provides an in-depth picture of the emotion labor expectations in the correctional officer setting and, in turn, makes the case that emotion labor is difficult not necessarily because it contradicts a "real" self, as suggested by theories of emotive dissonance. Rather, a post-structuralist lens highlights how the ease of emotion work is intricately connected to discourses of power and organizational structures that enable and constrain the construction of identity. Such discourses are manifest both in macro societal structures and everyday organizational practices. For instance, warehousing correctional philosophies strip punishment, reward, and expert resources of power from officers, suggesting that correctional officers are oftentimes little more than glorified maids. On a micro scale, physical organizational

processes limit officers' opportunities to engage in backstage interaction, and organizational norms discourage officers from being "personally needy" around each other. In addition, because of officers' dual responsibility to nurture and rehabilitate inmates, yet consistently watch them for signs of wrong-doing, "success" is elusive, if not paradoxical—an issue that may be particularly problematic for officers who identify highly with the job.

In sum, this grounded analysis suggests the following conclusions—issues that I hope are taken up and further examined in future research:

- Emotion labor is easier when it confirms a preferred identity. Individuals may label this as an "authentic" identity; however, it is not a "real" or essentialized self, but is continually (re)constructed.
- Serving people designated by organizational and societal discourses as "low status" and undeserving makes emotion labor more difficult.
- Employees with relatively limited resources for power will experience increased difficulty in providing emotion labor, especially when their work suggests a servile position.
- Opportunities for backstage interaction with similar others allow employees to engage in hidden transcripts, social support, and role-distancing behaviors—activities that aid in the (re)construction of a preferred sense of self and thus ease emotion work.
- Employees who frame emotion labor as a strategic exchange are more likely to find it easy and perhaps even fun.
- High identification does not always ease emotion work. In cases where the success of one's work role is elusive or ambiguous, dis-identification may actually facilitate emotion labor.

In addition to extending extant theoretical understandings of emotion labor, these findings also suggest practical implications. When emotion labor expectations serve to challenge the identity needs of employees, managers should consider alternate avenues or resources for employees to achieve a desired sense of self. For instance, providing officers with more decision-making power might obviate the assertion of power through "accidental" punishments, such as slamming a prison door. Second, when organizational success is elusive, managers might encourage employees to find identity-fulfilling interests outside of work. Third, given that emotion work is facilitated when it can be viewed as a strategic game, training should emphasize the ways that emotion labor may actually make employees' jobs easier. Fourth, this study suggests that organizations provide spaces and time for employees to give each other social support. When employees can reconstruct preferred identities with one another, they are more likely to succeed in providing emotion labor to their clients.

Last, if correctional administrators truly desire employees who nurture, they should consider extant organizational practices that stigmatize employees for showing personal "neediness" or concern. When officers admitted being uncertain or fearful in their job, or went so far as to seek professional counseling, colleagues and

supervisors shamed them. This effectively closed the door on compassion in the workplace. Frost, Dutton, Worline, and Wilson (2000) argue that “people experience connection and belonging through feeling” (p. 26). As such, “one important aspect of an emotional ecology is a working environment in which people are given permission and space to attend to their pain” (p. 36). While it may be necessary for officers to keep emotions locked up around inmates, expressing feelings to co-workers opens the door to compassion and human connection in the workplace.

Together, these findings make the case that the ease of emotion labor is mediated by a number of factors including resources of power, opportunities for interaction with like others, and societal discourses that define some jobs and aspects of identity as more valuable than others. While employees may feel as though they are “faking it,” and thus blame “emotive dissonance” for their discomfort, these feelings are discursively constructed and constrained. This qualitative study of correctional officers, coupled with a post-structuralist understanding of subjectivity, suggests that the discomfort associated with emotion labor is intricately intertwined with the layered patterns, contradictions, structures, everyday practices, and discourses of power that surround and discipline employees.

## Notes

- [1] When researchers do venture behind bars to conduct qualitative research, they rarely focus on correctional officers (for an exception, see Conover, 2000), opting rather to tell the stories of inmates (e.g., Corey, 1996) or administrative employees (e.g., Waldron & Krone, 1991).
- [2] This question has also proven fruitful in past emotion labor studies (e.g., Hopfl & Linstead, 1993; Morgan & Krone, 1999).

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