Surfacing the Deeper Human Aspects of Reform: The Role of Power, Identity, and Emotion

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Surfacing the Deeper Human Aspects of Reform: The Role of Power, Identity, and Emotion

A Dissertation

presented by

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Surfacing the Deeper Human Aspects of Reform: The Role of Power, Identity, and Emotion

Abstract

Scholars have examined why successful reform often remains elusive in the public sector. These perspectives have focused on how the structure of many public sector systems complicates top-down implementation, as actors respond to reforms based on their own understandings, interpretations, and interests. Across three papers in this dissertation, I build upon prior work by exploring how power dynamics, social identity, and emotions shape how individuals, groups, and organizations respond to reform.

The first study draws on interviews with 77 actors across role levels in two states that were implementing education reforms as part of Race to the Top. Findings uncovered how power and identity dynamics divided “higher ups” in district offices and state agencies and “lower down” teachers and school leaders. Higher ups were able to break power and identity barriers to mitigate the negative consequences of this divide by conveying respect, humility, and empathy in their interactions with educators.

The second study examined a prison that had recently implemented a new unit dedicated to rehabilitative practices and draws on 25 interviews with correctional officers, operational managers, and senior leaders, as well as 56 hours of observation of routine work activities, staff meetings, and training sessions. The first paper examined how officers in the rehabilitative unit took on fundamentally new roles that conflicted with core elements of the traditional correctional officer identity. This role-redefining reform succeeded when the new form of emotional labor
aligned with officers’ natural tendencies, when they had strong social support, and when the
leader of the reform embodied the ideal, “fantasmic” images of both the old and new role
identities. Finally, the last paper examined how the organization’s ambivalence about the
punishment-rehabilitation paradox and the ways in which they managed the tension across the
traditional units and the rehabilitative unit mirrored their ambivalence about how to
simultaneously defend against and confront deeper anxieties, pain, and trauma.

Together, this dissertation offers contributions about how deeper social and emotional
factors shape responses to reform in ways that are both conscious and nonconscious, as well as
new theoretical and methodological approaches for uncovering the impact of these factors.
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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Scholars, policy makers, and practitioners alike recognize that the public sector often falls short of its ultimate goals and responsibilities; yet, the dominant conversations about why institutions in the public sector remain so difficult to change and manage have prioritized structural, political, and cognitive factors over important social and emotional factors that drive human behavior. After all, the public sector is comprised of individual human beings whose daily decisions powerfully shape the world we live in (Lipsky, 1983, 2010). On top of that, the public sector is organized into many layers of bureaucracy, which still embody remnants of Weberian ideals of rationality. As such, the public sector was not designed to honor the range of human emotions and social relationships, and public debates about how to improve the public sector have not sufficiently brought these socio-emotional issues to light.

One reason that important social psychological factors like power, social identity, and emotions have not been examined in the public sector is that they are difficult to measure and observe. Furthermore, they are so deeply embedded into the daily interactions that take place within organizations that they become taken-for-granted and invisible to those working in the system (Voronov & Vince, 2012). This dissertation explores how these important factors, combined with the complexity of the public sector, shape how various types of reforms play out.

The three papers in this dissertation come from two different studies. The first paper comes from a qualitative field study of top-down education reforms in two states. The second and third papers come from a separate qualitative field study of a rehabilitative justice reform in a prison. These studies provide a fruitful ground for examining my interests in power, social identity, emotion, in the public sector. Schools and prisons represent perhaps the most drastic extremes of public institutions. In providing free education for all, the government makes
decisions about what values and knowledge citizens should have in order to participate in our economy and democracy. Public schools touch the widest swath of society in a deeply personal way. Prisons, on the other hand, interact with a narrow subset of the population, which has fallen through every other crack in society. Public schools are in the business of preparing citizens, while prisons are in the business of repairing them. Furthermore, both types of work require high levels of emotional labor (Meier, Mastracci, & Wilson, 2006; O’Connor, 2008; Tracy, 2004) and operate within traditional bureaucratic hierarchies.

The first paper, “Humans in Hierarchies: Intergroup Relations in Education Reform,” explores how actors at different role levels perceive one another in the context of reforms and how those perceptions shape responses to reform.¹ In this study, we interviewed 77 individuals across various levels of the education system (including teachers, school administrators, district administrators, and state education agency staff) in two states. Many of the interviews in both states focused on the role of high-stakes teacher evaluation policies that had recently been implemented in both states. We found that school-level actors held deeply negative and widely pervasive stereotypes of higher ups in the district and state offices. Often, the negative stereotypes persisted even though higher ups were aware of them and tried (unsuccessfully) to mitigate them.

Ultimately, the few higher ups who were able to break through the negative stereotypes did so by conveying respect, humility, and empathy in their interactions with educators on the ground. These findings supported our theoretical framework, which asserted that identity and power dynamics influenced how actors on the ground responded to reforms. When educators perceived the higher ups as people who were not like them (i.e., did not share their same social

¹ This paper was co-authored with my advisor, Dr. Jal Mehta.
or role identities) and who used their power to coerce educators into complying with new requirements (i.e., felt belittled by the power dynamics inherent in the hierarchical system), they held unfavorable views of the reforms. However, when higher ups broke through those barriers, educators were more open and receptive to the higher ups’ ideas.

The second study builds on the first in a few important ways. First, it focuses in on the particular type of reform that requires the most drastic changes – those which ask workers to change core elements of their identity and their emotional experiences at work. These role-redefining reforms are becoming more widely implemented in the public sector, and they also are the most difficult to accomplish. For many professions, especially those that are typically seen as low-status, workers rely on idealistic, or “fantasmic” images of their role identity as a defense to uphold their status and protect them from the psychological effects of carrying out difficult or impossible tasks (Vornov & Vince, 2012). As a result, reforms that ask workers to change core aspects of their identities in ways that challenge the fantasmic aspect of their identities can feel particularly threatening. This is especially true when the mandate comes from someone with greater power and authority and who, in many cases, does not share the same role identity as the front-line workers (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). For those reasons, it was surprising to find a case where a handful of workers did embrace a top-down role-redefining reform. This was especially surprising to find in a prison, where the work requires high levels of emotional labor, is widely considered a low-status form of “dirty work” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), and there are strong fantasmic images of what it means to be a correctional officer and a member of the law enforcement community.

The second paper of this dissertation, “Role-Redefining Reforms,” explored how emotional labor and fantasmic frames shaped workers’ responses to the opportunity to take up a
role-redefining reform. Data revealed that the workers who were willing and able to take on the role-redefining work of the rehabilitative unit were those who were already engaged in emotional labor that was similar to what was required in the new role, or – at a minimum – they had been distanced from the more intensive forms of emotional labor the majority of staff members had to use in their daily jobs. They also required strong social support from colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates. Finally, for the correctional officers who chose to work in the rehabilitative unit, they did so in large part because the leader of the new unit embodied the extreme idealistic notions of masculinity, strength, courage, and duty alongside the “softer” values of the rehabilitative approach. This study demonstrated that there may be cases where a large contingent of employees are deeply unsatisfied with their work and emotionally disinvested from the system, and yet that alone is not enough to motivate them to abandon their traditional work in favor of new roles that offer healthier alternatives. In essence, workers were either imprisoned by or liberated from the emotional labor and fantasmic frames of the traditional approach. Those who were liberated from it were the ones who were willing and able to take on role-redefining work.

Finally, the third paper, “Ambivalence in Ambidexterity: An Emotional Lens on Organizational Paradox,” examines the relational and emotional dynamics that surfaced in the context of an organization that managed the paradox of punishment versus rehabilitation through an ambidextrous structure. Building on the second paper, this study considers how the primary work roles and responsibilities in the punishment-focused and rehabilitative-focused units were mirrored in the emotional cultures within each unit. The traditional, punishment-oriented units focused on ensuring minimal survival of inmates; in turn, officers and managers also sought minimal survival for themselves. In contrast, the rehabilitative unit’s focus on healing inmates
also enabled healing among staff, as the group was able to surface and collectively work through past pain and trauma. What emerged from the rehabilitative unit’s surfacing and managing collective pain and trauma revealed that the organizational ambivalence about the punishment-rehabilitation paradox mirrored their individual ambivalence about wanting to both defend against (suppress) and confront (heal from) pain and trauma. In this way, only the officers in the rehabilitative unit were able to participate in collective healing; those in the traditional units had no mechanism to enable such a release. Resolving the punishment-rehabilitation paradox at the organizational level may have prevented resolution of the individual-level tensions they represented. Overall, this study contributes an emotional perspective on how organizations can manage competing demands, the implications of using an ambidextrous structure to accomplish that goal, and the intersection of tensions across levels of analysis.
Paper One: Humans in Hierarchies: Intergroup Relations in Education Reform

There has been a growing interest in the “human” side of education policy, with research beginning to recognize that actors throughout the education sector need to be understood as human beings possessing not only interests but also motivations, needs, and emotions. A few scholars in recent years have begun to explore how human-centered approaches could inform and shape public policy and education reforms (Evans, 1996; Author, 2016; O’Toole & Meier, 2009), but the bulk of research on implementation has overlooked these affective dimensions in its quest to understand why successful reform remains so elusive.

We are particularly interested in these questions in the context of large public institutions, which often feature one or more layers of administrators supervising a practitioner class of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980). Such arrangements prevail in education, but they are also present for nurses, social workers, police officers, and many other classifications of workers who provide vital public services. Finding ways to create effective work across the layers of such large public institutions is critical if these institutions are going to carry out important public functions. Existing research from various bodies of literature, including organization studies (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976), institutional theory (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977), and political science (Matland, 1995; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), has examined how the loosely coupled nature of most public sector systems shapes the policy implementation process. However, much of what we understand about loosely coupled systems has focused on their technical, political, or cognitive aspects—ignoring, or, at best, hinting at, the role of social relationships and emotions in systemic reform.

In our effort to explore some of the fundamental questions centered on the human side of reform, we recognize that systemic reform inherently requires interaction among actors—
individuals, groups, and organizations—who not only have different ways of understanding and making sense of reforms (i.e., the cognitive aspects of reform), but who also hold different workplace social identities based on their roles, experiences, values, and beliefs, as well as differential access to resources and authority. We accordingly draw on literature from intergroup relations to understand the implications of identity and power dynamics in systemic change efforts.

In this paper, we examine how actors in different professional roles and organizational levels of a loosely coupled system perceive one another and how they have experienced recent reforms in the U.S. public education system. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with 77 actors across levels of the system in two states, we find that “lower-downs” have pervasive and widely shared stereotypes of “higher-ups”; that these views are rooted in specific experiences, as well as in differences in power and resentment of bureaucratic superiors; and that higher ups are aware of these unflattering stereotypes but are largely unable or unwilling to mitigate them.² The few exceptions occur in instances where higher ups show respect, humility, and empathy to lower downs. Overall, these findings support the pivotal role that identity and power dynamics inherent to loosely coupled systems play in shaping how actors experience and respond to reforms. We argue that human-centered approaches to reform must account for these dynamics and that the consequences of these dynamics create challenges for systemic reform efforts.

**Perspectives on Implementation**

The organizational structure of loosely coupled systems, in which organizations in the systems are linked, yet independent and distinct (Weick, 1976), creates challenges for successful

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²We use quotation marks around “higher-up” and “lower-down” on first usage to indicate that while they hold different positions in the education system, we do not accord more respect to “higher ups” than to “lower downs.” For readability, we remove the quotation marks in subsequent uses.
reform efforts. In this section, we summarize the technical, political, institutional, and cognitive lenses on implementation in loosely coupled systems and argue that these perspectives are missing critical social, emotional and motivational elements that are important for successful reform.

**Political, Institutional, and Cognitive Perspectives**

In hierarchical loosely coupled systems, like the education system, as policies are implemented from the top down, they evolve in various ways as they pass through each level of the system (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Because policymakers at the top of the hierarchy cannot fully anticipate what changes will take place during the evolutionary process, they often cannot appropriately plan for those changes in their policy design (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). More often than not, once the policy reaches ground level, it hardly resembles the original design or intent (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

Depending on one’s perspective, this elasticity in the system can be viewed positively or negatively. From the perspective of those who take a public-administration or a principal-agent view, the localized adaptations and autonomy afforded in a loosely coupled system can thwart systemic reform by enabling practitioners to depart from the stated intentions of policymakers (Matland, 1995). Conversely, from the perspective of those who view policy as necessarily undergoing a process of adaptive integration to meet the needs of local contexts, the flexibility provided by loosely coupled systems allows local practitioners to make sensible choices on the basis of what they see in front of them (Elmore, 1979). In both cases, the structure of loosely coupled systems offers autonomy to individual actors across organizational levels, making it difficult for reforms to be implemented as originally designed.
Another well-known perspective on implementation is offered by institutional theory. Here the argument, initially developed by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and elaborated in many forms since, is that loosely coupled systems are deliberately created to give the appearance of technical rationality without wading into the difficult work of actually changing practice. While, in the context of schools, some have argued that the accountability movement has recoupled systems by creating greater monitoring of the technical core of classroom teaching (Fusarelli, 2002; Meyer & Rowan, 2006), other scholars continue to view the system as loosely coupled, arguing that contemporary efforts at data-driven decision-making are “technical ceremonies” that do more to preserve legitimacy than to improve practice (Yurkofsky, 2017).

Finally, in recent years scholars have focused on the cognitive or sense-making (Weick, 1995; Hill, 2000) dimensions of reform. Research in this tradition has emphasized the ways in which policy messages are filtered by those closer to the ground, particularly the way that individuals’ pre-existing schemas lead practitioners to ignore or, at best, hybridize policy messages from above (Coburn, 2001; Isabella, 1990). More social views of sense-making have suggested ways in which networks, teams, and local culture at the practitioner level may influence the ways in which policy messages are interpreted and enacted (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Datnow, 2012).

While these perspectives capture a wide range of challenges to successful reform in the public sector, they conceptualize individuals within the system as cognitive actors who receive information, interpret it, and choose to comply, buffer, or ignore the directives. These perspectives do not sufficiently capture the integral role of social and emotional factors that are inextricably linked to actors’ interests, motivations, and cognitive responses to reforms. Only recently have scholars begun acknowledging and calling for greater emphasis on the role of
emotions in organizational and institutional change (Heaphy, 2017; Voronov, 2014; Voronov & Russ, 2012).

There are some strong reasons to think that these affective dimensions are important in creating successful reform efforts. Case studies of successful school districts frequently emphasize the way in which the leadership team mobilized not only the “skill” but also the “will” of on-the-ground practitioners (Austin et al., 2006; Honan et al., 2004; Childress et al., 2009; Fullan, 2016), suggesting the importance of motivation and shared identity in bringing about change. More theoretically, scholars have suggested that loosely coupled fields like education are “opaque” fields characterized by causal complexity, practice multiplicity, and the invisibility of practice to the supervisory class (Wijen, 2014). In such fields, management scholars argue, it is too difficult to standardize core technical processes and too unwieldy to closely monitor the technical core, and thus success is particularly dependent upon the effort and good will of the people actually doing the work (Wijen, 2014). Recent, practitioner-oriented books have stressed the importance of becoming “The Listening Leader” (Safir, 2017) and have begun to stress the way in which educational leadership requires emotional as well as strategic intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Thus understanding the “human” dimensions of reform is becoming an increasingly salient concern.

Human Aspects of Multi-Level Organizational Reforms: Role Identity, Power, and Stereotypes

There are many related ideas in social psychology, organizational behavior, and intergroup relations that one could connect to the “human” side of reform (Fiske, Gilbert, & Lindzey, 2010). It is our contention that this whole realm has been under-appreciated in the context of large public institutions, perhaps because of an unhealthy fixation on technocratic or
overly rational approaches to reform (Author, 2013; Porter, 1995; Schon, 1983). But to make it more manageable and allow us to be more analytically precise, for the purposes of this paper we will focus on three concepts that are particularly relevant to our analysis: role identity, power, and stereotypes. While these ideas have not been discussed much in the public administration or implementation literature, we borrow from work in intergroup relations and organizational behavior to posit that these three ideas fit together well to theoretically explain how human beings experience cross-level reforms in a loosely coupled system. Broadly, this work would suggest that just as the structure of loosely coupled systems facilitates political and cognitive challenges to systemic change, it also facilitates social and emotional challenges that arise when actors who have different workplace social identities and differential access to power and resources interact.

To begin with role identity: Because the distinctiveness of organizational levels creates divisions along organizational boundaries with respect to culture, language, norms, values, beliefs, and practices (Weick, 1995), we would expect one critical dimension of educational actors’ identities to be formed by the role and positions they play in the system (Alderfer and Smith, 1982; Hogg and Terry, 2000). Actors are socialized into their roles, which helps them understand the organization and create meaning based on their social interactions and interpretations of symbols, messages, and cues (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

By describing these as “human” factors, we are not trying to reify false divides between the cognitive and affective sides of people. Research is clear that cognition and emotion are heavily intertwined. The notion of stereotypes, for example, has both affective and cognitive dimensions; affectively, it is generally motivated by animus towards a group, but it also has a cognitive dimension in the way that it assigns very flawed probabilities to individuals based on (often false) ideas about groups. However, we do think that the literature has heavily conceived of people either as interest-based actors, or as boundedly rational actors who have limits to their cognition, and we are trying to rectify that imbalance by emphasizing the role of affect and emotions in efforts at reform.
In the education context we have some understanding of what a teacher’s role identity looks like, but we know much less about those in higher levels or how these different identities interact across the system during reform efforts. Teaching is often regarded as a very “humanistic kind of profession” in that teachers’ professional identities are inextricably linked with their emotional commitment to support the whole child, not merely to deliver curriculum and build knowledge (Lasky, 2005). Teachers also tend to view the test-driven policies as conflicting with key parts of their role identities (Lasky, 2005; O’Connor, 2008). On the other hand, we know very little about role identities at higher levels of the system, such as at the district and state level. It seems reasonable to suspect that because they have jobs which focus on systems rather than individual students, because they self-selected into these jobs, and because their social networks then become comprised largely of similar actors, that they also hold social identities based on their roles, and that these identities are more focused on system level views of educational success. But there is little research on higher-ups role identities.

The next question is what happens when actors interact across organizational levels. Differences in power seem likely to be critical here. Higher-ups have greater access to resources, authority, and system-wide information than those on the ground. Actors at higher levels of the system exert their power over others by using various tools and resources, including statutes, accountability mechanisms, performance metrics, sanctions and incentives, as a means of motivating low-powered actors to comply with the reforms (Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra, 2011; Kern, Laguecir, & Leca, 2017; Matland, 1995; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

The interaction of identity and power dynamics in hierarchical loosely coupled systems creates conditions that lead actors at lower levels of the system to feel threatened by reforms
coming from the top-down. Teachers often feel threatened by top-down reforms which can jeopardize the way they do their jobs, their relationships with students, and their job security (Baum, 2002; Conley & Glasman, 2008; Day, 2002; Hargreaves, 1998; Jaffe-Walter, 2008; Olsen & Sexon, 2009; Van Veen & Sleegers, 2006). The literature in organizational behavior on “threat rigidity” suggests that when individuals experience threat, they tend to rely and focus on their preconceived ideas, expectations, and stereotypes rather than considering a greater range of information (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). In cases where low-powered actors feel that the actions of a high-powered group threaten their identity, the low-powered group is likely to defend themselves by derogating the high-powered group and applying simplified, negative stereotypes (Fiol, Pratt, & O’Connor, 2009; Petriglieri, 2011).

Furthermore, the physical and geographical divisions among organizational levels in the education system limit regular contact between members of different groups. The “contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954), which posits that under certain conditions contact between groups can mitigate stereotypes, has remained one of the most enduring perspectives on intergroup relations (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). Even when groups interact, mere contact is not sufficient to mitigate stereotypes (Allport, 1954). For maximum effectiveness, groups must have equal status prior to (Brewer & Kramer, 1985) and during (Moody, 2001) the contact experience (Dovidio et al., 2003). This criterion is infeasible in hierarchical loosely coupled systems because actors inherently have unequal status. Other factors that mitigate stereotyping include intergroup cooperation and common goals (Allport, 1954, 1958; Dovidio et al., 2003). But these characteristics are relatively rare in the American education system (Payne, 2008). More positively, literature on stereotypes suggests that personal friendship or acquaintanceship between members of different groups (outside of the work context) can mitigate stereotypes if
the individuals’ characteristics are unrepresentative of their stereotypes (Pettigrew, 1998), which may suggest one path towards a more hopeful alternative.

In sum, the literatures on organizational behavior and intergroup relations offer strong reasons to think that the challenges to successful reform in loosely coupled systems are likely to depend on human factors like social identities, power differentials, and the stereotypes actors hold of one another. But these dimensions have mostly gone unexamined in the education or public administration literatures, thus inspiring the research we report upon here.

**Research Questions**

These perspectives informed our two initial research questions:

1. How did actors across levels in a loosely coupled system perceive one another?

2. How, if at all, were their perspectives shaped by their social identities, power imbalances across levels, or other factors?

We were also interested in whether these views varied across policy contexts which had very different theories of action. In the educational arena at the time of our study, some states were pursuing top-down approaches to reform, emphasizing the role of teacher evaluation, punitive accountability, and other performance metric approaches. Other states took a different tack, setting a more collegial tone, in which the theory of change was more focused on building professional capacity and less on top-down accountability. We thought it was plausible that these differences in approach could lead to different reactions; it also seemed possible that the structural characteristics of loosely coupled systems might outweigh differences in policy approaches. This led to our third research question:

3. Did differences in states’ policy approaches lead to differences in how lower downs viewed higher ups?
Finally, as we developed the study, we were struck that while the dominant patterns were, as expected, very unfavorable characterizations of higher ups by lower downs, there were a few exceptions to this rule: a few situations where lower downs had more positive views of higher ups. This led us to ask:

4. How were higher ups sometimes able to mitigate the negative views held of them by lower-downs?

Methods, Sample, and Data Collection

The data for this paper come from a larger study examining the “human side” of state-led education reform initiatives across two different states during the period of June 2015 through January 2017. The U.S. public education system has served as a quintessential context for studying loosely coupled systems and served as the research site for Weick’s (1976) foundational paper. Accordingly, our multi-level study included participants from all organizational levels of the hierarchical education system, including the state education agency (SEA), the school district, and the school, the last including principals and assistant principals (school administrators) and teachers.

We chose two mid-sized states for our study. Both of these states had between 850,000 and 1 million students and between 57,000 and 67,000 teachers. They differed quite substantially in their policy contexts. State One, which we will call “Evaluation-Heavy State,” had pioneered the use of value-added data to measure and hold accountable teachers and schools. The leader of the state education agency, a product of Teach for America, was widely lauded in reform circles and equally heavily criticized by teachers and their representatives. State Two, which we will call “Support-Heavy State,” was headed by a commissioner who had worked her

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4 We do not give precise numbers of teachers and students because we need to preserve the anonymity of the states.
way up through more traditional channels and was widely seen as a conciliatory and consensus-building leader. While both states were influenced by a broader policy context that was strongly emphasizing an accountability-heavy approach, the states and their leaders were frequently described by knowledgeable observers, and in the media, as enacting very different theories of change.

Our sample consisted of interviews with 77 individuals (40 individual interviews and 13 focus groups of 2-6 participants each) across the two states. In each state, we developed a nested sample, meaning that we chose districts within the states, and then schools within those districts. In each state, we interviewed a stratified sample of employees at various levels of the SEAs, school districts, school administrators and teachers.

In State One, we interviewed ten SEA staff members and selected two districts—one large urban district and one small rural district. In the large urban district, we interviewed two district staff members, school administrators from two schools, and ten teachers from each of the two schools. In the small rural district, we interviewed two district staff members and one assistant principal. In State Two, we interviewed ten SEA staff members and chose a nested sample of district and school staff from two districts (one large urban district, and one smaller rural district). We interviewed eight district staff spread across the two districts (four from each district), nine school administrators spread across five schools (three schools from the first district, two from the second), and 1 teachers spread across three schools (two schools from the first district, one from the second). Figure 1 graphically displays our nested sample.
Figure 1: A Nested Sample: Two States, Four Districts, and Eight Schools

Data for this study were collected via interviews and small focus groups over two separate phases. The first phase focused on State One and ran from June 2015 through January 2016. The second phase focused on State Two and ran from July 2016 through January 2017. Interviews were semi-structured in nature, beginning with questions about respondents’ roles and their daily work. We then asked them about other actors in the system, with questions focused both on their general views of other actors and on how they viewed the role of these actors with respect to particular reforms. The interview protocol is included as Appendix A.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using a grounded-theory approach, beginning with open coding and identifying core themes (Glaser & Strauss, 2007). Since our initial findings from State One suggested strong levels of antipathy toward higher ups from lower downs in a state known for its emphasis on teacher evaluation and value-added scores, we intentionally chose a second state that had a more conciliatory policy context to see whether this would lead to different results.

Stereotyping actors at other levels, and sometimes actors within one’s own level, emerged as a core theme across all interviews. After the first phase of theoretical coding, we
conducted a more systematic round of coding focused exclusively on data that pertained to stereotypes and to interactions with actors at other levels, which participants used to explain, justify, and make sense of the stereotypes. We also became aware of the role of power and workplace identities in shaping respondents’ reactions, which led us to additional readings and additional rounds of coding, to understand these dimensions in more depth. For each round of coding, we looked for disconfirming as well as confirming evidence associated with a particular theme or code.

The multi-leveled nature of this study presented challenges as we attempted to analyze the findings based on actors’ roles within the system. In similar previous work, Smith (1987) demonstrated that actors’ positions in the education system are dynamic in that they are relative to their reference group. For example, when a school administrator interacts with a teacher, he/she is an “upper;” however, when interacting with someone from the district office, the school administrator is a “lower” (Smith, 1987). Similarly, in the context of our paper, some participants may be considered a lower down in one context (e.g., if a district staff member talks about the SEA) and a higher up in another context (e.g., if a district staff member talks about teachers or school administrators).

There are some limitations to this approach. Our findings are useful for descriptively understanding how actors view one another across levels of a loosely coupled system. We do not make any causal claims about how different patterns of relationships connect to the efficacy of reforms. These were also mid-sized states; whether different patterns prevail in small or large states will await future research.
Findings

“Cocktail Hour, Men in Suits, Out of Touch, Not Doing What’s Best for Kids”: Lower Downs Pervasive Antipathy Toward Higher Ups

The first finding of our study is that lower downs expressed pervasive antipathy toward higher ups. Additionally, lower downs expressed similarly negative views of higher ups regardless of state policy context, as well as across quite varied districts within the same states. Overwhelmingly in both states, lower downs described higher ups as “out of touch” and “disconnected,” arguing that the higher ups either had never been in their shoes or had been out of their shoes for so long that they could not remember what it was like.

One reason lower downs thought that higher ups were disconnected is that higher ups simply do not spend time visiting schools and interacting with the people “in the trenches.” Additionally, lower downs saw the top-down policies as “not even appropriate for our students.” One teacher wondered out loud, “So it makes me think like, okay, you know, if you’re not writing curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for these kids, clearly you are disconnected.” When asked whether they thought people at the state understood what it was like to be in the teachers’ shoes, teachers in one focus group laughed and exclaimed, “My initial instinct is to say no . . . because some of the things that they think of . . . [are] not something that I would ever . . .” Another teacher jumped in, adding, “I just feel like if it was someone from our shoes going to the top, then things would be aligned with our ideas. If it’s coming from us, then it would be in line from us.” Lower downs often struggled to make sense of policy changes or decisions coming from the top down because the policies and decisions did not resonate with their own experiences. As such, the lower downs perceived higher ups as out of touch and disconnected.
In addition to perceiving higher ups as out of touch and disconnected, lower downs in both states shared similar stereotypes of higher ups. When asked what image came to mind when they thought about someone from the state, the vast majority of lower downs first responded with a pause and slightly uncomfortable laughter, with some making comments like, “I’m glad you’re taking my name off of here.” Overwhelmingly, the most common response included the word “suits.” While most lower downs used the word “suits” in reference to business suits, one school administrator explained that people from the state must “wear clown suits to work . . . because they tell so many jokes. ‘Cause we laugh so hard whenever they send out an e-mail. So I know they’re wearing clown suits.” One teacher joked about people from the state having “cocktail hour” in the afternoon, while another described them as “stuffy and distant.” These descriptions were nearly unanimous among our school-level participants across two states and four districts.

In addition to viewing higher ups as disconnected and out of touch, lower downs in both states described higher ups as holding fundamentally different values about education. They felt that higher ups valued numbers, test scores, money, and politics above the human side of the education profession and “what goes on in the classroom.” One teacher in State Two (the supposedly support-heavy state) argued that the higher ups didn’t “want to have that emotional connection, because when you have that emotional connection it’s more difficult for you to make the right choices,” implying that the “higher ups’” misaligned values led them to make decisions that were not in the best interest of students. Similarly, during one focus group in State One (the evaluation-heavy state), two district-level staff (who are lower downs compared to the state, but higher ups compared to school administrators and teachers) explained that people from the state and some district staff had the “opposite” of the “heart of a teacher,” which means “all the time
what’s best for kids.” In these examples, lower downs clearly expressed views of higher ups as holding professional values antithetical to those of practitioners on the front lines of the work.

Particularly for the teachers and the principals, this kind of boundary drawing (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) served to reaffirm the value and honor of the work that they were doing at the ground level. By citing emotional connections, knowing students, and staying late at school rather than going to “cocktail hour,” the practitioners reaffirmed their identities as on-the-ground educators and endowed their work with honor and meaning. Especially in focus groups with teachers, participants frequently would build on one another’s comments in ways that served to reaffirm their role identities as teachers and distance themselves from higher level administrators. These reactions were consistent with the literature on workplace social identities described above.

**Why Lower downs Dislike Higher ups: Reasons for Hierarchical Stereotyping**

In this section, we lay out three themes that arose with respect to lower downs’ negative characterizations of higher ups. These themes, which focus on the nature of the interactions between the parties, are in addition to the negative experiences that lower downs had with the policy choices and attitudes of higher ups, which were described above.

**Interactions That Reinforce Negative Perceptions.** One reason lower downs had negative views of higher ups is that cross-level interactions largely reinforced their existing negative perceptions. One teacher recounted, “I think we’ve had somebody come from the state one time just to kind of walk through when they were very formal. People that come from those places, they never come with a t-shirt and cap. It’s always some kind of formal dress, so like ladies in skirts and heels and all that stuff.” In this example, the state’s efforts to interact with the teachers did more harm than good because its representatives’ attire and lack of substantive
dialogue with teachers signaled to the teachers that the higher ups were not interested in making genuine connections or having meaningful interactions.

Similarly, a school administrator in the Evaluation-Heavy State described an interaction she had recently had with the leader of the state education agency, explaining:

We were a rewards school. She was here for just the meet and greet type of thing. You know, I got my own little, like, minute and a half with her, and it was just like, really quick. And it was mainly just about, you know, testing, and we were doing our testing at that point when she was here. And, um, I really felt like it was just a PR. She had all her people with her and, you know, taking pictures . . . . And, so it was good for that. Um, but it wasn’t . . . you know, it wasn’t sittin’ around this table.”

Again, rather than build bridges and personal connections across levels, the commissioner’s visit to the school—with an entourage of photographers and only brief conversations with the teachers—reinforced the lower downs” perceptions of her disconnect from the work on the ground.

Beyond ceremonial drop-ins and PR visits, even some genuine attempts to engage with lower downs often proved to be counterproductive. In one school, teachers recounted an interaction they had had with their district superintendent the previous school year. The school had been facing worse behavioral problems than usual, and a small group of teachers (three of whom were participants in our focus group) reached out to the superintendent for advice. The superintendent responded to their request for support and went to the school to meet with the small group of teachers.

While the teachers said that they did believe that he genuinely wanted to hear their concerns and was truly listening, they still felt that he “didn’t get it.” One teacher explained:

Maybe it was like his poker face, but I just didn't feel like when I was explaining to him how overwhelming being with those students who are disrespectful every day can be, and that we're trying all these things... I didn't feel like he had any empathy for the fact that we were really struggling, and like... to the point where some of us were in tears I think,
or at least teary-eyed. And I didn't feel like ever he was overly… or empathetic at all, I guess.

Another teacher added, “Well—and he came in—he came in with the article. So, he had made his decision on what he was going to be sharing with us before . . . ,” when the first teacher interjected, “he even heard what we had to say.” The piece referenced was a research article about the benefits of rehabilitative discipline, a program with which the superintendent had had success in his previous district.

After sharing the article with the teachers, the superintendent sent them to a rehabilitative discipline training led by a private company. The teachers went to the training, which they described as “pointless” and “not well presented.” Furthermore, the superintendent did not follow up with them to see whether the training had been helpful and if they had been able to implement any of the strategies to address the behavioral problems among their students. In this example, the superintendent traveled to the school, sat down and engaged with the teachers, and the teachers felt as though he cared about their struggles. Yet, because teachers felt he hadn’t really listened to their concerns and instead had already pre-formulated his response, the interaction reinforced existing negative stereotypes of district officials.

**Infrequent Interactions and Limited Knowledge.** A second reason that lower downs had negative views of higher ups is that they had extremely limited interactions with them, and thus had limited knowledge of what system actors did or how they did it. Numerous school-level staff reported that they rarely, if ever, saw or interacted with people from the district or state. One teacher reported, “I don’t think I’ve ever really interacted with a central office person . . . . We don’t see them, they don’t come in, they don’t experience what we experience every day.” Another explained, “They’re so far away from the reality of every day. I’ve never seen many state people down here.” During focus groups, many teachers revealed that they did not know the
names of district-level supervisors and “couldn’t tell you who the previous commissioner [of education] was.”

Because of these limited interactions, they had few opportunities to develop better understandings of who the higher ups were, what their jobs entailed, and how the system functioned. When asked what they thought people at the district and state levels did all day, the overwhelming responses were some version of, “I have no idea.” When pressed, some speculated out loud that the higher ups must “analyze a budget” and have “scheduled meetings, and meetings, and meetings.” Some also recognized that the higher ups must feel “pressure…different pressures than ours…but pressure.” School-level staff further emphasized the disconnect by describing the state as a “whole ‘nother universe.” When asked to what extent they felt they understood how the education system functioned, teachers in one focus group laughed, two teachers chimed in with, “nothing” and “little,” while one teacher explained, “I know my classroom. I know the four walls of my classroom.” Therefore, “lower downs’” lack of contact with the larger system fed into their stereotypical perceptions of higher ups. This is consistent with literature on stereotypes that suggest that stereotypes are frequently bred in the absence of knowledge or connection with another group (Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999).

Both lower downs and higher ups agreed that they had very little contact with one another; however, they differed in the nature of their frustration with the disconnect. When lower downs talked about their limited interactions with higher ups, their responses illuminated that they felt a sense of unfairness that the higher ups had power and authority over their roles, yet did not prioritize spending time in schools talking with teachers and students. On the other hand, when higher ups talked about their limited contact, they often stated that they wanted to be more involved in schools, but they “just didn’t have the staff” or “didn’t get to” interact with teachers.
From their perspective, the heart of the problem was not that they had power over people whose jobs they could not fully understand; the problem was that they wanted to spend more time in schools but simply did not have the time, resources, or infrastructure to do so.

“Lunch Hour, Politically-Driven Morons, More Money to Do Easier Jobs”:

Resentment and Power Dynamics. The third reason lower downs disliked and resented higher ups was the power differential between them. Expressions of resentment were the strongest examples of actors’ emotional responses to reforms, especially among school-level actors. Lower downs felt that higher ups had no skin in the game, yet they made decisions that had significant consequences for the lower downs. For example, many teachers felt resentment that their evaluations rested on student test scores, which can be affected by a multitude of factors outside the teachers’ control. The students’ outcomes also felt personal for the teachers, as the teachers saw themselves as caring about the whole child, while the district and state people cared only about their scores. One teacher expressed, “Those are my babies. I don’t know if it is for them.” In other words, lower downs felt as though they saw human beings while higher ups saw only numbers.

Beyond the perception that the work was not personal for higher ups, lower downs also felt resentment because the higher ups were disconnected from the work on the ground and were not capable of carrying out the tasks they expected of the lower downs. Teachers felt that the district staff typically provided only surface-level support rather than the depth they needed to be successful. When describing a district-led professional development session, one teacher claimed, “I think all these things are really great, but these just don’t really hit down to the very core issues. Like I think these are all band aids.” Lower downs felt that if the higher ups were not able to do the work on the ground, then they had no right to expect it of them.
Lower downs also resented higher ups because they perceived the higher ups as being paid more money to do easier jobs. One teacher said, “Are the state people gettin’ paid more than us? I would say probably so. You know, could they come in and do the same job that we’re doing? I don’t think they’d want to.” Several teachers in both states cited lunch hours as a prime example of the ease of “higher ups’” roles. In one focus group, teachers argued, “They have their lunch hour… Like they have a real world, real life thing.” Another agreed, “They get to go out to lunch when they want to.” A school administrator in another district told us that the previous day she had taken a personal day for the first time in two years. She went to breakfast with her father who was visiting from out of town. While at breakfast, she saw someone who was in a “very high level position at the district.” Reflecting on the incident, she explained:

I was thinking, I never take time off. I'm here because my dad, who never comes to town, is in town, and you are sitting here enjoying a two-hour long breakfast. Now, maybe you're having a meeting. But if I'm sitting here watching you, all I know is my blood is boiling, because I know what has not gotten done from your office, it falls in my direct wheelhouse.

This administrator’s verbal emphasis on the words “you,” “your,” “I,” and “my” conveyed her decidedly negative emotional experience during this event and simultaneously reinforced the us versus them mindset between school-level staff and central office staff. Beyond perceiving higher ups to have easier jobs that offer more flexibility and autonomy, lower downs feel anger and resentment at the ways in which higher ups failings create more work for them as lower downs.

Finally, the most cynical participants felt a sense of resentment that the higher ups sought to blame teachers and were actively out to get them. Some teachers felt that if a district or state person walked through their classroom and witnessed a student acting out, they would “blame us for our classroom management,” signaling that the lower downs felt a lack of empathy from the
higher ups. One school administrator perceived the people from the state as “politically-driven morons” who “just want to get reelected.” He explained that the state leaders “get reelected by making those educators in [our county] have as low pay as possible and make it look like you’re holding them to the fire to get every dime you can for the work that you do out of them.” Similarly, one teacher from that same school even felt that the people from the state were “sittin’ back smilin’ knowin’ we’re doin’ more work.” Although these were the most extreme examples from our study, they illuminate how sinister some lower downs perceive the higher ups to be.

**Higher Ups’ Perceptions of Lower Downs**

While lower downs directly expressed stereotypes of higher ups, the higher ups we interviewed did not actively disparage teachers, nor did they share similarly stereotypical perceptions of them. One potential reason for this is that higher ups were more cautious in their interviews because they have had more experience interacting with researchers and reporters and were savvy enough to know that they should say positive things about teachers. Still, despite not having stated clear stereotypes or strictly negative perceptions of teachers, some higher ups did express some frustration with lower downs’ reactions to reforms and their efforts to implement them.

In a parallel way to how teachers described their own roles, many higher ups cast themselves as moral defenders of students and focused more on systems than individual students. They argued that there is an inherent tension between what is best for adults and what is best for students, and that teachers too often prioritize what is best for adults. As such, many higher ups expressed views that the state has a responsibility to use their power and authority to hold teachers accountable for “what’s best for students.” One state leader claimed, “I think the department’s stand is that we’ll do what’s best for children, and a lot of times that’s not what’s
best for teachers.” Another state leader claimed that teachers “have to have enough skin in the
game and nerves as a teacher to think that you’re accountable for real results for students and
that you’re working with some urgency and some real sense of purpose.” In essence, these
statements imply that the state serves as the ultimate gatekeeper of students’ best interests and
that without accountability from the top-down, teachers would not be motivated to work hard for
their students’ success.

Another potential reason why the higher ups did not express outward stereotypes of the
lower downs is that the majority of higher ups in our sample had also been lower downs at one
point, and therefore they brought their knowledge, experiences, and memories into their roles as
higher ups. In Table 1 we illustrate what percent of participants in our sample had previously
worked in other roles in education. On average, 90% of state participants and 92% of district
participants had previously worked as teachers, while only 23% of principals and assistant
principals and 0% of teachers had worked at district or state levels. As such, higher ups have
experienced the jobs of lower-downs, but lower downs have not experienced the work of higher
ups.
Table 1: Higher ups Had Been Lower downs, But Lower-Down Had Not Been Higher ups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Role</th>
<th>Previous Role</th>
<th>State (n = 20)</th>
<th>District (n = 12)</th>
<th>School Administrator (n = 13)</th>
<th>Teacher (n = 31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>n = 8 (40%)</td>
<td>n = 6 (50%)</td>
<td>n = 18 (90%)</td>
<td>n = 0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>n = 2 (17%)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>n = 3 (23%)</td>
<td>n = 6 (50%)</td>
<td>n = 11 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>n = 0 (0%)</td>
<td>n = 0 (0%)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>n = 0 (0%)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>n = 3 (23%)</td>
<td>n = 3 (23%)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>n = 13 (100%)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Light gray shows participants who have previously worked in a lower role

Dark gray shows participants who have previously worked in a higher role

Higher ups often used their personal experiences to understand lower downs, and their images of “typical” lower downs were more nuanced and shaped by their own experiences.

When asked what a “typical” teacher looked like, one state person explained that a typical teacher is “doing the best they can for their kids, given so much change.” She went on to list several recent change initiatives that have had a significant impact on teachers’ jobs. She then explained that because her mother was a teacher, and because she spent two years in the classroom, her experiences have made her “more sympathetic to the challenges that come with being a teacher.” Reflecting on changes in teacher evaluation policies, she stated:

I remember when I was evaluated, I just knew it was something we had to do. I didn’t really think about why it was important that it was happening or what’s the purpose of this, because no one ever told me that . . . . I think, probably, teachers are so busy during the year doing all the things they need to be doing to be good at their jobs that they’re not really sitting back and pondering a lot of our initiatives and why they matter.
In this example, the higher-up used her own personal experience to reflect on why lower downs may not fully understand, or even care about, the rationale behind certain policy changes. In other cases, higher ups drew upon their own experiences to gain perspective and motivation about why some changes might be necessary. Several higher ups reflected that, especially early in their careers as teachers, they felt lost and desperately wanted feedback on their practice. In their roles at the district and state levels, they hoped to provide those types of support to lower downs at the school level.

Still, there was considerable variance in the degree to which higher ups emphasized their experiences as teachers and how important their teacher identity was to them. Even in the midst of carrying out responsibilities as system level actors, some higher ups still felt that a core, enduring part of their identity was rooted in their perceptions of themselves as teachers. The extent to which higher ups retained and valued their teacher identity shaped their perceptions of teachers in the context of reform. Among higher ups who did not seem to value and retain their teacher identity, they emphasized the pivotal role of buy-in, claiming that successful reforms hinged on the extent to which district and school leaders embraced the reform and made it their own. Implicit in this view of reform is the notion that the state has the answers and pushback from district and school leaders is unjustified. On the other hand, those higher ups who did retain and value their teacher identity tended to take a more empathetic approach with teachers and sought to leverage their positions as system-level actors to provide teachers with the type of support they deeply craved when they were in the classroom.

While higher ups did not engage in overt stereotyping of lower downs, they did enact and implement policies that caused lower downs to view them in the negative ways described above. Given that they had some ability to take the perspective of teachers (and almost all had been
teachers), exactly why they fulfilled the stereotypes held of them when they assumed system roles is a significant question that is beyond the scope of this paper. In a separate paper (Authors, forthcoming), we take it on directly, and suggest that a range of factors, including pressures from policymakers, a tendency to “see like a state” (Scott, 1998), the power of a public administration paradigm which emphasizes “fidelity” of implementation over local adaptation, socialization into the norms of district and state offices, and absence of ongoing contact with the field come together to produce a mindset that provokes much of the negative hierarchical stereotyping described above.

Mitigating Negative Stereotypes: Respect, Humility, and Empathy

While the dominant pattern in our data was hierarchical stereotyping of higher ups by lower downs, there were some instances where higher ups were able to mitigate these negative viewpoints. Understanding these instances is important because they signal that it is possible for higher ups to be perceived as helpful by front-line practitioners. Here we rely exclusively on the perspectives of “lower-downs,” since higher ups sometimes overestimated their abilities to mitigate stereotypes (as in the case of the superintendent who brought a pre-formulated solution to his meeting with teachers). The most prevalent themes in lower downs’ descriptions of higher ups who successfully mitigated stereotypes were respect, humility, and empathy.

Respect: “If I emailed him in the morning, by the end of the day I would get a response.” The first way in which higher ups were able to mitigate their negative stereotypes was by demonstrating respect through their communication with lower downs. When lower downs described positive interactions with higher ups, they frequently cited the importance of timely and accurate responses to questions or requests for support. When lower downs knew the names, e-mail addresses, and personal phone numbers of specific higher ups, they reported much
more positive perceptions of them. One district administrator described his relationship with a
state official, explaining, “He was excellent. He gave us somebody that we could have regular
conversations with, and we felt part of the state again.” Similarly, a teacher described her district
supervisors as, “very reachable, very helpful,” adding, “If I e-mailed him in the morning, by the
end of the day I would get a response about something.” When lower downs felt confident that
they could reach out to a higher-up and receive a response in a timely manner, it made them feel
a sense of importance, as if the higher ups respected them enough to make answering their
questions a priority. Knowing they could ask questions without fear of being judged or
reprimanded also signaled to lower downs that the higher ups believed they were competent and
capable of being successful in their work.

Additionally, lower downs felt respected when higher ups reached out to them for input
and feedback and acted on it. Teachers and principals referred to district leaders who actively
visited schools to meet with teachers, providing opportunities for the latter to voice concerns and
ideas. One principal noted a district “accountability coordinator” who “sat down with the
supervisors and school testing coordinators and told us, ‘[The state] came down. They met with
the PARCC Consortium, and changes were made based on the feedback, and here were the
changes.’” Another principal told us, “I feel respected in many ways . . . . I feel like they do
respect my decisions. They do listen to me . . . . They call me. They initiate conversations,
‘What do you think about . . . ‘ or “How would you feel if . . . .”” In all of these examples, the
most important thing was not simply the higher ups soliciting feedback, but rather in their’ being
able to clearly communicate back to the lower downs how their feedback had actually impacted
decisions made at higher levels. On the contrary, we heard many examples of lower downs being
asked to give feedback through surveys, yet feeling that their feedback never made any
difference. As a result, many actually stopped filling out the surveys because they saw doing so as a waste of time. However, when lower downs could clearly see the impact of their feedback, they felt as though the higher ups respected them enough to ask for their input, to take it into consideration when making decisions, and to demonstrate how their input shaped ultimate outcomes.

**Humility: “I’ve never thought about it like that.”** The second way in which higher ups were able to mitigate their negative stereotypes was by demonstrating humility in their interactions with lower downs. When higher ups were eager and willing to engage with the work on the ground, it signaled to lower downs that the higher ups did not see themselves as “above” the front-line work. Teachers cited examples of principals or district supervisors coming into their classrooms or modeling a lesson with students in the room. One teacher cited a specific district supervisor who would visit the classroom and ask, “Why are y’all doing these kinds of work stations? Oh, I’ve never thought about it like that.” The teacher continued, “I appreciate, you know, that there’s . . . not that I need an accolade or a shout out, not that I need that, but just, you know, like, ‘Oh yeah, she does put some thought into it.’ You know?” Hearing a “higher-up” acknowledge that she did not have all the answers and that she did not think there was only one right way to approach a lesson signaled to the teacher that the “higher-up” saw *her* as the expert in her own classroom.

A teacher in another district told a story of time when she asked for advice from a new district learning specialist. She explained:

I had a question for her, and she goes, “I’m going to give you this advice . . . but I haven’t been in a classroom in a few years. She goes, ’I’m teaching this whole week actually. Let me do that, and then come back to you and tell you if I can really help you. I’m going to tell you this, but that might not be realistic. I haven’t taught first grade in years. So let me do a week of it and see if I can even help you, or if everyone else is having the same
problem. So, it was nice to kind of hear that she was like, “I don’t feel comfortable answering this until I’m put in your shoes.”

In this example, the higher-up first demonstrated humility by acknowledging that she did not have firsthand experience with the situation and that her advice might not be appropriate. Second, by deliberately putting herself in the teacher’s shoes, she signaled that she was willing and able to engage in the challenging work on the ground.

By demonstrating this sort of humility, higher ups mitigate two of the most prevalent stereotypes lower downs have of them. The first is that lower downs see higher ups as people who are out of touch and who have been out of the classroom too long to remember what it was like. In these examples, the higher ups actively engaged in the work on the ground, which directly combatted that perception and demonstrated that they were competent and capable of carrying out the work they were asking of lower downs. Second, because lower downs frequently resent higher ups as people who make more money to do easier jobs, when higher ups are ready and willing to take on the front-line work and partner side-by-side with the lower downs, they show that they are not simply “doing easier work.”

**Empathy: “I feel like he’s a lot like us.”** The third important way that higher ups were able to mitigate the lower downs’ negative stereotypes of them was by conveying a sense of empathy and showing lower downs that they shared similar values. For example, one district supervisor cited one of the state’s assistant commissioners of education as an example of someone at that level who was “doin’ a better job.” She explained:

He’s been a teacher. I feel like, he is . . . he’s a lot like [us]. When you’re with [him], he’s been very kind and considerate and thoughtful. He doesn’t make rash decisions. So, I do think they have people in place in several pockets that have the experience they need to be able to empathize with what’s happening, with what’s truly happening.
In this example, the lower-down felt that because she knew the higher-up had actually been in the shoes of lower downs, and because he was like them in some ways, he was able to empathize with their roles. By emphasizing, “with what’s *truly* happening,” she insinuated that higher ups who have not been in “lower downs”’ shoes could *not* understand what is truly happening.

Beyond conveying that they understand what it is like to be in “lower downs’” shoes, higher ups who successfully mitigate negative stereotypes also show lower downs that they share similar values. One group of teachers talked about a few “terrific” people in their district office, saying:

They are closer, in terms of their roles to us too. Like it’s not . . . they don’t sit in an office and push paper by any means. They are mentors. They lead trainings. They coach coaches. They, you know, they still have a very active role in the teaching . . . the craft of teaching. They’re not [what I usually think about] when I think of district and state, you know.

Similarly, a teacher in another district praised their former superintendent, explaining, “He was unique though. I think he really did have the kids, and education, and teachers at heart . . . I really do think he had both the students’ and teachers’ best interests at heart. And I thought — I felt very supported by him.” The lower downs saw these specific higher ups as counterexamples to their stereotypes because they shared similar values around the craft of teaching and reinforced the importance of such human factors as having the kids’ and teachers’ best interests at heart.

In sum, in nearly all examples of times when higher ups successfully mitigated their negative stereotypes, the lower downs described these positive perceptions of higher ups as rarities rather than regularities. Lower downs frequently followed a positive story with a statement that such behavior was atypical of most higher ups. While our data show that it *is* possible for higher ups to successfully mitigate lower downs’ negative stereotypes of them, they
also show that these examples are rare and do not change “lower downs’” overall negative characterizations of higher ups.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Our pattern of findings suggests the importance of considering the “human” side of reform, particularly the ways in which role identities, power dynamics, and stereotyping across levels pose barriers to reform strategies.

Our interviews suggest that the negative ways in which higher ups are seen by lower downs are pervasive and ubiquitous. In an accountability-heavy state and a support-heavy state, from rural to urban districts, across different schools, lower downs consistently saw higher ups as at best out of touch, and at worst “politically-driven morons,” officials in “clown suits.” Given that in loosely coupled systems, reforms are highly dependent upon the willingness of frontline practitioners to implement them, the antipathy that lower downs expressed toward higher ups is a critical problem for those hoping to create large-scale reform.

Our interviews suggest that this antipathy comes from experiences (and the lack thereof) which reinforce negative perceptions, including lower downs’ limited knowledge of and contact with higher ups, and lower downs’ resentment of higher ups for doing what they consider easier work, with higher status, for more money. These more specific responses are manifestations of more general theoretical ideas. Fundamentally, they show how the systems’ policies and compliance mentalities, coupled with the social and physical distance between higher ups and lower downs, produce intense resentment and antipathy among system actors. They also indicate the ways in which workplace social identities—in this case teachers’ professional identity—create common worldviews and perceptions around which boundaries are drawn excluding higher divisions, in this case the district and state. They suggest the ways in which unequal
power dynamics influence how higher level actors are understood and construed. Finally, while some of what lower downs said might be taken by a neutral observer as accurate, their statements also expressed stereotypes which arose from lack of contact and which extrapolated from specific instances to generalized claims about higher ups.

The only times in which higher-up are able to mitigate these negative stereotypes is when they engage in behaviors that actively refute these stereotypes. By providing lower downs with timely, accurate responses and ensuring that they know the right person to call for help, higher ups blur the power differences by communicating that lower downs’ time is just as important and valuable as their own. Similarly, higher ups diminish power differences when they involve lower downs in important decisions, take their input into consideration, and communicate back to the lower downs how their input shaped policy choices. When higher ups engage with lower downs in complex problem-solving, they signal that they are not above the lower downs and highlight the ways that their identities are similar. By recognizing and admitting that they do not always have the answers, higher ups relinquish some of their power, thus empowering the lower downs. And, when lower downs see the higher ups as “one of us,” or as having a shared identity, they feel valued and understood. This points to an important avenue for future research exploring how actors at various levels of the education system manage feelings of role conflict and the extent to which actors’ maintaining their professional identity, or the “heart of a teacher,” as one of our participants put it, enables them to navigate their work more effectively.

Our findings indicate the magnitude of the challenge facing system-level actors in loosely coupled systems. Consistent with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), all of the instances in which higher ups mitigated the stereotypes of them came through personal connections—instances where lower downs were consulted, connected with, or responded to, by higher ups.
Given that lower downs vastly outnumber higher ups, personal connections may not always be a possible or sustainable strategy for building intergroup trust. Mechanisms that higher ups used to communicate *en masse* with teachers—such as e-mail blasts—were disparaged by lower downs as impersonal and not genuine. How to create positive intergroup relations without personal contact is a critical topic for future research.

Future research might also explore the ways in which aspects of the American political, social and cultural context provide the backdrop for the negative appraisals of higher ups by lower downs in loosely coupled systems. Even though we chose states that were quite different in their policy approaches, they both exist within an American context that has put an unrelenting emphasis on test scores, valued-added metrics, and teacher and school evaluations. It is possible that in a different context, such as Canada’s, which has emphasized drivers more focused on support than on accountability (Fullan, 2016), different results might appear. Our research also might be construed as supporting the creation of policy systems that give more power and decision-making to front-line units, arrangements which could subvert longstanding hierarchical approaches to systemic reform and which might also improve relations across levels of the system.

Our study also has more general implications for the social and emotional aspects of reform in hierarchical loosely coupled systems. To date, scholars have hinted at (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), yet not theorized around, the role of social and emotional factors in loosely coupled systems and how those factors shape the implementation of systemic reforms. Our study begins to address this gap by conceptualizing systemic reform through the lens of intergroup relations, and by demonstrating how reform in hierarchical loosely coupled systems inherently activates identity and power dynamics tied to stereotyping. Future research might
begin to more systematically measure the emotional and affective dimensions of loosely coupled systems and consider the degree to which they are linked to reform outcomes.

Finally, our findings are a call to action for policymakers and practitioners to rethink some of the traditional ways of designing and implementing systemic reform. Given that many higher ups thought they were behaving in ways that would build relationships and trust across organizational lines, yet were failing to do so, our study helps illuminate how some of those strategies are counterproductive. We also suggest specific ways in which some actors were able to mitigate stereotypes and build more trusting relationships across organizational lines. Wise system-level actors would do well to heed these results and reconceive their approaches in ways that are more humane and attuned to the needs of the field.
Paper 2: Role-Redefining Reforms

The public sector is responsible for providing a wide range of critical services for citizens, including many social services which require complex interactions between the “street-level bureaucrats” who carry out the work and the citizens they serve on a daily basis (Lipsky, 1983; 2010). Many of these services, including public education, housing, welfare, policing, and corrections, involve work with vulnerable populations and/or challenging situations in which the street-level bureaucrat is required to think, feel, and behave in certain ways. Yet the impact of the inherently emotional nature of public sector work is not well understood, nor do we know much about how the emotional labor required of public sector employees shapes broader efforts to reform these large, complex systems. This is particularly important given that many reforms require fundamental changes to workers’ roles and responsibilities and may challenge core aspects of their role identities. In essence, this type of reform asks workers not only to change what they do, but also who they are expected to be in their roles.

Two examples of these reforms are underway in the public education and prison systems. In education, the accountability-heavy, top-down reforms of the last two decades have spurred a shift from a so-called “soft” approach, which focuses on the development of the whole child, to a “hard” approach that prioritizes test scores and measurable outcomes (Jal Mehta, 2013). Prison reforms, on the other hand, are undergoing a shift in the opposite direction, moving from “hard” punishment-oriented work to “soft” rehabilitative work. In this way, reforms in both sectors have forced the front-line public servants to adjust to new demands that fundamentally clash with the central values, beliefs, and cultures of their professions.

In this paper, I explore how front-line workers in one public institution responded to this particular class of reforms, which I call role-redefining reforms. The study takes place at a prison
that had recently implemented a new rehabilitative justice unit which required a fundamentally different type of work, shifting from a “hard” punishment approach to a “soft” rehabilitative approach. Through interviews with staff members and observations of routine work activities, staff meetings, and training sessions over a period of six months, I explore how front-line correctional officers and operational managers throughout the organization experienced the dominant work context of the status quo, what factors helped enable some staff to break free from the status quo and take on new work in the rehabilitative unit, and how staff throughout the prison experienced this new work context.

My data illuminated that staff throughout the entire prison felt as though the emotional labor required in their roles – namely emotional suppression and distancing – led to a host of negative outcomes including cutthroat staff dynamics, anxiety, and depression, which ultimately spilled over into their lives outside of work. Furthermore, they felt as though there was no sense of camaraderie or “the brotherhood” that they deeply desired in their idealistic images of law enforcement professions. Yet, despite the fact that the status quo was not working in anyone’s best interests, a small group of correctional officers and managers were willing and able to take on new roles and responsibilities in the rehabilitative unit. In this paper, I present a multi-level analysis of the socio-emotional factors that enabled both individual officers and the unit as a whole to break free from the constraints of the dominant work context and how they experienced their new roles and work environment. Overall, the findings from this study illustrate how the nature of emotional labor required in certain types of work and the collective fantasies about what it means to embody an ideal role identity profoundly shape how people experience their roles and respond to new ways of carrying out their work.
Predominant Approaches to Public Sector Reform

Top-down implementation – in which elected or appointed officials and bureaucrats at the top of the system make decisions that those at the bottom must carry out – has been the predominant method of enacting reforms across the public sector (Elmore, 1979; Lipsky, 2010; Matland, 1995; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). However, this approach rarely works. Scholars across a range of disciplines have identified at least three main perspectives to examine the limitations of top-down approaches. Political scientists have argued that top-down reforms fail because actors at the top of the system cannot fully anticipate how the policy will evolve as actors at lower levels of the system implement it with their own discretion (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Institutional theorists have argued that the loosely coupled structure of many systems in the public sector enable actors to make surface-level changes in compliance with reforms while avoiding changes to core elements of their work (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Finally, the cognitive or sense-making perspective argues that actors in different levels of a system have different ways of understanding and interpreting reforms based on their prior experiences and knowledge (Cynthia E. Coburn, 2001; H. C. Hill, 2001; K.E. Weick, 1995).

While existing perspectives provide useful explanations for the limited success of top-down reforms, they do not fully account for how emotions and relationships shape actors’ responses to reforms on the ground. In fact, as Hoffer Gittell and Douglass (2012) argue, the traditional Weberian view of bureaucratic organizations (which includes public institutions) fails to facilitate the cross-functional relationships and emotional connections necessary for important outcomes like caring, timely, and knowledgeable responses. Furthermore, Rinehart and Mehta (n.d.) discovered in their study of state-wide education reforms that “lower down” actors on the
front lines of the system (in this case teachers and principals) held pervasive and widely shared stereotypes of “higher ups” (i.e., district administrators and state officials). This sowed resentment of higher ups and the reforms, which were tainted by the negative stereotypes of their creators. Higher ups only broke through the negative stereotypes when they diminished power and identity barriers by demonstrating respect, humility, and empathy in their interactions with lower downs. Finally, in my own prior work I have theorized about how top-down reforms highlight the power differentials and conflicting role identities between teachers and policymakers. As a result, such top-down reforms often elicit negative emotional responses – namely anxiety, threat, and shame – which can lead to behavioral responses that undermine reforms (Rinehart, 2017). Thus, it seems that role-redefining reforms, which highlight divisions across identity and power barriers, would be even more difficult to achieve.

However, Lipsky (2010) highlights a successful case of public sector reform that did fundamentally change the nature of street-level bureaucrats’ work. In the 1980s, the Massachusetts Department of Welfare made a drastic shift from serving as an agency focused on income support and monitoring recipients of that support to one that aimed to place welfare recipients in jobs. Lipsky (2010) notes that this shift was difficult for front-line agency workers, explaining that a successful implementation would entail the following:

Workers would have to establish rapport with recipients, engage them in discussion of matters not directly related to the recipients’ primary concerns of getting on welfare, and persuade them to investigate the program’s options. This persuasion would have to be done by social workers who were not trained for such work and who, a short while ago, had been focused on an entirely different set of priorities. (227)

In this case of role-redefining reform, success was attributed to the managers, who helped front-line workers adapt to these changes by establishing a clear mission for the agency (which included the new task of job placement), setting clear goals for individuals and tying them to the
larger agency’s goals, monitoring performance and rewarding success, and becoming personally involved in monitoring performance. In another study of the same case, Behn (1991) focuses squarely on the role of management and leaders, furthering a principal-agent perspective on public sector reform. It does not explore or account for the range of emotional experiences and reactions among front-line social workers who took on fundamentally different roles.

Clearly there is still much to learn about how front-line workers in the public sector might respond to role-redefining reforms. In the conceptual framework that follows, I draw on theories from organizational behavior and institutional theory to shed light on how the emotional labor required in certain roles becomes embodied in workers’ daily work and inextricably linked to their role identities. I then consider how the relationship among these three constructs could shape workers’ responses to role-redefining reforms in the public sector.

**Emotional Labor, Emotional “Habitus” and Role Identity of Front-Line Workers**

**Emotional Labor**

Emotional labor refers to the effort required for workers to display certain emotions that have been deemed appropriate based on societal, organizational, and role norms (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). Emotional labor is highest among service workers and those who directly interface with clients and customers (Hochschild, 1979). Because those interactions define the customer’s experience with the larger organization, front-line service workers bear the responsibility for ensuring that every interaction with a customer or client is consistent with organizational goals. Non-service roles, like factory line workers, require lower levels of emotional labor because they do not directly interact with customers, and therefore they are not responsible for embodying the organization’s values and goals in repeated actions with customers (Hochschild, 1979).
Empirical studies of emotional labor have examined a broad range of service professions, including flight attendants (Hochschild, 1979, 1983), police officers (Martin, 1999; Van Maanen, 1973, 1978), restaurant workers (Boas & Chain, 1976), Disney staff (Peters & Waterman, 1982), doctors (Rogers, Creed, & Searle, 2014), nurses (Denison & Sutton, 1990), teachers (Hargreaves, 2000; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006), and educational leaders (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015). In these types of service roles, front-line workers engage in emotional labor across three key dimensions: 1) expression of sanctioned emotions and suppression of non-sanctioned emotions, 2) whether the displayed emotions are positive (e.g., smiling, friendly attitudes) or negative (e.g., cold and intimidating expressions), and 3) whether it requires workers to engage in “surface acting,” in which the actors merely fake emotion for the sake of displaying it or in “deep acting,” in which the actor strives to change his or her emotion to align with the displayed emotion (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1979; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987).

Researchers have examined how emotional labor impacts employee effectiveness; however, few studies have explored how emotional labor can shape identities or how it affects employees’ lives outside of work. In some cases, emotional labor can be beneficial when the emotional labor protects workers from experiencing deep pain, as in the case of physicians who maintain emotional distance from severely ill patients (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). On the other hand, Hochschild (1983) describes how flight attendants who were required to express positive emotions through polite, friendly attitudes and constant smiles subsequently battled harmful long-term outcomes including drug and alcohol abuse, absenteeism, and depression. This suggests that there may be a discrepancy between the short-term and long-term consequences of emotional labor for front-line service workers.
While these studies address important, and often overlooked, emotional aspects of worker’s roles, they have made fundamental assumptions that may not hold in certain cases. First, while some scholars argue that emotional distancing among medical professionals is a positive individual outcome because it protects them from experiencing deep pain in their work, they overlook questions about how emotional distancing might undermine their ability to care for patients, as Menzies (1960) demonstrated in her classic study of nurses’ defense mechanisms. Second, they do not sufficiently attend to questions about how repeated emotional distancing at work might transfer over to other areas of the professionals’ lives. Third, they do not adequately address how the emotional labor required in a given role might become embedded into one’s role identity and the psychological value they derive from that identity. These factors are especially relevant in cases where professionals view their role identities as intricately intertwined with their complete, authentic self, which extends beyond the workplace (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

**Emotional “Habitus” of Roles and Professions**

Organizations, especially in fields that require high levels of emotional labor, develop mechanisms to normalize the institutional rules around what emotions are displayed and when (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002). For example, police and workers in other fields that require workers to suppress their genuine emotions and/or manufacture cold, detached emotions often normalize those practices through strategies like dark humor (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Martin, 1999). As individual workers are socialized into certain roles, they learn not only how to display such appropriate emotions, but also how to experience their own private emotions (Voronov & Vince, 2012). In this way, they begin to embody an emotional form of “habitus” (Bourdieu, 2000) that motivates workers to think and act in certain field-prescribed ways (Voronov & Vince, 2012).
individuals begin to embody the rules about how to experience and display emotions, they create “internalized unconscious representations of what is good and bad and right and wrong in organizations [and] help to generate self-imposed limitations on behavior” (Voronov & Vince, 2012, p. 64). This emotional habitus ultimately maintains a dominant institutional order by creating self-reinforcing cycles that uphold the emotional rules and power relations within the status quo (Voronov & Vince, 2012).

In this way, the emotional habitus of a field binds together the prescribed ways of displaying emotions with the central ideas about what it means to embody a given role identity and the psychological value derived from that identity to shape how individuals within a system behave. This is particularly true in fields that prioritize traditionally masculine views of strength, courage, and honor. The emotional habitus of a given role gives rise to a broad-based and deeply entrenched culture (or institutional order) that is extremely difficult to change.

**Social-Psychological Functions of Role Identity**

Social identities, including role identities, serve many psychological functions. The very foundation of social identity theory emphasizes the enhancement of self-esteem as one of the primary drivers of social identity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). From a psychodynamic perspective, social identities also fulfill the unconscious recognition that one will never be fully complete (Driver, 2009). In this sense, buying into fantasies about what it means to identify with a certain social identity provides a sense that one is whole and complete. This “fantasmic” aspect of social identities also provides important defenses in cases where individuals confront difficult or impossible tasks (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Laughlin, 1970). An example of this type of defense would be the heroic depiction of teachers who work in low-income schools. This view of teachers, which is popularized by films like *Stand and Deliver*
(1988), *Lean on Me* (1989), and *Freedom Writers* (2007), perpetuates the notion that the difficult task of providing high quality education and equal opportunity across American public schools could be accomplished if only we had more heroic educators. As a result, teachers’ social identities – and the self-esteem derived from that identity – could depend on the extent to which they feel that they can live up to that idealized, fantasmic image.

Voronov and Vince (2012) demonstrate that institutional orders can change through disruption of the current order and/or the creation of a new order only when individuals within the system become less cognitively and emotionally invested in the status quo. One of the main determinants of one’s emotional investment in the status quo is the extent to which the status quo fulfills one’s fantasies and symbolic needs (Voronov & Vince, 2012). When the system fails to meet those needs, individuals are more likely to take action to disrupt the current system or create a new one. For example, workers in traditionally masculine fields like policing and other law enforcement professions who derive a significant part of their self-esteem from their role identity as a law enforcement official and who buy into the fantasmic notions of what it means to “be a blue” would likely uphold dominant institutional practices of suppressing “soft” emotions and expressing a macho, tough-guy attitude. However, for workers in law enforcement who do not rely on their role identity to supplement their self-esteem, or for whom the symbolism of “being a blue” has failed to live up to its ideals, they would be more likely to engage in behaviors that challenge those dominant institutional practices.

**Bringing It Together: Implications and Questions for Role-Redefining Reforms**

Extant theories and empirical studies about emotional labor, emotional habitus, and the social-psychological functions of role identity provide a useful framework to ask new questions about how front-line workers in the public sector might respond to and experience role-
redefining reforms. Because front-line workers in the public sector are often responsible for carrying out difficult or nearly impossible tasks, they are likely to depend on the ideal, fantasmic views of their role identities. Thus, questions remain about how their responsibilities shape their emotional investment in the dominant institutional orders of their professions. Finally, these theories raise new questions about how one’s role identity and the fantasmic frames of that identity fulfill deeper psychological needs, and how reforms that ask workers to change core aspects of their roles and responsibilities might feel to workers on the ground. This is especially important in the case of top-down role-redefining reforms where front-line workers perceive the policy makers at the top of the system as people who are fundamentally different from them and who have an entirely different (and in many cases, conflicting) set of priorities and values.

**Research Questions**

Based on the review of the literature on reforms in the public sector and the theoretical framework discussed above, it was extremely surprising to find a case where a small group of correctional officers – which is a role that requires high levels of emotional labor and holds fantasmic notions about serving in law enforcement and protecting society from dangerous criminals - embraced a top-down reform that fundamentally changed the nature of their work and the emotional labor required to carry out that work. In this study, I build upon prior work to develop a deeper understanding of how emotions and identity shape how workers respond to role-redefining reforms. In light of a research context where workers had an opportunity to take up a voluntary role-redefining reform, this study addresses three research questions:

1) What was the dominant work context at the prison, and in what ways did the emotional labor required in the work, the broader emotional habitus, and the fantasmic frames of role identities shape workers’ emotional investment in the status quo?
2) What factors were important in enabling individual officers and the group of officers who worked in the new unit to break free from the dominant work context?

3) Once the new unit was formed, how did the group and individual officers redefine the social and emotional aspects of their new roles and work context?

Research Methods

Research Setting and Context

This study was conducted at a prison that had recently implemented a new unit dedicated to rehabilitative justice, which seeks to replace punitive approaches with “community-based reparative justice and moralizing social control” that will enable greater justice, healing, and “genuine accountability for offenders and their reintegration into law-abiding society” (Johnstone & Ness, 2013, p.5). This new unit required a fundamentally different approach to working with inmates, as staff would be expected to develop relationships with inmates and invest in their wellbeing by helping them engage in self-reflection, developing relationship and communication skills, and applying for jobs.

With respect to size, this prison served approximately 1,000 inmates at any given time, though the number fluctuated regularly because it housed pre-trial inmates who were awaiting sentencing. At least half of the inmates were awaiting sentencing, while the remainder were serving sentences of two and a half years or less (though some were serving multiple sentences back-to-back, spending as many as seven years in the facility). The facility was organized into six different units, which housed approximately 120 inmates in cells and two dormitory-style units housing 60 inmates each. They had a staff of approximately 750, which included operational staff, support staff, and administrative staff. The operational staff included front-line officers, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, and deputies (in ascending rank). In this study, I
consider front-line officers, sergeants, and lieutenants as “correctional officers, or officers” and captains and deputies as “operational managers.” Though sergeants and lieutenants were responsible for some operational management, they were part of a different union and wore the same color of uniforms as the front-line officers (the “blue shirts”). The captains and deputies were represented by a different union and colloquially referred to themselves as “white shirts.” On each shift, there was one shift commander, who was typically a two-star deputy. Additionally, there were usually two or three other “white shirts,” plus two or three lieutenants, four or five sergeants, and the rest were front-line officers.

The schedule was divided into three eight-hour shifts. All operational staff worked five consecutive days, with a two-day “weekend.” Shifts and weekend days were assigned by rank and tenure, so the newest officers often worked on the 3 pm to 11 pm shift or the 11 pm to 7 am shift and had Tuesdays and Wednesdays as their weekend. Many officers reported that it took at least ten years on the job to earn a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday off.

Staff were mostly white males, with a handful of females and non-white males and females. Over half of the operational staff I interviewed had a two- or four-year degree, though it was not required to obtain employment as a correctional officer and was only sometimes a relevant factor when being considered for promotions.

**Background of rehabilitative unit implementation.** To better understand the role-redefining work of the rehabilitative unit, it is helpful to briefly describe how the unit was developed and implemented. The initial idea for the rehabilitative unit began when the Deputy Sheriff attended a conference and met someone from The Rehabilitative Institute, a nonprofit organization that partners with prisons to help design and implement rehabilitative justice programs. When he came back from the conference, he shared the idea with the Sheriff, who had
been greatly interested in implementing innovative ideas in the prison. The Deputy Sheriff, who had a longer tenure working in prisons than the locally elected Sheriff, was initially skeptical and thought the idea was “kind of crazy.” Yet, he agreed to visit a nearby prison that had implemented a program in partnership with The Rehabilitative Institute. After seeing how successful the program had been at the other facility, he quickly became excited and began working with the leadership team to develop a plan to create a similar program at their facility.

As the Sheriff, Deputy Sheriff, and the rest of the leadership team began working on the plan, they initially were concerned about how the staff would react because it represented such an extreme departure from the traditional approach to corrections. The senior leaders assumed that most correctional officers and operational managers would strongly push back on the idea. In an attempt to protect the program from being squelched before it began, they decided not to inform the staff at the early stages of the idea. Questions of who would run and operate the unit were secondary at this point.

The leadership team did, however, agree that if they were serious about creating an entire unit dedicated to the rehabilitative approach, they would need to have their own staff capable of training new the officers who would work in the unit. They asked the captain of the Training Academy to join a leadership team meeting to discuss plans for the new unit and what it would require from the Academy staff. The Academy captain was vehemently opposed to the new unit and did not want to attend the meeting. Instead, he sent the female sergeant, Sergeant Williams, who acquiesced because she was “voluntold” to do so.

When she arrived at the meeting with the other members of the leadership team, whom she did not know very well and were several ranks higher than her, she felt apprehensive about the idea and uncertain of her role in the conversation. Everyone else has been mulling over the
idea for at least a month prior to her involvement, so she felt as though she was playing catch-up. As she learned about the concept of the rehabilitative unit, she thought it was a crazy idea. After that meeting, she had a chance to speak with the Deputy Sheriff and asked, “Is this for real? Or is this like a joke? This is crazy.” He responded, “This is crazy, right? I thought so too, but I went to [the other facility] and it works.” She sighed a reluctant sigh of acceptance.

Despite Sergeant Williams’s belief that the entire premise of the rehabilitative unit was a crazy idea, she told the director of the Academy, Deputy Johnson, that if there was any chance of her getting on board with the idea, she would have to visit the model program that the Deputy Sheriff had seen. Deputy Johnson agreed and arranged a day trip for the Academy staff to visit. Deputy Williams described their visit to the model program, saying:

When we visited that unit, everything just made sense. Like how the inmates were, how calm they were, the atmosphere and the interaction between inmates and the staff, like, just seeing everything like kind of – and then being able to talk to the staff and find out how they got there and what that transition looks like, because obviously it wasn’t easy. And it wasn’t overnight. And just having all those things clarified for me made sense.

When they left the facility, she looked to Deputy Johnson and said, “I get it now. And not only do I get it, but I really want to be part of the process.” He looked at her and responded, “Me too. Me too.”

At that point, Sergeant Williams and Deputy Johnson agreed that they would both volunteer to implement and run the unit, but only if they could go together. The Deputy Sheriff agreed. Next, they needed to recruit officers to staff the unit, so they posted a job announcement with the application. For the vast majority of prison staff, the job announcement was the first time they had heard about this new rehabilitative unit. According to the Deputy Sheriff, so few people applied that they accepted “almost everyone.” Nearly three months later, 36 officers
attended a three-week training program, partly led by staff from The Rehabilitative Institute. The new unit opened less than two weeks after the training was complete.

Data Collection and Sample

I collected data from one-on-one interviews and observations of routine work activities, staff meetings, and training sessions over a period of six months. I spent nearly 100 hours in the field, with site visits including 25 semi-structured interviews and 56 hours of observations of routine work activities, staff meetings, and training sessions. For the interviews, I used strategic sampling to identify individual staff members across ranks, shifts, and perspectives on the work at the prison. At the beginning of the study, the Deputy Sheriff recommended six officers and operational managers whom he thought would be willing to speak with me. I reached out to them via email, and only three of the six individuals responded to my interview requests. One of the initial interview participants agreed to let me shadow him for a full day in June. During this time, I met several other staff members with whom I became familiar throughout the duration of the study, as we interacted over my repeated visits to the facility. I also shadowed a shift commander for part of that day and observed many informal interactions among officers and the operational managers.

On the day that I shadowed the lieutenant and shift commander, I met the deputy who ran the new rehabilitative unit. He enthusiastically welcomed me to come visit the unit and offered to participate in an interview. Ten days later, I returned to the facility to interview him and receive a tour of the rehabilitative unit. He was intensely interested in the study and extended an open invitation for me to come visit at any point.

My initial interviews and shadowing observations helped my search to identify key staff members who would help paint a comprehensive picture of the organization and their
experiences within it. In addition to seeking a representative sample across traits like race and


gender, it became apparent that I also needed to sample staff who had been working in the prison for different lengths of time. This particular prison had experienced illegal abuses of power from several sheriffs spanning more than two decades prior to the current sheriff’s arrival. As a result, staff members who had lived through those experiences had different perspectives than those who had only worked under the current sheriff. I also learned that there was a small group of staff members who “played the game” by participating in organization-sponsored events to develop positive rapport with the sheriff and put themselves in a strong position for promotions. In my sampling, I searched for staff members who were both skeptical of “the game” and those who played it, as well as those who were willing to participate despite being ridiculed as a “kiss-ass.”

Of the twenty-five interview participants, twenty were male and five were female. Twenty-two were white, and three were black or Latinx (which was relatively representative of the staff). Of the operational staff, I interviewed 13 correctional officers (ranging from front-line officers to lieutenants) and seven operational managers. Among the operational staff, six worked exclusively in the traditional part of the facility, five worked almost exclusively in the rehabilitative unit, and two worked in the rehabilitative unit only one or two shifts per week. I also interviewed five members of the senior leadership, including the Deputy Sheriff, three executive officers, and the superintendent of the prison. I audio recorded each interview and transcribed them verbatim. Interview transcripts totaled over 530 single-spaced pages.

In addition to interviews, I collected observational data from observations of routine work activities (approximately 10 hours), staff meetings (3 hours), and trainings (43 hours). The majority of observational data (50 of the 56 hours) were conducted in the rehabilitative unit. I
took extensive notes during each observation and wrote detailed field notes within two days of the observation. Field notes totaled over 145 single-spaced pages.

**Data Analysis**

All interview and observational data were analyzed using a grounded-theory approach, iterating back and forth between data and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2007). I began with an initial round of open coding, including as many categories as possible. This first phase of open coding yielded nearly 500 unique codes. After the initial round of coding, I wrote analytical memos about core themes that were emerging (Locke, 2001). I then conducted a second round of more focused coding, including just over 50 level-1 codes and over 150 level-2 codes. I then wrote additional analytical memos and went back to the literature, which helped me home in on the key themes of emotional labor, emotional habitus, role identity, and fantasmic frames.

**Limitations**

This study was a single-site field study of a prison in the Northeastern United States. As such, this study is designed to provide rich descriptive data, and the analytical patterns that I uncovered are not intended to be generalized to all role-redefining reforms. Future studies of similar role-redefining reforms in prisons must be conducted to find further evidence to support, complement, and challenge these findings. This study also faces limitations due to the relatively small number of in-depth interviews and limited observations of the traditional side of the facility. However, returning to the same research site over repeated visits allowed me to become familiar with a much broader range of staff members who provided valuable information through informal conversations. For example, even though only six hours of my formal observations took place in the traditional side of the facility, at least ten hours of additional fieldwork involved
interactions with officers from the traditional part of the facility working at the security checkpoints and driving the van from the first checkpoint to the main facility.

**Results**

**Dominant Work Context and Emotional Investment in the Status Quo**

Across nearly all interviews and informal conversations with correctional officers and operational managers, prison staff painted an overwhelmingly bleak picture of their experiences of working in the prison. The dominant work context – fueled by emotional suppression, a “tough guy” culture, and toxic staff dynamics – failed on nearly every front to meet the deeper psychological needs and fantasmic ideals of prison staff.

**Emotional labor.** Unsurprisingly, correctional officers’ roles required a high level of emotional labor, as nearly all correctional officers agreed that they were expected to put on a “tough-guy” attitude and suppress emotions in their interactions with inmates. Officers believed that suppressing emotions was important for two reasons. First, it was important to maintain a façade of impenetrability and toughness so that inmates would not try to take advantage of the officers. Second, they encountered situations on the job that would be too disturbing if they allowed themselves to truly feel the resulting emotions. These types of occurrences ranged from dealing with inmates’ smearing fecal matter on the walls (which was such a common occurrence that some officers carried Vick’s Vapor Rub to massage under their noses to mask the stench), to ignoring infuriating insults from inmates, to traumatic and tragic events like inmate suicides. As one officer explained:

I think [the officers] just feel they have to, because as far as like the population, it’s always known if you show any vulnerability, they’re going to – they’re going to feed on that, you know, any type of weakness, or any type of whatever. …You have to have that, you know, exterior, like, you know, and actually get through the day too, because you may see some terrible things, you know, what one man could do to another man, you know, and you got to go about your business. You may break up a really bad fight, or these guys may break up a
really bad fight now, and then… they have to go right back to running that [unit]. That [unit] isn’t self-running.

This description highlights the reasons why officers work so hard to maintain their tough guy exteriors. Taking it a step further, another officer admitted, “You think of [the inmates] as cattle. You’re herding the cattle to the chow hall. You don’t know what the cattle did. You just know where it’s got to go. Try to keep your distance.” Like surgeons and nurses, correctional officers must be able to continue carrying out their roles and responsibilities despite frequently-occurring emotionally distressing events and regular interactions with a stigmatized population.

For their part, female correctional officers wrestled with gender norms which called for them to draw on their “softer” side to do more of the relational work with inmates. Three of the females I interviewed stated that their communication skills were their strongest asset to the organization. In the cases where they were required to take on more traditionally masculine work (e.g., breaking up an inmate fight or disciplining an inmate), they feared being called a “bitch.” As a result, female correctional officers reported feeling incredibly alone and largely unsupported by their peers and managers.

To the extent that the emotional suppression and distancing from inmates did protect prison staff, it came at a high price. One unintended consequence of their emotional suppression and distancing is that it cultivated an environment where the work itself began to feel futile. By suppressing their emotions and minimizing engagement with inmates, many officers felt that their work was repetitive and that they had little to show for their efforts. As one young correctional officer explained, “It’s Groundhog Day. Every day it’s the same thing over and over again.” A deputy elaborated on this sentiment, expressing his deep frustration with the organization’s repeated failure to help people who entered the prison system, “Even the word,
“corrections,” we are corrections officers. What correcting do we do? We’re not correcting anything. We’re housing people… So, we just – they’re a number. And that’s it.” One officer who worked as a contractor during the day felt as though his day job allowed him to build something for someone and feel a sense of accomplishment about having something to show for his labor; at the prison, there was nothing to show for his efforts. Many correctional officers had seen the same faces cycle in and out for years, and some even encountered the children and grandchildren of people who had been inmates in the prison. This Sisyphean environment, coupled with the emotional labor of suppression and distancing, created an unbearable feeling of futility in their work.

**Emotional habitus.** The emotional labor required in their roles extended beyond their interactions with inmates. Over time, prison staff began to embody the very thoughts and feelings they were required to express (or suppress) in their roles. Several officers reported that within five to ten years on the job, they had “totally changed,” not simply as an officer, but as a person. In confidential, closed-door interviews with me, they reluctantly admitted that the demands of the job had turned them into a person they did not like and did not want to be. They became numb to events that would traumatize most people (e.g., seeing an inmate cut his own wrists), found themselves judging people everywhere they went (like recognizing panhandlers on the street who had been in jail or staring at a suspicious man in a bar), and distanced themselves from their spouses and family members. They had become so adept at shutting off emotions at work that they could not simply switch them back on once they returned home. One officer described the most challenging aspect of the job for him, “Shutting off, like going home. My wife always says to me that we don’t live in a jail. It’s not who I am, like that’s not how life is. And that’s the most difficult part for me, trying to switch off.”
Several other officers expressed deep, personal pain because of how much their work had interfered with their home lives. In fact, it is somewhat ironic that many officers entered the profession because they knew someone (typically a family member) who worked at the prison; and yet, in nearly every case, the family member strongly encouraged the aspiring officer to choose another profession. They knew the costs and wanted to protect younger men and women from enduring the same damaging work environments. In this way, the emotional labor their roles required became so deeply embedded in their daily lives that it became extremely difficult to “turn off” when they left the facility. What was necessary to get through the disturbing and traumatic daily occurrences in the prison – suppressing genuine emotions, distancing one’s self from inmates and colleagues, and excessive use of dark humor – penetrated their lives well beyond the workplace and caused deeply painful problems with family and loved ones.

**Fantasmic nature of role identity.** The most pronounced fantasmic notion of correctional officers’ identities revolved around their conceptions of the camaraderie of the law enforcement profession, or “the brotherhood.” Some told stories about events and memorials held in honor of officers who had died while working on the job. One officer explained, “there’s an officer that died for us,” implying that he died serving on the job, much like a police officer or a member of the armed services who was shot and killed in the line of duty. He briefly paused and then corrected himself, adding, “…but died while working for us.” After I probed for details about the event to honor this fallen officer, the participant revealed that the officer had passed away from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). This interaction suggests that there may be some lingering remnants of a “fantasmic frame” (Voronov & Vince, 2012), in which correctional officers hold onto into ideals of what it means to be a correctional officer and the sense of duty and camaraderie that goes along with it.
Yet, the majority of officers admitted that, in fact, there was no sense of camaraderie or brotherhood. People primarily looked out for themselves, and the only time staff ever came together was in a crisis situation. Once the crisis was over, everyone returned to their positions of self-protection. In one-on-one interviews and in my observations of group conversations, I heard countless reports of how staff members cut each other down and deliberately tried to hurt each other. One of the most striking examples came from an officer who shared a story about a time when he had been out of work on disability leave. He had torn his rotator cuff while breaking up an inmate fight, for the second time in his career. He recalled the story:

I was out one time after a year, and everyone knows I have a business, so I go out to the bottom of my driveway and I get the mail or something. And I see, like, I live on a desolate suburban road. And I see an SUV parked, and I come in and tell my wife, “I think someone from the sheriff’s office is parked outside.” “What are you talking about?” And I'm like “I'm telling you. I'm being watched.” And I said, “I'm going to take a ride.” So, I get in my truck, and I get to the bottom of my driveway, and the car is gone...And I get to the end of my street, and the car is behind me. And I have to go down a dead-end street to see that a guy from my department is following me. He really was... something like that happens, and it’s like, “Wait a minute, there’s no team here. There is no us. It's me against you.”

In this example, the staff member was following the injured officer to make sure that he was not faking his injury to gain more time to work his other job outside the prison. Another prominent example came from a group conversation I observed, in which a young female officer raised a concern about an incident that deeply troubled her. The organization had hosted a memorial to honor officers who had died while working for the department. This event took place in the wake of a young officer who committed suicide less than three years into the job. The young female officer attended the event to support her colleague who had been close friends with the officer who committed suicide. The memorial was poorly attended, with a mere three officers showing up to pay their respects. With trepidation in her voice, she recalled that when she walked into the roll call room at the start of her shift (after the memorial), “Everyone was
making fun of me.” She paused, then added, “We don’t support each other here.” Her colleagues had accused her and the others who attended the memorial of going just so they would look good to the bosses and have a shot at a promotion. They saw her as one of the people who “played the game” and derided her for it.

These examples highlight the divergence between the desire for the brotherhood and the lived reality of that fantasming frame. Rather than banding together and supporting one another, they deliberately cut each other down and, as one operational manager put it, “want[ed] people to fail.” They exacerbated one another’s pain and then left each other to suffer in silence, alone.

Beyond the failure of the fantasming notions of the “brotherhood,” many correctional officers also failed to find a positive identity as members of the law enforcement community. In fact, staff members expressed ambivalence about being proud of their roles. One operational manager proclaimed, “I wear this patch, and I wear it proud” (“this patch” meaning the uniform patch). Yet, the same individual remarked that when he meets new people outside of work, he tells them that he works for UPS:

Because as soon as you tell them you work at a jail, “Oh, you beat people up.” “No, we don’t beat people up. Whatever you see on TV is not what we do.” You know, so that’s why I just tell people I work for UPS.

In this example, the deputy’s pride for his profession was diminished by his awareness of the negative stereotypes perpetuated in the media. Another deputy defended the status of the profession, explaining:

You know what annoys people, what annoys us the most is when we are referred to as “guards.” Because we’re not guards. Guards are the guys at the bank. We’re officers. This is our own little city. You know, you got guys working in police departments, you got 1,000 people living here. And you might have two bad guys in the whole city. We got 1,000 bad guys in here. So, we’re officers. We’re just as trained as anybody else.
Furthermore, some officers admitted that they became correctional officers because they could not find employment with the state or local police, which— for some— created feelings of inferiority and increased the need to boost their professional identity for their self-esteem.

**Emotional investment in the default work context.** As these painful accounts illustrate, the default work context failed to provide a positive identity, meaning, or value for the prison workers. In fact, almost all interview participants admitted that the only reason they stayed in the profession was because they feared that they could not find another job with the same pay and benefits. Unlike many public sector workers who feel underpaid, almost everyone I spoke with felt satisfied with their compensation (despite their frustration with delays in renewing their union contract and not receiving sufficient annual pay increases). Furthermore, state statutes set strict requirements for the number of years workers had to serve in order to receive their pensions. Most officers felt that if they had worked at the prison for four or five years, they should stay for at least 20 years (which was the first substantial benchmark for receiving a portion of their salary as a pension). One young officer with just four years on the job choked up in an interview, saying, “I say I’ll do this for 20 years. And I think… twenty years. Twenty years,” as if the thought was unbearably dreadful. For many officers, especially those who did not have a college degree, exiting the profession did not appear to be an option. Coupled with the troublingly high rates of divorce, substance abuse, alcoholism, depression, and suicide, many officers felt that they were in a prison of their own. Some even compared their tenure to a sentencing “bid,” in which working for 20 years equated to serving a 7-year sentence.

According to Voronov and Vince’s (2012) theoretical typology, it would appear as though the prison staff in this study would have had little to no emotional investment in the current system, and therefore they would take actions to disrupt the default work context or to
create a new one. At the same time, they and others (e.g., Kahn, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 2009) acknowledge that individuals sometimes maintain emotional investment in systems that appear contradictory to their interests and desires because it serves as a defense mechanism to protect them from other (often unconscious) fears and anxieties. While it is possible that the default work context did, in fact, serve some sort of defensive purpose for the majority of the staff, it is beyond the scope of this paper to make a claim one way or the other. However, given that all staff had an opportunity to take up a role-redefining reform that would offer a fundamentally new – and potentially healthier – work environment, and given that only a small number of staff members chose to take on these new roles, there is much to learn about what factors enabled some officers to work in the unit and how those officers experienced their new roles and work environment.

**Breaking Free from Dominant Work Context**

Data revealed that there were three important factors that enabled individual officers to break free from the dominant work context: 1) the emotional labor they were already exerting in their roles was better aligned with the approach of the rehabilitative unit, 2) the rehabilitative unit provided an opportunity to work with officers who approached their work in a similarly counter-cultural way, and 3) many officers in the rehabilitative unit had experienced saliency-shifting events through “wake-up calls” that alerted them to the dangers of remaining in the dominant work environment. For the rehabilitative unit as a whole, enabling factors included physical separation from the dominant work context, group bonding activities during training sessions, and having a leader who embodied the ideal traits of both the “old” dominant approach and the “new” rehabilitative one.
Individual factors: Emotional labor, counter subculture, and saliency-shifting

**events.** The first factor that enabled individual officers to break free from the dominant work context is that the staff who chose to work in the rehabilitative unit were engaging in a different form of emotional labor than the traditional approach of emotional suppression and distancing. The two main leaders of the rehabilitative unit, Deputy Johnson and Sergeant Williams, had worked in the Training Academy for many years prior to implementing the rehabilitative unit. The Academy was situated in an old schoolhouse a few miles away from the prison, and therefore they were removed from the daily interactions with inmates which made the emotional distancing feel so necessary for the rest of the staff at the prison. The correctional officers, on the other hand, had been working inside the prison and were interfacing with inmates on a daily basis. Yet, the officers who chose to join the rehabilitative unit described themselves as the “kind of person” who liked – or at a minimum, did not mind – talking with inmates. Because they were not fully participating in the dominant form of emotional distancing and suppression, they were better equipped to shift towards a different type of work that required more emotional openness and more closely aligned with the type of work they were already doing.

Relatively, the second enabling factor is that the rehabilitative unit provided a home for disparate members of a counter subculture, where officers were liberated from the hyper-masculine form of emotional labor they were expected to exert in their former roles on the traditional side of the prison. The broader organizational culture shunned personal interactions between officers and inmates, believing that officers who built relationships with inmates would get too “cozy” and would be taken advantage of. Yet, for the officers in the rehabilitative unit who had been accused of being “con-lovers” in the traditional side of the prison, the new unit
offered a safe space for them work in a way that felt natural to them and to be surrounded by like-minded people. As one officer described it:

I just feel like I was fit for this unit because I don’t mind talking to these guys. In other units, I go on nights and most of the guys talk to me… but, I mean, I’ve gotten it before, like, “Oh, you’re a con-lover, you’re an inmate lover,” and this and that. I’m not an inmate lover. I’m not a con-lover. I’m just, I am a loving type of person. I’m a caring type of person.

Another rehabilitative unit officer recognized that the traditional approach was not working, and he wanted to help give inmates the tools they needed to avoid reoffending and returning to the prison. He stated, “I always want to help people. So, I always want to talk. Now, like the group of [officers] that are selected for [the rehabilitative unit] – they’re all the same people with the same mindset as me.”

The third enabling factor was that many members of the staff who joined the rehabilitative unit had experienced saliency-shifting events through “wake-up calls” about the dangers of remaining in the dominant work environment and the emotional culture it cultivated. Deputy Johnson had experienced a deeply traumatizing event in his personal life, as his teenage son had attempted suicide and was subsequently hospitalized for a week. During that entire event, he did not confide in a single colleague to share what was going on and seek emotional support. He later shared his story with a group of young officers at a training session for the rehabilitative unit, stating, “What did I do? I put on my uniform and went to work.” Putting on his uniform was a symbol for the role he felt he had to play as a strong, masculine leader. As he reflected on this event, he recognized that it was a life-altering event that awakened him to the reality that his attempts to display traditional notions of strength and courage – and the emotional suppression he associated with those traits – exacerbated his pain rather than mitigated it. This failure of the “fantasmic frames” about the value of maintaining a façade of emotionless strength
forced him to confront hard truths about his work and personal life. Ultimately, it led him to reevaluate his life priorities, where he derived value and meaning, and the version of himself he wanted to bring to work each day.

For their part, the officers who joined the rehabilitative unit had experienced a number of “wake-up calls” of their own. Some of them had attended the Academy with the young officer who committed suicide three years into the job and experienced that event as a warning to the severity of the detrimental work environment. The department had suffered a significant increase in staff suicides within the past several years (much higher than it had been in the twenty years prior), so younger officers confronted the chasm between their lived experiences in the organization and the “fantasmic frame” at a much earlier point in their careers than officers who had been there for 20-30 years. Additionally, most of the rehabilitative unit officers had been in their roles for fewer than five years and were right on the cusp of recognizing that they were becoming a version of themselves that they did not want to be. Thus, these traumatic events shifted their attention and increased the saliency of the detrimental work environment. They saw the rehabilitative unit as providing a different – and perhaps healthier – way of doing their work.

**Group factors: Boundaries, bonding activities, leader embodying old and new.**

The first group-level factor that helped the rehabilitative unit break free of the dominant work context is that it was implemented in a physically separate unit of the facility and was co-created among staff and inmates. The prison was divided up into six units, which housed approximately 120 inmates each. Despite serving only 12-20 inmates at a time, the rehabilitative unit was given one of the six full units. This meant that there was ample space to turn empty cells into other “rooms,” like a library, a meditation room, a music room, a barber shop, and a laundry room. In fact, when the rehabilitative unit was first implemented, the initial group of officers and
inmates partnered together to decide how to use the extra space and co-create the design and decoration of each room. This collaboration helped build the new culture of the unit, which was much more emotionally open and focused on treating inmates like “humans.” Beyond facilitating the development of a completely new culture, rehabilitative unit staff, particularly Deputy Johnson, were proud of having created a unit that felt totally different from the rest of the facility. He explained that this space was “much quieter, much better for their mental health.” When I observed a training session where new officers visited the rehabilitative unit for the first time, one officer explained that this unit felt so different from the other units that had to manage constant anxiety. In this way, the physical separation of the unit and the co-created design made the unit a safe space for staff to engage in fundamentally new work that would not have been acceptable in the dominant work environment.

A second enabling factor was that the rehabilitative unit facilitated deep bonding among staff members through intensive training sessions for the new unit. Several staff who attended the first training (before the unit opened) recalled one particular day in which everyone went around in a circle and shared something that they had overcome in their lives. One officer shared:

There was one particular Tuesday where we were just sitting in a circle, and everyone just had on their like – I forget what the original question even was, but what it turned out to be, what I recall, every single one of us took off our suit of armor, and people I work with side by side, I had no idea the stuff that went on in their life. And it was – everyone in that circle was crying by the end – big tough person, like the officers [laughs]… But you’re like, “Wow, oh my god.” And we still talk about that one particular Tuesday. We’ll refer back to like, “Wasn’t that just brutal?” Because it just tore everyone’s heart out… Like, that day, you saw… we are people, and not only that, but stuff – people working right next to you are carrying in there, you had no idea that they were carrying… it was just amazing.

Deputy Johnson recalled that day, saying, “There was a lot of emotion in that room, and it just changed how we treated each other.”
During my observations of the second training, I witnessed several similar moments where officers took off their armor, opened up, and shared emotions with the group. In one group conversation, an officer became visibly emotional, choking up and holding back tears as he reflected on his time working with the young officer who committed suicide three years in to the job. He stopped himself, saying that he needed to step outside because he was getting too emotional. He was the first person to show such heavy emotions and tear up in front of the group. Deputy Johnson tried to encourage the group to continue delving into their emotions, saying “I know we’re off-topic, but this is so healthy.” Another young officer interjected and asked with an air of frustration in his voice, “Is anyone going to step out with him? He’s emotional and I don’t want to leave him by himself.” He assertively jumped out of his seat and left the room to console his colleague. In this way, the officers in the rehabilitative unit cultivated something that went deeper than the camaraderie and brotherhood of the traditional fantasmic frame; they created a familial team dynamic in which people could be vulnerable, knowing that they would be accepted and cared for no matter what.

Finally, the third important enabling factor was that the leader of the rehabilitative unit, Deputy Johnson, embodied the most idealistic qualities of both the “old” and the “new” approaches. In this way, he modeled how officers could uphold traditionally masculine values while simultaneously redefining what those values looked like in practice. With respect to the “old” approach, he epitomized the most extreme ideals about strength, honor, courage, and duty because he was the commander of the S.W.A.T. team. He was a credible leader throughout the organization and was widely respected, even among those who were the strongest critics of his work in the rehabilitative unit. Additionally, because he had been the director of the Training Academy for seven years, he had played a significant part in socializing new officers into the
correctional officer role and the organization as a whole. Yet, as he drastically changed the way he brought himself to work each day, he redefined the ideals of who correctional officers should aspire to become. He repeatedly told his staff that showing emotion was a sign of real strength and courage. He prioritized quality of life above all else and implored his staff to have fulfilling lives outside of their work at the prison.

Because Deputy Johnson embodied two images that many deemed incompatible – that of the tough S.W.A.T. Commander and as someone who emphasized the merits of a “softer” approach, he became a symbolic leader for a new, younger generation of officers. This became even more evident during a group discussion at the December training session when a young officer, Officer Peterson, expressed, “Deputy, you have our backs, but I worry about what will happen – you won’t always be there.” He continued, explaining that there was so much gray area for decision-making in the rehabilitative unit, and he worried that whomever would fill his role after he left would not have their backs in the same way. He was concerned that he would lose his job for being “a caring person” because the next person may not value the same types of behaviors and would punish him for breaking the black-and-white rules that applied in the traditional side of the prison. Deputy Johnson responded, thanking the officer for the kind words, sharing that he planned to retire within the year, and offering some words of encouragement. A palpable anxiety filled the room. Deputy Johnson asked Officer Peterson if he felt better. When Officer Peterson reluctantly responded, “A little,” Deputy Johnson chided back, “I’ll give you a hug at the break.” Officer Peterson responded, refusing Deputy Johnson’s half-hearted attempt to pacify him, “But it’s a serious question.” The conversation quickly escalated into a panic about how to reconcile the drastically opposing approaches to their work as correctional officers. The dynamics of this group conversation brought to light their collective anxiety about how the
rehabilitative unit could go on in the absence of a leader who simultaneously embodied the extremes of both approaches.

For his part, Deputy Johnson also shared this concern. In a one-on-one interview, he voiced his concerns about who would take over once he left. He felt that Sergeant Williams would be a natural choice, and although he did not offer a clear reason why she would be insufficient, he was debating between promoting her or another male lieutenant who was part of the original group that opened the unit. He explained:

It’s one of those two people. Now, they’re different people. Sergeant Williams is more like me. You know, she’s passionate about what she does. Lieutenant Smith is a good operational correctional guy. I just don’t know if he’s let enough of that anger go to supervise this unit.

In essence, he felt conflicted about who would be the better choice to follow in his footsteps. It was as though he was choosing between the very two extremes that he embodied within himself, and neither one alone would be sufficient.

**Redefined Social and Emotional Aspects of New Work Context**

For the rehabilitative unit and the individual officers who staffed it, their experiences of their redefined roles and new work context ultimately provided much of what they wanted but failed to find in the traditional approach. The group now had a leader who embodied a balance of the “old” and “new,” and thus gave them a more positive role model to emulate in their careers. The group dynamics, culture, and norms, of the new unit provided a familial environment that transcended their deep desires for the traditional fantasies of the brotherhood and gave them hope that their hard work would make a difference in inmates’ lives. Individual officers were liberated from the high levels of emotional labor they were expected to exert in the traditional side and freed to bring their authentic selves to their work, which translated to improved lives outside of work.
**Group-level experiences: New fantasmic frames and meaningful work.** Following Voronov and Vince’s (2012) theoretical framework, when individuals become disinvested in the dominant approach, they may create a “rival fantasmic frame…which may divert emotional energy from the currently dominant fantasmic frame” (p. 67). In redefining the role of a correctional officer and the work activities involved in this new approach to corrections, the rehabilitative unit created a new fantasmic frame anchored in the openness and inclusiveness of rehabilitation as opposed to the restraint and exclusivity of the traditional punishment approach. Ultimately, the unit created its own redefined fantasmic frames about what an ideal correctional officer should be, how the group should interact and treat one another, and what they could accomplish through this new approach to corrections.

First, in his role as the leader of the rehabilitative unit, Deputy Johnson redefined the fantasmic frame around the role identity of a correctional officer. It is precisely because he embodied the most extreme ideals of the traditionally masculine images of strength, courage, honor, and duty that he was able to redefine the fantasmic notions of a correctional officer into one that also made space for one’s authentic emotions and experiences that would have been off-limits in the traditional approach. For the many young officers who respected him and looked up to him, he offered a new and healthier alternative to follow. This was illustrated when he opened up to the group of young officers at the second training session about his son’s suicide attempt. The room fell silent, and all eyes were on Deputy Johnson as he shared his painful experience. After he spoke, several officers thanked him for sharing and opened up about their own experiences with suicide of loved ones. One officer shared that he was tearing up during the story because he is also a father and could not imagine what it would feel like if his own child...
tried to commit suicide. In this way, Deputy Johnson helped redefine what it meant to be an ideal correctional officer and paved the way for younger officers to follow his lead.

Another aspect of the fantasmic frame of the rehabilitative unit is a redefined notion of the camaraderie that so many officers desired from the organization but failed to find in the traditional approach. Unlike the dominant work context, in which officers deliberately tried to hurt one another through gossip, making fun of each other, and stabbing one another in the back, staff in the rehabilitative unit genuinely respected one another and felt as though they could count on each other. One officer who typically only worked in the rehabilitative unit on Fridays shared:

I love coming in here on Fridays. Even, you know, I’ve had a lot of stressful days in here on Fridays… But the people that I work with in this unit, I love. I love working in this unit… we don’t, I don’t know if it’s just these officers on Friday, but I’ve worked with a few other ones in here, and I just feel like we are kind of more like a family in here than when you go in other units. People just sit there, I mean, there’s a lot of down time in this job where people just talk shit about other people that we work with. You know? I don’t feel like that happens here in this unit. And I really do enjoy being up here in this unit compared to other spots.

In this description, he touches on the core desire underpinning fantasmic frames of the brotherhood. What the prison staff truly desired above the stereotypical perceptions of “being a blue” was the feeling of belonging to a family. In fact, the officer who had been stalked by a coworker while he was out on disability leave described the dynamics on the traditional side of the facility by stating, “You don’t really feel like it’s a f- [pause] a close-knit organization until something bad happens.” In this statement he stopped himself before he could finish the word, “family,” suggesting that he deeply wished for a more familial work environment but did not want to put words to that desire.

Finally, another important aspect of the new fantasmic frame was the hope that the staff in the rehabilitative unit had that their hard work would truly make a difference in the inmates’
lives and that the inmates from that unit would not recidivate. Rather than accepting the dominant work context, in which staff merely come to work to punch their time cards, put in their eight hours, and go home, rehabilitative unit staff were dedicated to doing meaningful work that they truly believed would make a difference. Because the unit had such a small number of inmates and had been operating for less than a year, it was difficult to quantitatively measure their success based on recidivism rates. The staff, especially Deputy Johnson and Sergeant Williams, were optimistic about their work – so much so that some staff members viewed them as naïve and out of touch because they had not worked “on the inside” for several years.

This tension surfaced during the second training session, as the group had several conversations about one particular inmate who was a gang leader in a nearby city. This inmate had recently been released, and Deputy Johnson and Sergeant Williams were cautiously optimistic that he was on a better path and would not reoffend. A group of officers who maintained a dose of skepticism throughout the entire training (three of whom admitted that they only attended the training because it meant that they got to work a regular work day with nights and weekends off for two weeks) raised concerns about this inmate, pointing out some questionable activities that they had witnessed during the inmate’s recent visits with friends and family members. From their perspective, they had evidence to believe that this inmate had been continuing his gang activities during his sentence and that he would almost certainly return to that behavior as soon as he was released. After hearing their concerns, Sergeant Williams responded, “I don’t understand. If I knew I would have been asking so many questions.” She was unsatisfied with their overt assumptions about his behavior and wanted to believe that there could be another side of the story.
Similarly, another officer, who had recently been promoted to an operational manager, pushed back on the overly optimistic hopes of the rehabilitative unit. He was attending the training so that he would better understand the rehabilitative approach from a management perspective, but he had no intention of staffing the unit himself. During a group conversation about some of the programmatic aspects of the unit, he turned to Deputy Johnson and asked, “For those of you who are talking to [an inmate] and you know that person will probably fail, how do you deal with that? How do you stay positive? How do you deal when you know they’ll fail?” Over the course of his career, he had heard countless inmates insist that they were going to change, and then as soon as they were released from prison they would reoffend within a matter of months. As a result, he had grown cynical and did not understand how the rehabilitative unit leaders could be so optimistic. They had an open and honest conversation, in which Deputy Johnson and Sergeant Williams admitted that sometimes it is difficult, but that they do have hard conversations with inmates when they suspect that they may return to their old ways after their release. The social worker for the unit stressed, “It’s not our job to fix them. They have years of trauma. But we can plant seeds.”

While they recognized that they could not “fix” everyone who came through the unit, they did believe that they could offer tools that would at least give the inmates a chance at success. At a minimum, they could do better than the rest of the prison where inmates simply learned how to “become better criminals.” For the rehabilitative unit leaders and staff, the new work context offered hope that their work had meaning and would make a difference, despite their recognition that this remained an incredibly difficult task. This newfound purpose and hope stood in stark contrast to the futility of the dominant work environment.
Individual-level experiences: Alignment of emotional labor, authenticity, improved quality of life.

For the officers who worked in the rehabilitative unit, their experiences led to positive outcomes including a form of emotional labor that better aligned with their authentic selves, the intrinsic value of bringing their authentic selves to their work, and an improved quality of life outside of work.

While many officers described the work in the rehabilitative unit as “emotionally draining,” it was a different type of draining than what they experienced on the traditional side of the prison. The traditional approach was easier in some ways because the officers could do the bare minimum work, put in their hours, and go home at the end of their shift. However, it was also draining because it created unbearable boredom and a cascade of negative consequences like incessant rumors and gossip, which added yet another layer of emotional labor to cope with those secondary challenges. The rehabilitative unit, on the other hand, was draining because it required more in-depth emotional engagement with inmates, who often frustrated, angered, and disappointed the officers who were working so hard to help them turn their lives around.

What is important to note is that for the officers who worked in the rehabilitative unit, the open and relational form of emotional labor was better aligned to their authentic selves than the closed and distanced version that was required in the traditional units.

In addition to liberating officers from the constraints of the emotionally suppressed culture, it provided opportunities for them to bring their full, authentic selves to work. For some officers, this enabled them to bring their own unique talents and interests to their work. When the team was first building the rehabilitative unit, they decided to add artwork to some of the walls. One of the inmates was a talented graffiti artist, so Deputy Johnson had an idea to find an artistic
officer to work with the inmate to paint murals on the walls. He found a young officer, Officer McKee, who was also a talented painter and artist. Officer McKee was not interested in staffing the rehabilitative unit, but he agreed to help out with the painting. After that experience, he became intensely interested in the unit and was an enthusiastic participant during the second training session. He appreciated that he finally had an opportunity to bring some of his own passion and talent into the work, especially if it could help some of the inmates turn their lives around. This experience stood in stark contrast to the way officers experienced their work in the traditional units, as the norm of maintaining distance from inmates prevented them from bringing their authentic selves into their interactions with inmates.

Finally, working in the rehabilitative unit created a different environment and emotional habitus, which resulted in drastic improvements in their home lives. For example, during the intensive training session in December, one young officer told the group that he had gone to dinner with his wife the previous night and that he “wouldn’t shut up about work – there was so much positive stuff to share.” He continued, “We work 40 hours a week with nothing, but so much now from this week.” What he meant was that for the first time in his career, he actually wanted to share positive stories about work with his wife. Many other officers echoed this sentiment in informal conversations during my visits. In fact, several officers urged me to expand my study to include the spouses of officers because that would give me the best sense of the impact the rehabilitative unit had on officers’ quality of life. In this way, their new roles and the work environment in the rehabilitative unit mitigated many of the most detrimental aspects of the dominant work context, lowered the emotional labor required from their roles, and offered a new and healthier fantasmic frame to strive towards.
Discussion and Conclusion

Findings from this study have important implications for role-redefining reforms across sectors and industries. In the public sector, reforms like community policing are shifting frontline officers’ roles from that of a “warrior,” who is trained to follow strict orders through a chain of command, to one of a “guardian,” whose role is to use sound judgment in exercising discretion, build trust, and protect citizens (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015). In moving to a “softer” approach to policing (Ariel, Weinborn, & Sherman, 2016), this reform requires role-based culture shifts similar to those discussed in this paper. Additionally, broader shifts throughout the public sector are placing increased pressure on front-line workers to improve customer experience (D’Emidio & Malfara, 2018). In their report, D’Emidio and Malfara acknowledge that “improving customer experience is a complex task, since it requires employees to change mind-sets and behaviors, and requires organizations to rewire operations with the customer in mind, rather than adhering to traditional functional silos” (p. 2). In both of these examples, the redefined roles of front-line workers require fundamentally different tasks and types of emotional labor, which have the potential to conflict with workers’ deeply entrenched beliefs about their roles.

Similar challenges are underway in the private sector, as the decline of industries like coal mining, manufacturing, and trucking are requiring front-line workers to explore entirely different career paths. While declining industries do not involve the same types of top-down role-redefining reforms from within the organization, they are part of a broader national conversation about how to retrain workers from declining industries into growing fields like computer technology and health care (Selingo, 2018). Some of the fastest-growing occupations are in healthcare – an industry typically seen as “women’s work” (Dawson, 2017). Working-
class men have resisted these so-called “pink-collar” jobs because they conflict with their deeply-held views about masculinity and what it means to be strong and tough (Dawson, 2017). What is noteworthy is that these shifts also expect workers who were not previously in service-providing roles to ones that require direct interaction with clients and a new, unfamiliar, version of emotional labor. Additionally, Katz (2017) points out that shifts towards traditionally feminine occupations and jobs requiring softer skills can create “identity mismatch,” particularly for non-college men.

This study examined a subset of prison workers who took on redefined roles that required them to shift from emotionally-closed to emotionally-open interactions with inmates and one another, and to carry out their work in ways that challenged traditional notions of masculinity. As such, findings from this study have many important implications for the significant changes taking place throughout the public and private sectors. As the above examples demonstrate, many of these occupational shifts require workers to take on roles that align with stereotypically feminine tasks, including “soft” skills and caring professions. The social and emotional dynamics that emerged in the context of this study point to a number of factors that can shape how workers respond to such occupational shifts and redefined roles.

Correctional officers throughout the prison – including those who opposed the rehabilitative unit as well as those who embraced it – had experienced a chasm between their lived realities and the fantasmic frames of their role identities. Yet, only a small group of correctional officers were able to break free from the dominant work context and take on new roles aligned with rehabilitative justice. This raises important questions about the fantasmic frames that exist in other sectors and industries and the delta between what workers have experienced in their roles and what they desire from their role identities. In this research setting,
officers’ recognition of the gap between reality and fantasy was not sufficient for motivating them to abandon their traditional roles and take on new ones.

There were three important factors at the individual level that enabled workers to break free from the dominant work context and take up their redefined roles. Officers who viewed themselves as caring and relationship-driven felt that the emotional labor required in the rehabilitative unit was better aligned with their natural dispositions than the emotional distancing required in the traditional approach. The rehabilitative unit also provided a safe space for these officers to work together in a community of like-minded people. They were protected from colleagues on the traditional side who derided them for being “con-lovers.” Finally, young officers experienced saliency-shifting events through “wake-up calls” about the dangers of the emotionally suppressed culture in the traditional units.

At the group level, enabling factors included clear boundaries between the traditional and rehabilitative units, group bonding experiences during trainings, and a leader who embodied the most idealistic traits of the old and the new approaches. Physical and relational boundaries separated the traditional and rehabilitative units, as the rehabilitative unit was located in a remote part of the prison and had a selective process for hiring new officers into the unit. This allowed the group to collaboratively and intentionally design the space and culture of the unit. Group bonding experiences during training sessions provided opportunities for officers to be vulnerable and emotionally open with one another, which enabled a different type of work to unfold in the rehabilitative unit and reinforced the boundaries between the traditional units and the rehabilitative unit. Finally, the leader of the rehabilitative unit played a critical role in modeling how the traditional values of strength, courage, honor, and duty could co-exist within the old and new approaches.
In other contexts that require role-based cultural changes – particularly those shifting from traditionally masculine roles to stereotypically feminine ones – it is important to consider how these individual and group-level factors might affect how workers respond to such changes. The leadership component is a particularly powerful factor, as the right leader can demonstrate how two seemingly conflicting role identities (e.g., masculine/hard vs. feminine/soft) can coincide. In the context of this study, Deputy Johnson embodied the most extreme traits of the ideal images of the traditional correctional officer role alongside the new one. Identifying the right leader can also draw out like-minded workers who are willing and able to embrace new roles. Having shared spaces to work together, bond with one another, and redefine their own roles also helps solidify the strength and viability of the new roles.

In this study, the group of officers and staff from the rehabilitative unit began to take on new roles and responsibilities, and ultimately redefined the ideal image of a correctional officer. For those in the rehabilitative unit, the ideal correctional officer was no longer someone with a tough exterior who emotionally distanced himself from inmates; instead, he exhibited authenticity and courage through emotional openness with inmates and with one another. By becoming emotionally open with one another, they were able to realize their deep desires for familial relations in “the brotherhood.” This redefined brotherhood was built on emotional openness, vulnerability, and trust. In this way, the rehabilitative unit offered a “rival fantasitic frame” (Voronov & Vince, 2012), in which officers strove to make a difference in inmates’ lives and were willing to risk failure and rejection to achieve that goal. As workers throughout other industries continue to face similar types of role-redefining reforms, it is possible that they will create rival fantasitic frames that fundamentally change what the ideal roles might look like and how such redefined role identities can create deeper value and meaning for workers.
While some scholars and practitioners have begun to take these social and emotional factors into consideration (D’Emidio & Malfara, 2018; Katz, 2017), they have largely been neglected in broader conversations about how to reform front-line workers’ roles. If these factors continue to play a minimal role in conversations about reforming government services and redirecting workers from declining industries, we risk misdiagnosing some of the most significant challenges in our workforce.

These social and emotional dynamics are complex and should be explored in greater depth and across many additional settings. One factor that may be unique to the prison setting is that many correctional officers grew up in the same communities as the inmates and knew friends or family members who had served prison time. For many officers, their daily interactions with inmates served as a constant reminder of what their lives could have been. Thus, the ways in which officers treated inmates may be related to how they view themselves (e.g., for some officer this dynamic could lead them to feel compassion towards inmates, but for some others it could lead them to feel disdain). While some interview data touched on these topics, they were not explored in-depth in this study. Future research should explore how front-line workers’ deeply personal responses to their interactions with clients might shape how they carry out their roles and the impact that has on how willing and able they are to carry out their work in fundamentally different ways.

Finally, the role of leadership deserves much more attention in future studies. In this study, Deputy Johnson emerged as a powerful figure at the middle-manager level. He was the leader of the rehabilitative unit, but he still reported to senior staff members. There is much to learn about how the relationships between senior leaders and middle managers affects how managers take on and successfully lead significant role-redefining reforms.
Organizations across sectors and industries face a multitude of paradoxical pressures as they seek to achieve competing – and sometimes conflicting demands. Common examples include pressures to maximize profit while striving towards greater social responsibility (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012) and balancing the need to innovate through “exploration” while maintaining efficiency through “exploitation” (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Benner & Tushman, 2003, 2015; March, 1991). Organizational paradoxes involve “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386) and create tension as actors navigate such oppositional tendencies (Lewis, 2000). Additionally, paradoxes can trigger ambivalence, manifesting in complex cognitive and emotional dynamics across levels of analysis from the individual to the collective (Ashforth, Rogers, Pratt, & Pradies, 2014).

One of the most common ways organizations manage such paradoxes is to adopt an ambidextrous structure where separate subunits focus on different priorities or opposing poles of the paradox (Benner & Tushman, 2003, 2015; March, 1991). The vast majority of scholarly work has examined ambidexterity as a strategic response to managing competing demands, often viewing it as a successful mechanism for resolving tension (Ashforth et al., 2014; Benner & Tushman, 2015). This paper contributes a multi-level perspective on the emotional aspects of organizational ambidexterity. In this study, I examine the emotional experiences and cultures within subunits focused on opposing paradoxical poles, how senior leaders’ own emotional experiences shape how they manage across subunits, and how these emotional dynamics affect the organization’s ability to achieve both sets of competing demands.
Given that ambivalence has roots in psychodynamic theory (Ashforth et al., 2014, citing Freud, 1961; Horney, 1945; Sincoff, 1990), I use a systems psychodynamic lens to uncover the complex emotional dynamics within an ambidextrous organization. This theory integrates traditional psychodynamics with open systems theory (Agazarian, 1989; Bion, 1955; Jacques, 1955; Menzies, 1960) to examine the interrelationships between the emotional needs of individuals and groups and the structures, processes, and cultures they are part of (G. Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Thus, it is well-suited for analyzing emotional dynamics across levels of analysis. It has also recently regained prominence among scholars seeking to examine deeper emotional dynamics and unconscious processes within organizations (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2019; G. Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019; G. Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, 2015).

This study is set in the context of a prison that recently adopted an ambidextrous structure to implement a new unit dedicated to rehabilitative practices. This paper draws from observational data of training sessions for the new rehabilitative unit, along with individual interviews with correctional officers and operational managers in the “traditional” side of the facility and the “rehabilitative” side, as well as senior leaders from the prison. Data revealed that the paradox of punishment versus rehabilitation at the organizational level mirrored ambivalence at the individual level about staff members’ need to simultaneously defend against and confront past trauma and pain. The rehabilitative-focused unit allowed for emotional openness and trust, which enabled those staff members to surface and collectively work through deeper pain and trauma. At the level of the senior leadership team, rather than feeling pulled in two directions between the punishment-focused work and the rehabilitative-focused work, senior leaders favored the rehabilitative unit. This was evident in their implementation approach, allocation of
resources, attention and praise of the unit, and view that the rehabilitative approach aligned with their larger organizational goals. Ultimately, the ambidextrous structure formalized these dynamics so that staff only experienced the side of the paradox in which they lived and worked; those in the rehabilitative unit were able to begin a process of collective healing, while those in the traditional units had no mechanism to enable such a release.

**A Review of Organizational Paradox**

The inherent tensions organizations face as they seek to achieve competing demands, priorities, purposes, and identities have been studied through many lenses in organizational scholarship. Researchers have used the term “hybrid organization” most often with respect to questions of organizational identity and how organizations can integrate multiple institutional logics (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Glynn, 2000; Jay, 2013). From the perspective of managing such organizational tensions, scholars have explored how organizations can take on different structures to manage tensions, most often under the umbrella of “ambidextrous” organizations (Benner & Tushman, 2003, 2015; March, 1991; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). These bodies of literature fall under the meta-theory of paradox, which scholars of hybrid organizations, organizational ambidexterity, and institutional logics have leveraged “to move organizational research beyond ‘either/or’ debates toward ‘both/and’ expectations” (Lewis & Smith, 2014, p. 128). Though not all organizational tensions are paradoxes, I use the term “paradox” throughout this paper to integrate across literatures and address questions pertaining to the nature and dynamics of duality tensions as they are managed throughout an organization.  

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5 For a review of organizational paradox, see Schad, Lewis, Raisch, and Smith (2016)
Emotional Dynamics in Organizational Paradox

The emotional dynamics of organizational paradox have received some attention in scholarly work, especially as they pertain to paradoxes of control versus coordination and structure versus relationships (Ashcraft, 2001; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Gittell, 2000; Graetz & Smith, 2008; Gittell & Douglass, 2012; Lopez, 2006; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011). For example, Lopez (2006) and Dutton et al. (2006) demonstrate that organizational structures can enable more caring, compassionate work. Going further, Gittell and Douglass (2012) argue that creating reciprocal relationships between customers, workers, and managers can enable organizations to achieve a balance between the scalability and replicability of pure bureaucratic organizations and the caring, timely, and knowledgeable responses of pure relational organizations, and that structures can be designed to support this balance by embedding reciprocal relationships into roles.

As prior work has shown, we should expect emotions to play an important role in shaping how actors respond to paradox. The tension between competing demands can create cognitive dissonance, emotional anxiety, and ambivalence as actors work to resolve their seemingly contradictory thoughts and feelings (Ashforth et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, examining organizational paradox from an emotional perspective raises important questions about which “actors” actually experience tensions and how they navigate those experiences. In fact, in their multi-level model of ambivalence in organizations, Ashforth et al. (2014) do not distinguish between responses to ambivalence at the individual and organizational level. They do, however, note several connections across levels, arguing that experiences of ambivalence are likely correlated at different levels of analysis and that the underlying causes of ambivalence at one level can be resolved by activities at another. Yet, there is much to learn about how these
types of emotional dynamics play out within and across levels of analysis and the relationship between such emotional dynamics and the organization’s response to paradox.

Among individuals and groups, Smith & Berg (1987) demonstrate how the defensive processes of splitting, projection, and projective identification can reduce feelings of anxiety that often result from ambivalence. Because ambivalence involves simultaneously positive and negative thoughts and/or feelings towards an object (Sincoff, 1990), splitting allows the individual or group to divide each side of the ambivalence into two halves – one that is desired, and the other which is undesired. In turn, the individual or group holds onto the desirable part and projects the undesired part onto another individual or group. Projective identification then takes place when the individual or group “engaging in the projection now feels a strong identification with the other, because the other embodies an aspect of the self on the [individual’s or group’s] behalf” (Smith and Berg, 1987, p. 68-69). This trio of responses – splitting, projection, and projective identification – effectively reduces the anxiety provoked by ambivalence by maintaining both positive and negative feelings but without requiring them to coexist within one individual or group.

At the organizational level, extant literature on ambivalence has highlighted that hybrid identities, contradictory goals, and role conflicts arise from oppositional forces in which “a demand for A is juxtaposed with a demand for ‘not-A’” (Ashforth et al., 2014, p. 1456). Ashforth and Reingen’s (2014) field study of a natural food co-op serves as an illustrative example of a hybrid organization striving towards two competing goals of “idealism” (through commitment to social justice) and “pragmatism” (through commitment to high quality at low cost). Within the co-op, informal subgroups emerged as members coalesced around one of the two competing goals. As a result, ambivalence about the organization’s dual goals surfaced
through conflict at the individual and collective levels, as the anxiety was managed through the splitting, projection, and projective identification that emerged between the subgroups of idealists and pragmatists. While these defensive dynamics seemed irrational at the intergroup level because they perpetuated intergroup conflict, they created an organizational dynamic that allowed both sides of the mission to co-exist and sustain itself.

What is noteworthy about Ashforth and Reingen’s (2014) study is that it examined a hybrid organization striving towards two conflicting missions in which the conflict lived within individuals and groups throughout the co-op. The defensive dynamics that took place among informal subgroups emerged organically based on the organizational values that more closely aligned with members’ own individual values. This arrangement contrasts with one of the most common responses to organizational paradox: organizational ambidexterity, in which formal organizational structures and processes separate the organization’s conflicting demands (Ashforth et al., 2014; Benner & Tushman, 2003, 2015; March, 1991). Given that ambidexterity is such a common strategy for managing paradoxical tensions – and that it is often lauded as a successful approach to resolving tensions (Ashforth et al., 2014) – it raises questions about the relationship between tensions at the individual and organizational level when each side of an organizational paradox resides within formalized, distinct subunits in an ambidextrous arrangement.

In the next section I provide a brief overview of organizational ambidexterity, highlighting ways to build upon our understanding of how emotional dynamics shape what happens within and across subunits, how senior leaders’ own emotional experience of ambivalence affects their ability to integrate across subunits, and how such emotional dynamics affect how the organization achieves its competing demands.
Managing Organizational Paradox through Ambidexterity

One of the most common approaches to managing paradoxes involves separating each element of the paradox spatially into different structural units or segmenting them temporally by addressing each element at a different period of time (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). This allows both elements of the paradox to remain intact while relieving some of the tension caused by competing demands (Ashforth et al., 2014; Benner & Tushman, 2003). This type of separation is most often accomplished by adopting an ambidextrous structure, in which one unit of the organization focuses on the primary goal while a smaller unit focuses on the secondary goal (Benner & Tushman, 2003, 2015; March, 1991).

To the extent that paradoxical tensions and ambivalence exist across levels of an organization, scholars have called for further attention to “the level at which ambidexterity is held (i.e., where the tension between exploration and exploitation is felt) and the level at which it is resolved (e.g., where structural separation occurs)” (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008, p. 396-397). This is particularly relevant from an emotional perspective; if tensions can be resolved at one level, but held at another level, then what are the implications of an ambidextrous approach? Additionally, given that subunits of an ambidextrous organization are physically separated, focus on different work activities, and have distinct cultures (Benner & Tushman, 2003, citing Bradach, 1997; Nonoka, 1988, 1991; Sutcliffe, Sitkin, & Browning, 2000), there is also much to learn about how the emotional dynamics within subunits relate to the experience of paradoxical tensions and ambivalence across levels from the individual to the organization.

Finally, an emotional lens also opens avenues to build upon prior work about how senior teams manage organizational paradoxes and integrate across subunits of ambidextrous organizations. Because senior teams are integrated within both sets of contrasting units, and
because they have the authority to make decisions involving resource allocation, they are best positioned to integrate the separate units and capitalize on the strategic advantages of each (Smith & Tushman, 2005; citing Barnard, 1968; Hambrick, 1994; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994; Thompson, 1967; Weick, 1979). Research has shown that leaders must be able to engage in paradoxical cognition (Smith & Tushman, 2005) and that emotional equanimity plays an important role in mitigating the negative effects of anxiety in organizational paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Additionally, leaders sometimes experience emotional ambivalence and anxiety as they are pulled in different directions (Smets, Moss-Cowan, Athanasopoulou, & Moos, 2019).

Building upon this work, there is still much to learn about how leaders experience and manage their own emotions with respect to paradoxical tensions and what factors influence how leaders interact with and manage subunits within an ambidextrous organization.

**Systems Psychodynamic Theory**

To examine the emotional dynamics of interest in this study, I draw on systems psychodynamic theory, which integrates traditional psychodynamics with open systems theory (Smith & Berg, 1987). Systems psychodynamics examines “the way in which the emotional needs of individuals and groups shape structures, processes, and cultures in a social system and how these structures, processes, and cultures, in turn, shape the emotional experiences of the same individuals” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 46). This theoretical lens aims to uncover the conscious and unconscious relational, emotional, and political dynamics within organizations and systems (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, citing French & Vince, 1999). Classic and recent studies have used this lens to explore why seemingly irrational and dysfunctional behaviors persist in groups and organizations and to understand unconscious processes like the defenses of splitting, projection, and projective identification previously discussed (Ashforth & Reingen,
I extend this body of work by examining how unconscious processes manifest and play out within an ambidextrous organization.

One aspect of systems psychodynamic theory is that groups are made up of subgroups, which together make up a unified whole (Agazarian, 1989; Bion, 1961). Within this framework, “the behavior of a particular group is a function of the history of that particular group-as-a-whole and manifested in subgroup roles” (Agazarian, 1989, p. 152). Furthermore, individuals or subgroups can take on particular roles and carry particular emotions or positions on behalf of the collective (Smith & Berg, 1987).

Systems psychodynamics is also valuable for examining questions related to boundaries, authority, and anxiety (Neumann & Hirschhorn, 1999). Each of these factors is of interest in this study, as boundaries arise within the formal structures of ambidextrous organizations, the role of senior leaders’ management across subunits pertains to questions of authority, and the emotional experience of ambivalence is often anxiety-provoking. Holding environments are a useful construct for exploring these factors. The concept of a holding environment originated in reference to the relationship between a mother and her child, in which the parent provided a safe environment to contain and withstand her child’s anxiety and regression (Kahn, 2001; G. Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Winnicott, 1975). In a similar way to the parent’s holding of their child, Winnicott (1975) argued that the psychoanalyst can serve a similar function for the patient to work through past trauma and developmental blocks. Expanding beyond the psychoanalyst–patient relationship, organizational scholars have underscored that similar types of holding environments can be established in the workplace (Heifetz, 1994; Kahn, 2001; Kegan, 1982; G. Petriglieri et al., 2019; G. Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). In this way, holding environments
establish and sustain boundaries to “contain” anxiety, and they often are facilitated by a person of authority (e.g., mother–child, psychoanalyst–patient, organizational leader–member).

In summary, systems psychodynamic theory provides a lens to examine under-explored emotional facets of organizational paradoxes. First, it can allow for a deeper analysis of the conscious and unconscious aspects of paradox management, particularly with respect to emotional dynamics around ambivalence. Second, its emphasis on the nature and role of boundaries provides a new way to understand what happens within and across subunits in organizations that manage paradoxes through ambidexterity. Third, it allows us to draw insights about the unconscious dynamics at the organizational level of analysis by taking a group-as-a-whole perspective, as individual subunits take up roles on behalf of the unified whole.

Taken together, these links established the following research questions for this study:

1. How do the emotional dynamics within subunits relate to the primary work tasks required in opposing poles of an organizational paradox?
2. How do senior leaders’ emotional experiences shape how they manage across subunits?
3. How do these emotional dynamics within an ambidextrous organization affect the organization’s ability to achieve both sets of competing demands?

**Methods**

**Research Setting and Context**

This study took place at a prison that had recently adopted an ambidextrous approach to managing the paradox of punishment versus rehabilitation (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Ashforth et al., 2014). The prison had created a separate unit dedicated to rehabilitative justice, which seeks to replace punitive approaches with “community-based reparative justice and moralizing social control” that will enable greater justice, healing, and genuine accountability for offenders.
and their reintegration into law-abiding society” (Johnstone & Ness, 2013, p. 5). This new unit required a fundamentally different approach to working with inmates. Whereas traditionally prison staff emphasized order, control and emotional distancing from inmates, within this new unit they were expected to build relationships with inmates and prepare them for a successful life upon their release by helping them engage in self-reflection, developing relationship and communication skills, and applying for jobs.

In this research context, the subunits of interest included the traditional units (TUs) and the new rehabilitative unit (RU). Within the ambidextrous framework, the TUs functioned like the “exploitative” side in that they were large, centralized, and tightly coordinated (Benner & Tushman, 2003). The RU functioned like the “exploratory” side because it was small, decentralized, and given freedom to experiment (Benner & Tushman, 2003). However, this setting contrasted with traditional studies of ambidextrous organizations because the structural design was intended to manage the paradox of punishment versus rehabilitation rather than innovation versus efficiency.

With respect to size, this prison served approximately 1,000 inmates at any given time, though the number fluctuated regularly because it housed pre-trial inmates who were awaiting sentencing. At least half of the inmates were awaiting sentencing, while the remainder were serving sentences of two and a half years or less (though some were serving multiple sentences back-to-back, spending as many as seven years in the facility). The facility was organized into six different units, which housed approximately 120 inmates in cells, along with two dormitory-style units housing 60 inmates each.

They had a staff of approximately 750, which included operational staff, support staff, and administrative staff. The operational staff were divided into two main ranking tiers, which
were colloquially referred to as the “blue shirts” and the “white shirts.” The “blue shirts” included ranks of officer, sergeant, and lieutenant (in ascending order). “White shirts” included captains and deputies. Though sergeants and lieutenants were responsible for some operational management, they, along with the line officers, were represented by a different union than the captains and deputies. Thus, in this study, I considered front-line officers, sergeants, and lieutenants as “correctional officers, or “officers” and captains and deputies as “operational managers” or “managers.” On each shift, there was one shift commander, who was typically a two-star deputy. Additionally, there were usually two or three other “white shirts,” plus two or three lieutenants, four or five sergeants, and the rest were front-line officers.

The schedule was divided into three eight-hour shifts. All operational staff worked five consecutive days, with a two-day “weekend.” Shifts and weekend days were assigned by rank and tenure, so the newest officers often worked on the 3 pm to 11 pm shift or the 11 pm to 7 am shift and had Tuesdays and Wednesdays as their weekend. Many officers reported that it took at least ten years on the job to earn a “piece of the weekend” (i.e., Friday, Saturday, or Sunday off).

Staff were mostly white males, with a handful of females and non-white males and females. Over half of the operational staff I interviewed had a two- or four-year degree, though postsecondary degrees were not required to obtain employment as a correctional officer and were only sometimes a relevant factor when being considered for promotions.

**Organizational History.** During preliminary interviews with key informants, it became clear that the organization’s unique history was an integral part of the ongoing dynamics within the prison. Over the past three decades, there had been three main sheriffs, along with a handful of short-term and acting sheriffs in between each of the three. The first sheriff was removed from

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6 To protect confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms and all dates are approximated. I intentionally omit details from some aspects of the historical context and only include information relevant for the study.
office and sentenced to prison for tax evasion and illegally offering staff promotions in exchange for contributions to his campaign. The next long-term sheriff, Sheriff Walker, committed suicide near the end of his last term. He had decided not to run for re-election, and he was under investigation for illegally exchanging promotions for campaign contributions. The third long-term sheriff, Sheriff Martin, had been in office for nearly a decade and remained in his role throughout the duration of this study.

In addition to the trauma the organization faced with corruption among its leaders and Sheriff Walker’s suicide, it had also suffered many staff suicides. The corrections industry has notoriously high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, divorce, and suicide (Denhof, Spinaris, & Morton, 2014), a trend which was underscored by the fact that eight participants raised the issue during one-on-one interviews. In some cases, participants described them as field-level statistics (e.g., mentioning studies that have shown these trends). Yet, in other cases, participants described them in ways that felt personal, as if one or more of those negative outcomes was imminently upon them. For example, one officer explained, “There's a high alcohol rate, there's a high divorce rate, and we don't live very long either. It's the saddest thing, people will retire here and die like a year later all the time. That's why I, that's another reason why I kind of want to get out.” As an outsider stepping into the organization, my own experience was that the historical context and well-established, seemingly inevitable, negative outcomes for correctional officers loomed in the air, almost like an invisible, yet tangible, smog.

**Background of the Rehabilitative Unit.** To examine the dynamics that emerged in the prison with respect to the ambidextrous structure for the rehabilitative justice unit, it is necessary to understand how the idea emerged and how the unit was designed and implemented. The idea for the unit originated when Sheriff Martin met someone from the Rehabilitative Institute, a
nonprofit organization that helped prisons develop and implement rehabilitative justice programs, at a professional conference on prison reform. He became interested in implementing a dedicated rehabilitative justice unit at their facility. From idea to implementation, the program unfolded over a period of approximately six months. In the earliest stages, the program development began with the senior leaders of the organization, including the Deputy Sheriff and the director of education (who had left the organization prior to the study). They decided that in order for the program to have a chance of being successful, they would need to have staff on-site who could train officers to work in the new RU. Since the roles and responsibilities represented a complete departure from the traditional correctional officer, the new unit required specialized training. At that point, two members of the Training Academy staff became involved in the planning and development of the RU. The RU was housed in one of the six physically separate units, which had been under-utilized and was cleared out in order to make space for the RU.

In addition to the structural separation, the unit also relied on selection for recruiting officers to work in the RU. When the job posting for the new unit was released, there were so few applicants that almost everyone who applied was accepted. Officers who had used too may sick days or who had other disciplinary issues on their record were rejected from the initial training. The first group of 36 officers attended a three-week training in January, partially led by staff from the Rehabilitative Institute. Less than two weeks after the training was complete, the new unit opened.

Over time, the boundaries between the traditional units (TUs) and the RU became slightly more permeable. Because of occasional staffing shortages in the RU, there emerged a small group of TU officers who filled in for RU officers when necessary. These officers worked in the unit without having attended the formal training required for the first group of RU officers. In
June, the unit held an abbreviated two-day training session for those officers and any others who wanted to learn more about the unit. There were 20 officers who attended this two-day training. Then, in December, the unit held an in-depth two-week training session, partially led with staff from the Rehabilitative Institute. Of the 20 officers who attended the abbreviated training in June, 17 attended the December training.

Data Collection

I collected data from one-on-one interviews and observations of routine work activities, staff meetings, and training sessions over a period of six months. I spent nearly 100 hours in the field, with site visits including both interviews and observations. For the interviews, I used theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 2007) to identify individual staff members across ranks, shifts, and perspectives on the work at the prison. At the beginning of the study, the Deputy Sheriff recommended six officers and operational managers whom he thought would be willing to speak with me. I reached out to them via email, and three of the six individuals responded to my interview requests. One of the initial interview participants agreed to let me shadow him for a full day in June. During this time, I met several other staff members with whom I became familiar throughout the duration of the study, as we interacted over my repeated visits to the facility. I also shadowed a shift commander for part of that day and observed many informal interactions among officers and operational managers.

On the day that I shadowed the lieutenant and shift commander, I met the deputy who ran the RU, Deputy Johnson. I told him that I was conducting a study of recent changes that were taking place at the prison, how staff interacted across hierarchical levels, and the relationships between officers, managers, and senior leaders. He enthusiastically welcomed me to come visit the unit and offered to participate in an interview. Ten days later, I returned to the facility to
interview him and receive a tour of the rehabilitative unit. He was interested in the study and extended an open invitation for me to observe at any point.

My initial interviews and shadowing observations helped my search to identify key staff members who would help paint a comprehensive picture of the organization and staff members’ experiences within it. In addition to seeking a representative sample across characteristics like race and gender, it became apparent that I also needed to sample staff who had been working in the prison for different lengths of time. Due to the historical context previously discussed, staff members who had lived through those experiences had different perspectives than those who had only worked under the current sheriff. I also learned that there was a small group of staff members who “played the game” by participating in organization-sponsored events to develop positive rapport with the sheriff and put themselves in a strong position for promotions. In my sampling, I searched for staff members who were both skeptical of “the game” and those who played it, as well as those who were willing to participate despite being ridiculed as a “kiss-ass.”

**Interviews.** I ultimately was able to conduct twenty-five semi-structured interviews, which asked background questions about how the participant came to this career, what their experience had been like (e.g., what it takes to be a good correctional officer, what is most rewarding and challenging), how they perceived those in other ranks (e.g., how did “blue shirts” perceive “white shirts”), and what they thought of the RU.

Of the twenty-five interview participants, twenty were male and five were female. Twenty-two were white, and three were black or Latinx (which was relatively representative of the staff). Of the operational staff, I interviewed 13 correctional officers (ranging from front-line officers to lieutenants) and seven operational managers. Among the operational staff, six worked exclusively in the TUs, five worked almost exclusively in the RU, and two worked in the RU
only one or two shifts per week. I also interviewed five members of the senior leadership, including the Deputy Sheriff, three executive officers, and the superintendent of the prison. I audio recorded each interview and transcribed them verbatim. Interview transcripts totaled over 530 single-spaced pages.

**Observations.** In addition to interviews, I collected data from observations of routine work activities (approximately 10 hours), staff meetings (3 hours), and trainings (43 hours). The majority of observational data (50 of the 56 hours) were conducted with the RU. I took detailed notes during each observation and wrote in-depth field notes within two days of the observation (on average). Field notes totaled over 145 single-spaced pages.

The observational data from the TUs came from the day that I shadowed a lieutenant and a shift commander at the beginning of the study. During this visit, I observed roll call for the day shift and shadowed the lieutenant as he made rounds to each unit. I observed informal conversations in the shift commander’s office, which involved between three to five managers and one to two officers. During the informal conversations, I acted as a participant observer, which involved responding to questions about the study. I explained that I was interested in learning more about how staff interacted across hierarchical levels and the relationship between officers, managers, and senior leaders. They began speaking freely about their opinions of management and any other issues that were on their minds, like feeling micromanaged and acting as a “glorified paper-pusher.” I then shadowed a shift commander to the dorms, each housing 60 inmates in one room with 30 bunk beds. I met the officers working in the dorms, as well as a case worker who processed inmates who had recently been detained. The shift commander and I then returned back to the shift commander’s office, where I observed
additional informal conversations. Additionally, I observed roll-call for the afternoon shift and engaged in informal conversations with officers and managers from that shift.

I observed the RU on four occasions. The first observation involved a detailed tour of the unit, informal conversations with RU officers and staff, and an introductory conversation with Deputy Johnson. The second observation included the last three hours of the two-day June training, in which new officers visited the RU and talked with current officers and inmates. The third observation involved two hours of routine work activities in the RU, including the morning “circle-up” when officers and inmates shared how they were doing on a 1-10 scale and informal conversations with RU staff. The fourth observation included a one-hour staff meeting followed by two hours of rehabilitative circles, which was a new practice they were implementing for the first time that day.

In addition to observations in the RU at the prison, I observed the first week of the two-week training in December (40 hours total). The first two days of the training were co-led by Deputy Johnson, Sergeant Williams, and two representatives from the Rehabilitative Institute. The final three days were led solely by staff from the RU, including Deputy Johnson, Sergeant Williams, and a case manager. This training involved a mixture of lectures (minimal), structured activities (e.g., think-pair-share and energizers), and unstructured, free-flowing conversations. At the request of Deputy Johnson and Sergeant Williams, I acted primarily as a participant observer. My involvement entailed sitting in the circle with the officers and participating in activities that required everyone in the group to share out (e.g., reporting how we were doing on a scale of 1-10 or reflecting on what stood out to us the previous day), as well as think-pair-share activities. I did not participate during unstructured group conversations.
Data Analysis

Data analysis took place in three phases. In phase one, all interview and observational data were analyzed using a grounded-theory approach, iterating back and forth between data and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2007). I began with an initial round of open coding focusing on when, where, and how emotions surfaced and how staff talked about their roles, each other, and management. This first phase of open coding yielded nearly 500 unique codes. After the initial round of coding, I wrote analytic memos about core themes that were emerging (Locke, 2001). Core themes at this stage involved the vastly different relational patterns and emotional experiences in the TUs and the RU and how the RU facilitated an open, trusting environment.

It became evident that the types of work activities that took place between officers and inmates were also mirrored in the dynamics among staff members. Thus, I began coding for the different types of work activities within each unit, how staff talked about inmates, how they talked about each other, and how they talked about management. I then compared the patterns from the RU and the TUs, noting similarities and differences.

In phase 2, I leveraged systems psychodynamics as an analytical framework to uncover the deeper relational and emotional dynamics taking place between the RU and the TUs and throughout the organization as a whole. For this phase, I focused solely on my detailed field notes from the December training session. The unstructured, free-flowing conversations that unfolded during certain parts of the training resembled traditional psychodynamic techniques, which encourage patients to “speak freely about whatever is on their minds,” as their thoughts “naturally range over many areas of mental life, including desires, fears, fantasies, dreams, and daydreams (which in many cases the patient has not previously attempted to put into words)” (Shedler, 2010, p. 100). These unstructured conversations from the training sessions resembled
such an environment, and, in many instances, were instigated and encouraged by Deputy
Johnson. Thus, they provided an opportunity to explore how the group’s thoughts and emotions
naturally ranged over many aspects of their work and linked experiences that may not have
seemed related on the surface. I was especially attuned to these dynamics because I had been
participating in ongoing experiential learning with a group of experts who have been trained to
observe and uncover the unconscious dynamics that emerge in group settings.7

To analyze my field notes from these key conversations, I drew on Padavic et al. (2019)
as a guiding framework for my interpretive coding scheme. I used their work as a guide for
identifying “signals,” which:

…derive from noticing elements in interviews and transcripts that are typically ignored in
ordinary social discourse, such as attempts to avoid distressing feelings, which can
appear, for example, in ‘subtle shifts of topic when certain ideas arise’ and other
maneuvers (Shedler, 2010, p. 99). Signals include hesitations, stumbling, abrupt shifts,
setting up stark contrasts, striking use of metaphors, equivocation, deflections,
incoherence, and contradictions (Peebles-Kleiger, 2002; Shedler, 2006, 2010). These
signals are visible, almost tangible manifestations of internal contradictions or feelings of
distress. They serve as “tells” indicating that the content is potentially conflicted and
warrants attention; they are ‘markers’ similar to the ‘repetition, sequence, emotion,
discontinuities, spontaneous communications, and idiosyncratic communications’ of
interest to therapists (Peebles-Kleiger, 2002, p. 69). (11)

While Padavic et al. apply this interpretive coding scheme to interview transcripts with
individual participants, I apply it here to group-level conversations, taking a “group-as-a-whole”
perspective (Agazarian, 1989; Bion, 1961). While, to my knowledge, this is the first study that
applies this interpretive coding scheme to group-level data, this approach is in line with
theoretical grounding for systems psychodynamic research in organizations. In this tradition,
researchers build theory through observations of groups, paying attention to small cues and

7 At the time of writing this paper, I had been participating in bi-weekly experiential learning sessions with group
relations experts for fifteen months. Members of this learning community included group relations consultants,
psychotherapists and psychoanalysts, and professors and practitioners involved in Adaptive Leadership work.
nuances that point towards deeper insights, and supplementing observational data with interviews (Gabriel, 1999). Thus, in a group setting, one example of a “tell” would be when an individual abruptly shifts the topic of conversation. The job of the researcher is to observe how the group, as a whole, responds to that shift – whether the group picks up the new topic (and shifts the conversation in the new direction) or ignores it and continues talking about the original topic. These “tells,” or signals, then serve as a guide for further investigation into underlying patterns and themes (Gabriel, 1999; Padavic et al., 2019). (See Appendix B for examples and interpretations of group-level “tells.”)

Additionally, when it became clearer that the RU was acting as a holding environment, I conducted yet another round of coding to identify places when Deputy Johnson or other authority figures deliberately shifted the task towards the emotion and anxiety that surfaced in the room and when they shifted it away from the anxiety (Kahn, 2001).

Finally, in the third phase of coding, I identified the key topics that surfaced during the unstructured, free-flowing conversations from the training session, which included: the tension between the TUs and the RU (e.g., how each side talked about the other and incidents where the boundaries intersected), dynamics of how staff treated one another, authority figures (most often, the sheriff), and suicide. I went back through each of the interview transcripts and coded for those topics to triangulate patterns and insights that were emerging from my observational data.

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, this study examined just one prison that had recently implemented a new rehabilitative-focused unit. Because this research site had a unique history of trauma and pain, and because the paradox of rehabilitation versus punishment represents starkly contrasting ways of dealing with prisoners, this study constitutes an extreme
case (Eisenhardt, 1989). As such, findings from this study may not be generalizable to other contexts. The purpose of studying extreme cases is to choose cases that are likely to “replicate or extend the emergent theory” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537). Thus, this study is designed to advance our theoretical understanding of the emotional underpinnings of organizational paradox and organizational ambidexterity.

Second, this study began after the RU had already been rolled out. While my initial conversations with senior leaders began just days before the RU opened, and I took an informal tour of the unit six weeks after its opening, the study did not formally begin until four months after the RU opened. Future studies would benefit from a more longitudinal approach, following such an ambidextrous reform approach from inception through implementation. In this particular study, it would have been extremely valuable to have observational data from the initial in-depth training for the original group of RU officers and staff members.

Third, the perspectives of this study are limited to those of officers, staff members, managers, and senior leaders. While I had several informal conversations with case workers and case managers in the RU, only one interview participant was currently in the case worker role. Future studies would benefit from interviewing a broader group of organizational members, including support staff and mental health professionals. Additionally, I did not interview inmates, who constitute a critically important stakeholder group in this research context. As the primary client or customer in the prison setting, their personal experiences in the TUs and RU are highly relevant for a holistic analysis of how work activities impact subunit culture and how those factors affect inmates’ experiences in the short and long term. While I did garner some of the inmates’ perspectives through observations (e.g., observing the rehabilitative circles, RU circle-ups, and routine work activities), my understanding of their experience was limited. I also
did not have an opportunity to interact with inmates from the TUs; thus, my understanding of the inmate experience in the TUs was limited to the RU inmates’ comparisons of the two.

Fourth, it is possible that my presence as a researcher affected what unfolded during the December training session. For example, one of the RU officers I had interviewed prior to the December training session had opened up about his own struggles with depression, substance abuse, and

Finally, the systems psychodynamic analytical approach faces limitations due to its reliance on interpretations of links between what is said (conscious) and unsaid (including both the conscious and unconscious). I have also adapted prior methods for identifying and interpreting such unconscious patterns (Padavic et al., 2019) for the analysis of group-level conversations. While this challenge is somewhat inherent to efforts to uncover unconscious processes in organizations, I have tried to use this method to identify concrete links between the observable and explicit with the unseen and implicit.

Findings

Emotional Dynamics within the TUs and RU

The emotional dynamics that emerged within the TUs and the RU paralleled the main work activities involved in each of the distinct subunits and manifested in vastly different emotional experiences and cultures within subunits tasked with the punishment or rehabilitative side of the paradox. The punishment-oriented focus within the TUs emphasized order, control, emotional detachment, and minimum survival of inmates. In turn, emotional detachment and minimum survival were also core elements of the emotional experiences and culture among staff within the TUs. The rehabilitation-oriented focus of the RU, on the other hand, stressed healing and building positive, open relationships with inmates. Thus, the emotional experiences and
culture among staff members in the RU were also centered on healing, openness, and trust. In this section I describe the within-unit emotional dynamics of the TUs and the RU, highlighting how they connected to the primary work tasks required in the punishment and rehabilitation sides of the organizational paradox.

**Punishment-focused tasks and minimum survival in the TUs.** In the TUs, the punishment-focused environment encouraged officers to maintain emotional detachment as a strategy to protect themselves from being taken advantage of and to mitigate the disturbing and traumatic occurrences that took place almost daily. Two officers referred to the inmates as “cattle,” which allowed them to depersonalize their interactions. Officers who became too friendly with inmates were called “con-lovers” and faced ridicule from their peers. Many officers and operational managers from the TUs described the purpose of their work as maintaining the “care, custody, and control” of the inmates at all times; yet, few could articulate what that refrain actually meant in practice. One operational manager and one lieutenant emphasized that the legal responsibilities of their roles required them to observe “living, breathing flesh.” Essentially, the primary task for officers in the TU was to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the inmates while maintaining as much distance from them as possible.

In the TUs, the same focus on minimum survival, emotional detachment, and mistrust that persisted between officers and inmates was mirrored in the interactions among the officers, staff, and managers. In the same way that officers were expected to ensure the minimum survival of inmates, they also sought minimum survival for themselves. One manager reported that his main goal was simply to make sure that everyone got home safely at the end of the day. Other participants explained that their primary focus was to earn a paycheck and work towards retirement. They came to work, punched their time cards, and put in their eight hours. One
manager explained, “You have people, like, literally punching in and trying to wait 20 minutes to burn time… I’m telling you, like that’s exhausting. And I think that’s why when they retire, even if they get to 55, they’re dying a year after.” This example illustrates the lengths TU staff members would go to bide their time until retirement; and yet, there was an element of futility in this approach which was exacerbated by the short life expectancy of correctional officers post-retirement.

In a similarly parallel way, the emotional detachment that TU staff believed was necessary to protect themselves from being taken advantage of by inmates was also integrated as a core part of the emotional culture among staff. Emotional detachment from one another manifested in staff members’ constantly feeling like their colleagues were “out to get” them. A manager reported that the most challenging aspect of the job is dealing with “who’s stabbing you in the back, who’s talking shit, and whether they believe or not. I mean, this is both managers and officers. It’s almost like we created this – we want people to fail. That way you look better.”

Taking it another step further, one officer reflected on the emotional culture and the dynamics among staff, saying, “The place juts messes with your head.”

Relatedly, TU staff also exhibited deep mistrust of one another. One officer explained:

You can’t obviously just come right out of the gate trusting [the inmates]. But it was more so about my co-workers. Like, needing to make sure that I put my guard up with co-workers too. Because you don’t know who you can and can’t trust here, because everybody is out for themselves really.

There was also deep mistrust between officers and managers. One officer stated, “Here they keep you away from different things. We don’t want you to know this. We want you to be left in the dark like a mushroom. Feed you shit and keep you in the dark.” Others reported that they were afraid to show too much interest in any specific posts because if the managers found out, they
would intentionally move the officer to a worse location. The mushroom analogy (which was mentioned by two separate interview participants) and the fear of being moved from posts they enjoyed point to a deeper emotional experience of the leaders and the chain of command system as a sinister, conspiratorial process that was designed to inflict suffering.

As these examples demonstrate, the primary task in the TUs was to ensure basic survival of inmates, and the collective assumption was that carrying out this task required emotional detachment from inmates. At the same time, the emotional detachment pervaded the staff members’ relationships with one another and with their managers – thus creating an emotional culture that continually reinforced these dynamics. In the TUs, everyone was working towards their own basic survival: earning a paycheck, doing minimal work, and going home alive at the end of each day.

**Rehabilitative-focused tasks and emotional dynamics of RU.** In contrast to the punishment-oriented TUs, the primary task of the rehabilitation-oriented RU was to help “plant seeds” for inmates to heal from trauma and prepare for a successful life upon their release from prison. The RU was established with the understanding that the relationships between officers and inmates were a pivotal part of the rehabilitative work they would undertake as the primary task of the unit. For instance, during the rehabilitative circles, RU officers and staff demonstrated their deep investment in inmates’ lives and wellbeing by encouraging them to reconnect with supportive family members and urging them to avoid falling back into destructive patterns with unsupportive ones. One of the inmates shared that his grandfather was his role model; however, because the inmate was so ashamed of being in prison, he had shut his grandfather out of his life. During the rehabilitative circle, RU staff encouraged him to reconnect with his grandfather and
ultimately readmitted him to the unit under the condition that he arrange a visit with his grandfather.

The same supportive, open, and trusting relationships existed within the emotional experiences and culture of RU staff. The first intensive three-week training session for RU staff involved one powerful group conversation in which they were asked to reflect on a difficult life circumstance that they had overcome. Sergeant Williams reflected on that part of training:

Everything just got really deep and really emotional. It was actually really good for all of us because it brought us closer together. Because we were able to actually see that everybody in the circle had emotions, which we don’t usually show in front of each other.

This activity set the tone for how RU staff would be expected to interact with one another, sharing their struggles, showing vulnerability with one another, and expressing their own genuine emotions. Beyond the intensive training, the open, trusting relationships continued in the daily work inside the unit. RU staff reported feeling like they could be themselves when they worked in that unit; they were liberated from the pressure to sustain the “tough guy” persona that felt necessary in the TUs. Ultimately these dynamics created a familial culture and emotional experiences of safety, care, and healing in the RU.

Finally, in stark contrast to the deeply skeptical and conspiratorial views of leadership in the TUs, RU staff felt that Deputy Johnson “had their backs.” This was especially important in the RU because the staffs’ roles and responsibilities drastically conflicted with the traditional approach, requiring much more discretion and judgment. In many cases, there were no official rules or policies to back up the RU officers on their decisions. During the December training session, one officer expressed that he “worri[ed] about what would happen” because Deputy Johnson wouldn’t “always be there.” Over the course of my observations, I witnessed at least one distinct example in which Deputy Johnson supported his officers and had their backs. There
had been a disciplinary incident within the unit, in which a lieutenant handled the situation differently than Deputy Johnson would have liked (in this case, the lieutenant’s approach was more aligned with the traditional rather than rehabilitation approach). Deputy Johnson expressed his frustration in a private conversation with me, but explained that he would have a conversation with the lieutenant about it to better understand his perspective and why he managed the situation the way he did. Several days later, during my observation of a rehabilitative circle involving the inmate who had instigated that disciplinary infraction, Deputy Johnson stood behind the lieutenant, supporting the decision he had made that day. Despite the fact that Deputy Johnson did not initially agree with the lieutenant’s handling of the situation, he made a point of having a one-on-one conversation with him to understand his perspective and then ultimately stood behind him in front of other staff and inmates. In this way, Deputy Johnson provided the reliability, security, and safety the RU officers needed to do their jobs effectively.

In both the TUs and the RU, the primary work tasks and emotional cultures created mutually reinforcing dynamics. Just as the primary task of minimal survival in the TUs mirrored the culture among staff and managers, the RU’s primary task of rehabilitation mirrored the open, trusting relationships that allowed for healing among staff and managers. The TUs and the RU were designed to fulfill opposing ends of the punishment-rehabilitation paradox, and thus they pursued fundamentally different goals and work activities. In both cases, the units established contrasting means of accomplishing their goals in ways that mirrored their primary tasks and their assumptions about what it took to accomplish them. In the TUs, this meant that the emotional experiences and culture among staff were characterized by emotional detachment and deep mistrust. In the RU, on the other hand, the emotional culture was open, trusting, and provided space for staff to be vulnerable and engage in healing activities.
Formalization of Subunit Emotional Dynamics and Ambivalence Across Levels

In managing the punishment-rehabilitation paradox through an ambidextrous structure, the organizational design established thick boundaries between the units, further separating the work happening in the TUs and the RU. The RU was located in a physically separate part of the prison in the far corner of the second floor. This meant that inmates and staff from the TUs could easily avoid walking past the RU. One officer had been mocked on his way into the unit the day of our interview. He reported, “Oh yeah. I, walking up here today I heard shit… You hear all this shit. ‘What are you going to do, give them all hugs up there?’” Deputy Johnson expressed frustration that there were a lot of good officers out there in the TUs, but “they won’t come up here. Because they don’t want to be seen, because they could be seen on the camera. They don’t want to be seen on here, because we are the change… they don’t want to be associated with it because when they go back out there, they know they’re going to be harassed.”

At the same time, Deputy Johnson was hesitant about letting new people come into the unit. He was protective of the unit and wanted to make sure that anyone who worked in the RU was fully prepared to participate in the culture they had deliberately built. In addition to the physical boundaries around the RU, there were also relational boundaries due to selection process for hiring new officers into the unit and cultural boundaries related to their fundamentally different approach to corrections. As such, these boundaries and the structural formalization of the two sides of the paradox played a critical role in fostering one of the most

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8 There were two dormitory-style units that were located beyond the RU, meaning inmates and staff who lived and worked in that unit would routinely pass by the entrance to the RU on their way to classrooms, the mess hall, the infirmary, etc. However, the units that were structured similar to the RU (with cells along the periphery and an officer station in the front of the unit) were all located in a part of the facility where they would not have to walk past the RU.

9 The second paper of my dissertation, Role Redefining Reforms, delves deeper into how the physical and relational boundaries helped enable the development and success of the RU.
prominent dynamics that emerged in the RU: they enabled the unit to function as a temporary holding environment where deeper anxieties could be surfaced and collectively managed.

**Holding environment and secondary task of RU training.** Despite the fact that the primary task of the RU training was clearly about teaching officers how to implement rehabilitative justice practices, there were early signals that there was also a secondary task of the training: surfacing and collectively managing deeper anxieties related to personal pain and organizational trauma. Two staff members from the Rehabilitative Institute helped facilitate the first two days of training, which focused on topics like racial injustice in the criminal justice system, stereotypes of inmates and correctional officers, and a deep-dive into survey data comparing inmates’ perceptions of correctional officers with their own perceptions of their work and environment. During the first two days, the two staff members from the Rehabilitative Institute and the leaders of the RU led the conversations. There was little participation from the seventeen officers participating in the training, aside from group activities which required participation (e.g., think-pair-share activities, “energizers,” and circle-ups).

At the beginning of the second day of training, Deputy Johnson stated that he had a “history lesson and a reflection from yesterday.” He pressed, “You’re all good operationally, but you’re having a hard time talking about it. These are healthy conversations.” He reflected on the prior day, saying, “What stood out to me yesterday was Captain Nelson’s conversation about race,” referencing a controversial remark the Captain had made during a group conversation about racial injustice in prisons. However, instead of continuing the conversation about race, Deputy Johnson leveraged the topic of race to address something he felt was more relevant: the organizational history of corruption and trauma among their senior leaders. For his “history lesson,” he explained: “When I first started, I worked for a sheriff who was Irish-Catholic. He
ended up going to prison, which caused a lot of turmoil and trauma for the organization. Many people wondered how they would move forward… The next sheriff was extremely unhealthy… No one tried to help the sheriff. No one reached out because everyone was afraid of him.”

He continued, reflecting on the sheriff’s suicide, “We were in total disarray. We had no leader. We don’t talk about it. There’s so much hate and disarray.” After reflecting on the organization’s traumatic history, he shifted the topic back to race, mentioning a recent fight between a black and white officer, but “no one talks about it.” In this instance, Deputy Johnson deliberately attempted to shift the task away from the primary task of learning about rehabilitative justice and towards an underlying and related task of surfacing latent anxiety about the organization’s traumatic history. This was the first significant move Deputy Johnson made to signal to the group that there was an unspoken task of the training, which was an integral component of the stated task of learning about rehabilitative justice.

**Successful creation of holding environment.** On the third day, the two staff members from the Rehabilitative Institute were no longer present, and Deputy Johnson and Sergeant Williams led the training. After reflecting on the previous day’s activities, the group began discussing a recent decision not to let RU inmates work in the kitchen alongside inmates from the TUs. Deputy Johnson explained that the inmates were being harassed by the TU inmates who worked with them in the kitchen, as well as the TU officers who supervised their work. They shared with the group that there had been an incident – “the hotdog fight” – in which TU inmates threw hotdogs at the RU inmates who worked in the kitchen. In response, the three RU inmates threw the hotdogs back at the TU inmates. However, only the three inmates from the RU were fired; the TU inmates faced no punishment for their involvement in the incident. Deputy Johnson exclaimed, “How is that fair?!”
What unfolded immediately after hearing about the hotdog fight was a collective surfacing and release of pent up emotions and tension related to a host of issues throughout the broader organization. The discussion began when a young female officer, Officer Kelley, raised her hand and said, “I was going to mention this the other day but decided not to, but there’s a history of negativity here and we should work to change that, starting with the RU.” She continued, sharing a story about a recent experience where she attended a memorial service for officers who had died. Specifically, she attended to support a colleague who was close with a young officer, Officer Cox, who had committed suicide the previous year. Only three officers attended the service. When they reported to the roll call room at the beginning of their shift, all of the other TU officers made fun of them and accused them of attending the service to gain favor with the higher ups.

Directly after Officer Kelley shared her concerns, another officer, Officer Lewis, spoke up, saying, “Not to start the whole argument…” Before he could continue, Deputy Johnson interrupted, “There’s no arguing here. It’s healthy. This is RU training. It’s talking about things, communicating how you feel.” In this instance as the group’s emotions began to surface, Deputy Johnson sanctioned the deliberate shifting of the task towards the anxiety, declaring that that was, in fact, the purpose of the training. Officer Lewis went on to explain that it bothered him that the sheriff did not come to the prison the day the Officer Cox committed suicide. He stressed, “The guy who runs it all didn’t show up.”

Deputy Johnson responded with a strongly-worded monologue about the role of authority. “If you’re hung up on the sheriff, you’re focusing on the wrong thing.” He shared with the group a recent example of a time when he “didn’t get what [he] wanted from [the sheriff],”
but that he cared more about getting the support he needed from those closer to him – his trusted colleagues, his wife, and his family.

Several additional officers joined the conversation as the tension in the room continued to rise. The conversation stayed focused on the sheriff for a few minutes, until Deputy Johnson shifted the topic away from the emotional intensity and anxiety around the topic of the sheriff and Officer Cox’s suicide. He stressed that quality of life is the most important priority, and that is what they should be focused on. The group ignored Deputy Johnson’s attempt to shift away from the anxiety that had surfaced.

Another officer joined the conversation, shifting the topic back to the memorial service that Officer Kelley mentioned at the beginning of the discussion. Five officers, including Officers Kelley and Lewis, exchanged comments back-and-forth about what bothered them the most about the memorial and the sheriff’s response to Officer Cox’s suicide. A sixth officer interjected with large, sharp hand gestures and an angry tone of voice, exclaiming, “I don’t think it’s that we don’t support each other. Everyone hates the sheriff. He forgot my name the second he walked away from me. Why would I go to [the memorial service]?” At this moment, Deputy Johnson leaned back into the anxiety of the group, saying, “I know we’re off topic, but this is so healthy.”

Yet, as the conversation reached an emotional climax, Deputy Johnson made a second attempt to shift away from the anxiety in the room by sharing a personal story about his own son’s suicide attempt. After sharing the story, he momentarily revisited the anxiety in the room, stating, “It drives me crazy when I hear you guys talk about the sheriff. You’ve got to find people to support you.” He closed, suggesting that the group take a break.
After the break, Sergeant Williams asked everyone to check-in with how they were feeling at the moment. One officer shared that he felt like this was the first “real” day of training because they were having an open conversation rather than “death by PowerPoint.” Several others agreed, saying that it felt good to “get everything out in the open,” and “get a little anger out.” Sergeant Williams closed the activity, stating, “This is RU training. We’re already getting there, breaking things down, coming out of our shells, and opening up. You guys are killing it.”

The emotions and anxiety subsided, and they spent the rest of the day talking about a recent trip some RU officers had taken to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, how the RU uses rehabilitative circles, and legal changes to segregation policies and recidivism trends. On this day, the RU had functioned as a temporary holding environment, where the difficult emotions and anxieties held within the group, and the organization at large, could be surfaced and managed. In this instance, surfacing and talking through their deeper emotions allowed the group to continue working towards their stated goals of implementing rehabilitative practices in the RU.

Taken together, the five days of RU training served two purposes: the primary task, which was to teach officers how to implement rehabilitative practices to help inmates heal from trauma and turn their lives around, and the underlying task, which was to facilitate healing among the staff by surfacing and collectively managing difficult emotions and anxieties that they had not been able to work out elsewhere. In this context, the group could only achieve the primary task after they addressed the underlying need to surface and work through difficult emotions and past pain. Yet, the surfacing of their deeper emotional needs emerged, at least in part, as a result of the emotional dynamics of openness, trust, and healing that were critical components of the rehabilitative-oriented approach in the RU.
In contrast to the RU, the emotional culture that arose in the punishment-oriented TUs did not support the same type of open and healing environment that emerged within the RU. As such, the TUs did not have the ability to function as temporary holding environments to surface and release difficult emotions and anxieties. And as a result, they had no way to work out the emotional experiences that were impeding their ability to carry out the most basic functions of their roles and responsibilities. The arc of work during the RU training demonstrated that staff were able to focus on the task at hand only when they could deal with the debilitating emotions and anxieties. However, there were no mechanisms to enable such a release in the TUs.

**Senior Leaders’ Management Across Subunits**

By and large, senior leaders in the organization viewed the RU as the “new way of corrections,” especially as the industry as a whole has been placing a greater emphasis on human services like counseling and mental health support. While there was ambiguity about how (and whether) senior leaders hoped to scale the work of the RU, they were having conversations about integrating some elements of rehabilitative practices into the traditional Training Academy. One senior leader explained that the current curriculum includes two days of training on use-of-force policies, but only a few hours on mental health and communications. Given that mental health and communications were such an important part of the correctional officers’ roles, even in the TUs, senior leaders saw an opportunity to integrate some tools from rehabilitative practices into the traditional approach.

Aside from integrating rehabilitative practices around mental health and communication into the traditional Training Academy, leaders were unsure of how the rehabilitative focus would impact broader operations in the facility. One senior leader stated:
The officers that don’t work in that unit, they call it names. And I hope the goal is to eventually put some of those folks that don’t have the training, just sprinkle them in here and there so they can see that this is a new way of corrections.

By saying that he “hopes” the goal is “to eventually” integrate staff from the TUs with the RU, this leader expressed some level of ambivalence and uncertainty. Was that the goal? Or did he merely hope it was the goal?

In addition to their uncertainty about how to integrate across the RU and the TUs, there were other ways in which senior leaders’ ambivalence about the punishment-rehabilitation paradox surfaced. From the outset, senior leaders assumed that the vast majority of officers and managers would strongly resist the RU. As a result, they waited to tell staff members about the new unit until right before it was going to be implemented. They were afraid that staff members would sabotage their efforts and undermine a successful rollout. This decision became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as staff from the TUs felt as though they had been deliberately left in the dark. One TU operational manager reported that he first heard about the RU during a staff meeting when senior leaders informed him that eight of his officers were attending a training and that he needed to take them off the schedule. He explained that the RU training was by “invitation only” and that he “wasn’t there from Jump Street.” so “why [does he] need to learn about it now?” Even six months after the unit opened, he felt that he “still [didn’t] know what the purpose of it is.” In this way, senior leaders’ ambivalence about the RU roll-out created the very problem of resistance they were trying to avoid in the first place.

Another important consequence of senior leaders’ management across the TUs and the RU was that the RU took on an elevated status throughout the facility. Officers and managers throughout the prison felt as though the senior leaders favored the RU. As one manager expressed his frustration:
I wish [the senior leaders] would stop focusing on the RU, saying they have the best officers. It hurts peoples’ feelings, believe it or not. No tours go to Unit 3. Unit 3 has 120 inmates…. I see what Unit 3 deals with. At some point it’s not fair. These guys get nothing. People go to the RU. That’s it.

The senior leaders’ stance toward the RU spurred deep-seated jealousy and resentment throughout the TUs. TU officers felt invisible, as if they were the shunned, unwanted part of the organization.

**Senior leaders’ emotional experiences.** In contrast to other work which has shown that senior leaders may feel pulled in two directions as they try to manage across paradoxical tensions (Smets at al., 2019), senior leaders at the prison did not outwardly express such emotional experiences. Instead, senior leaders appeared to favor the RU, which was evident in their implementation strategy, their allocation of resources and continual praise of the unit, and their perception that the rehabilitative focus represented the future of corrections.

Senior leaders’ emotional experiences of past trauma shaped how they approached the rollout of the RU. On the one hand, senior leaders had their own deeply personal, painful experiences of the Sheriff Walker’s suicide, as many had worked closely with him on a daily basis. As one senior leader poignantly expressed, “There was no more trauma than there was in this office.” Yet, in the midst of the chaos, many senior leaders were forced to suppress their emotions and ensure the continued operations of the facility. Like the officers and managers in the prison, some senior leaders were never able to grieve and heal from the trauma.

Additionally, the senior leaders’ pain was compounded by the reaction from some staff members in the wake of Sheriff Walker’s suicide. There were rumors that some operational managers had expressed relief that certain members of Sheriff Walker’s leadership team may be
removed once a new sheriff took over. These remarks left irreparable scars in the relations between some operational managers and senior leaders.

From the perspective of prison staff, no one from the senior leadership team had ever addressed the sheriff’s suicide with them. The entire staff heard about the event through the rumor mill and what limited information was released in the media. They never received any official communication about the event from the organization, and, according to an operational manager, to this day, it remained “completely unresolved.” Furthermore, staff reported that they were not allowed to attend the funeral service, and therefore they never had an opportunity to collectively grieve and process what had happened. With the historical context in mind, the TU managers who were denied the opportunity to participate in important healing rituals, like attending Sheriff Walker’s funeral, may indeed have rebelled against senior leaders’ efforts to implement the RU. This is especially plausible because they blamed senior leaders for not having been admitted to the funeral service. In this way, the senior leaders’ approach to the RU implementation closely mirrored how they dealt with their leader’s suicide.

In addition to the senior leaders’ protective rollout of the RU, they favored the RU by allocating greater human and material resources and praising the work of the unit. The RU staffed three to four officers for just ten to twenty inmates; the TUs, on the other hand, typically staffed two officers to a unit with 120 inmates. While some material resources in the RU were donated (e.g., library books), senior leaders did allocate funding for in-unit gym equipment and tablets for each inmate in the RU. Additionally, senior leaders regularly praised the unit and showed it off to outsiders, including tour groups, media outlets, and researchers (including myself, prior to the beginning of the study).
Finally, despite the apparent ambivalence around how the RU model would expand or become integrated with the traditional approach, senior leaders felt that the goal of the entire organization aligned with the rehabilitative work. One senior leader explained:

I think the sheriff has been pretty clear about it, and I think that the executive team and more and more people are starting to buy in. It’s about how we are changing corrections… I think the sheriff is turning corrections on its head and understanding its more about mental health… and how do we rehabilitate them while they’re here so they’re not coming back in here, and you know, having the RU. You know, he is changing what corrections is looking like.

By favoring the RU and seeing it as the future of the organization as the whole, senior leaders may have been unconsciously healing their own pain through the unit. Because they also had never been able to fully grieve and heal from the trauma, they, too, needed an outlet for their lingering pain and suffering. Supporting the RU provided such an outlet. Additionally, showing off the unit to outsiders, like tour groups and media outlets, allowed senior leaders to publicly showcase their desired version of the prison’s work – that which aligned with rehabilitation and healing. This image stood in stark contrast to the organization’s history of scandals, abuses of power, and the traumatic suicide of their leader – some of which had been covered in local news outlets.

**Organizational Dynamics: Emotional Consequences of Ambidexterity**

Staff members’ emotional experiences and the within-unit cultures of the TUs and the RU paralleled the primary activities that were required to carry out the side of the punishment-rehabilitation paradox that each was managing. Thus, the boundaries that were established through the ambidextrous organizational design solidified organizational members’ experiences of the TUs as the place where people try to *survive*, and the RU as the place where people work to *heal*. At a conscious level, this manifested in the conflict that took place between the two units, as TU staff chastised RU staff for “going soft,” and RU staff criticized TU officers for
being “old school.” Additionally, these dynamics were further cemented as a result of the RU’s elevated status among the senior leaders. As previously described, TU staff felt that the RU had an inordinate amount of resources (both in terms of physical resources like their own gym, library, and tablets, as well as human capital with a far lower inmate to staff ratio), flexibility from stringent rules and policies, and attention from tour groups and the media.

Yet, at an even deeper, unconscious level, the conflict between the TUs and the RU closely mirrored the ways in which officers in the TU ridiculed those who participated in healing events like the memorial service for Officer Cox. TU officers mocked the RU officers for being “kiss-asses,” just as they accused officers who attended Officer Cox’s memorial of going solely to earn favor with the higher ups and have a better chance at a promotion. In fact, the emotional climax of the December RU training unfolded as a direct result of two seemingly unrelated topics: the hotdog fight, and the memorial service for Officer Cox. The hotdog fight symbolized the outward conflict between the TUs and the RU; and yet, it released something deeper about what the TUs and the RU represented for the organization’s anxiety and history of trauma. In this way, the organizational-level ambivalence about the punishment-rehabilitation paradox and the ways in which they sought to manage the tension within different subunits symbolized deeper individual-level ambivalence about how to simultaneously defend against and confront their deeper anxieties, pain, and trauma.

The consequence of these dynamics is that the organization was only able to achieve each of its competing demands for a subset of their clients (i.e., inmates) and their staff. Because the TUs symbolized the place of survival and the RU symbolized the place of healing, both inmates and staff were only able to experience one half of the paradox – the half in which they lived and worked. In essence, the separation of the competing demands of punishment and rehabilitation
provided an “out” for staff. While the ambidextrous structure resolved the organizational-level tension between punishment and rehabilitation, this design was problematic because of the parallels with staff members’ individual needs both protect themselves from past pain and trauma and also confront and heal from it. Rather than wrestling with how they could simultaneously punish and rehabilitate inmates – as well as how they could protect themselves from past trauma while still confronting it and healing from it – the ambidextrous structure gave staff a physical and psychological place to go. Each subunit had claimed its half of the paradox, which meant that individuals and groups no longer had to manage the tension and ambivalence at the conscious (i.e., organizational-level paradox of punishment versus rehabilitation) and unconscious levels (i.e., individual-level paradox of defending against versus confronting past pain and trauma).

Furthermore, considering the organization from a group-as-a-whole perspective, the RU had taken on the healing role for the entire organization. It was as if the RU served as a safety valve to release the pressure that had been building from the unresolved trauma. The RU carried the pain of the trauma and also provided some means of healing from it. However, this came at a price; the vast majority of staff worked in the TUs, which meant that they were simultaneously relieved of the need to confront trauma, yet robbed of the opportunity to heal from it.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

While ambidexterity is often seen as a resolution to organizational paradox, this study complexifies our current understanding of ambidextrous organizations across levels of analysis and uncovers links between the conscious emotional dynamics within contrasting poles and the deeper, unconscious dynamics they may represent. First, on a conscious level, this study advances our understanding of the relationships between the work activities, design, and culture
of ambidextrous subunits (Battilana and Lee, 2014). In this study, the work activities of the punishment-oriented TUs were focused on meeting inmates’ minimum needs for survival. To accomplish this, staff believed that they needed to keep emotional distance and remain skeptical in every interaction with inmates. As this became a regular part of how staff carried out their work each day, it fundamentally shaped the culture of the TUs and mirrored the emotional experiences of survival, detachment, and mistrust. The RU, on the other hand, was expected to rehabilitate inmates, teach them how to build positive relationships, and prepare them for successful life upon release. These activities fostered a culture of openness, trust, and healing. The ambidextrous design negated the need to deal with tensions related to the punishment-rehabilitation paradox at the organizational level but simultaneously formalized the divisions between the two sides.

Similarly, this study highlights conscious experiences of ambivalence with respect to the punishment-rehabilitation paradox. Among the prison staff, this manifested in ongoing conflict between the officers and managers in the TUs and the RU. Senior leaders also experienced ambivalence with respect to the design and rollout of the RU, as they deliberately withheld information and anticipated resistance from officers and managers. Even upon implementation, senior leaders remained ambivalent about how (and whether) they wanted to expand the work of the RU.

Examining the below-the-surface dynamics of the TUs and the RU illuminates how paradoxical tensions at a conscious level can mirror other tensions, anxieties, and emotional experiences of ambivalence at an unconscious level. In this case, individual prison staff members needed to heal from past pain and trauma, yet healing also required them to confront their deeper emotional experiences of anger, betrayal, abandonment, and grief. Because the RU functioned as
the place where people could heal and had mechanisms to enable deeper emotions to surface (e.g., via the holding environment created at the training sessions), it meant that only those individuals working in the RU had an opportunity to confront their pain and collectively heal. In this way, the resolution of the punishment-rehabilitation paradox at the organizational level inadvertently impeded resolution of the individual-level needs to defend against and confront past pain. Future research might examine the emotional dynamics and cultures of subunits in other ambidextrous organizations and to what extent organizational-level paradoxes parallel deeper tensions, anxieties, and feelings of emotional ambivalence.

Furthermore, senior leaders in this study may have experienced their own unconscious emotional investment in the RU. Because senior leaders reported that they had never been able to confront the trauma of Sheriff Walker’s suicide, they, too, needed a way to heal. Their desire for healing could have manifested in their favoring the RU by allocating significant material and human resources, as well as providing continuous praise and attention to the unit. However, given that they were uncertain about expanding the work of the RU, it is possible that their conscious ambivalence about the punishment-rehabilitation paradox symbolized a deeper level of ambivalence about suppressing versus confronting the trauma of the past. These findings are particularly important because of the historical emphasis on senior leaders’ roles and responsibility for successfully differentiating and integrating across subunits (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith & Tushman, 2005). Future studies should examine how and why senior leaders favor one subunit over the others and what deeper emotional experiences might drive such behavior.

Findings from this study also suggest two additional unconscious dynamics for which there was not enough evidence to uncover clear patterns. First, given that the RU was
implemented after a marked increase in the number of staff suicides, it is possible that the very development of the unit was in response to – rather than simply a parallel to – a recognition that the organization needed some sort of healing mechanism. Perhaps the organization had reached a tipping point with the suicide of young Officer Cox; yet because their efforts to directly respond to the tragedy by providing additional mental health services through their Employee Assistance Program and an increased emphasis on officer wellness did not yield the desired results, they unconsciously sought an indirect response through the healing focus of the RU. On the other hand, it is also possible that staff members simply leveraged the conflict between the TUs and the RU to act out their own feelings of ambivalence about suppressing versus confronting pain and trauma. Prior to the rollout of the RU there was nowhere for staff to displace their conflicted emotions; however, the conflict that ensued from the implementation of the RU gave staff an outlet to direct their emotions. Future studies could explore such phenomena through comparative case studies of organizations managing similar organizational paradoxes through ambidextrous structures, including when and why they adopted such an approach.

Second, the conflict between the TUs and the RU showed some of the “telltale signs” (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014, p. 489) of splitting, projection, and projective identification. Staff in both the TUs and the RU advocated their own side of the paradox while rejecting the other, encountered conflicts over value differences, showed “inklings” of awareness that these defensive dynamics were at the root of their conflict, and that neither side could fully renounce the other. To the extent that these dynamics did exist between the TUs and the RU, the structural separation of the two sides formalized and solidified the defensive responses and further entrenched the subgroups. Future studies could examine how these defensive dynamics play out
in ambidextrous organizations and how such structural differentiation shapes the ongoing
management of tension and conflict between groups.

This study raises new questions about organizational paradoxes and organizational
ambidexterity as a response to managing paradoxical tensions. First, with respect to
organizational outcomes, findings from this study raise questions about the types of paradoxes
that can successfully be managed through ambidexterity. Prisons are expected to simultaneously
punish and rehabilitate inmates. By segmenting that work into two subunits – one focused on
punishment and one focused on rehabilitation – ambidexterity undermined the organization’s
ability to accomplish its competing goals for all inmates. Instead, the outcome was that only a
small subset of inmates had an opportunity to engage in rehabilitative work. The small number of
inmates served in the RU is not inherently problematic, given that the idea is that the strategies
and activities in that unit will eventually translate to the rest of the organization. However, the
emotional dynamics that unfolded between the TUs and the RU reified divisions between the
units and impeded opportunities for successful integration of RU practices into the TUs.
Furthermore, unlike the majority of ambidextrous organizations that are focused on product
design and development (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Benner & Tushman, 2015), the prison
context involves human beings whose lives could depend on the types of services they receive
during incarceration. Future studies should examine other contexts in which organizational
paradoxes are managed through ambidexterity, particularly when the outcomes affect human
beings (e.g., in educational settings).

Finally, it raises questions about how these findings might play out in other types of
organizational paradoxes, including the common examples of innovation versus efficiency. This
context represents an extreme case of organizational paradox because the competing demands of
punishment and rehabilitation require such drastically different approaches to the work, and rehabilitation approaches directly conflict with deep-seated aspects of correctional officers’ culture, values, beliefs, and identities.\textsuperscript{10} Yet, it is entirely possible – and perhaps likely – that other ambidextrous organizations hold and manage similar types of deeper emotional dynamics beyond the surface-level tensions.

\textsuperscript{10} This is the topic of the second paper in my dissertation, \textit{Role Redefining Reforms}. 

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Conclusion

Taken together, these three papers illuminate the profound ways in which power dynamics, social identity, and emotions shape how individuals, groups, and organizations respond to reforms in the public sector. Far from the rational, emotionless actors Weber imagined in his conceptualization of ideal bureaucracies, front-line public sector workers, managers, and leaders are forced to manage layers of emotionality and complexity. Furthermore, these studies highlight that reforms, especially role-redefining reforms, hinge in large part on the identity of the actors who design, lead, and participate in the new form of work. In essence, public sector reforms are often less about the what and more about the who – who is designing the reform, who is responsible for implementing it, and to what extent do their shared identities, values, and beliefs align? In order to make more meaningful strides towards improving the public sector, these and other important social psychological factors must become a more central part of debates about how to design, implement, and scale successful reforms.

The first paper highlighted the importance of building positive, trusting relationships across hierarchical levels in the large, complex systems of the public sector. To the extent that reforms, especially large-scale reforms in contexts like public education, depend on front-line workers’ willingness and ability to make changes to their work, positive relationships across hierarchical lines are particularly significant. Furthermore, these types of reforms are also more difficult given that there are so many more front-line workers than higher ups at the policy level, and therefore it is more difficult to build personal relationships across hierarchical levels. Still, this study provides greater theoretical clarity about the underlying mechanisms that foster positive relationships and perceptions across levels, suggesting that interpersonal relationships are not necessary so long as higher ups can convey that they share some overlapping elements of
social identity with those on the ground and if they can break through the power barriers by showing humility and respect. Furthermore, this study also provided helpful insights for practitioners who often think they are doing the right things to build relationships but actually undermine their own efforts.

The second paper dove deeper into one specific type of reform, role-redefining reforms, to identify what it takes for front-line workers to be willing and able to successfully take on new roles and responsibilities. In this research setting, nearly all staff were heavily dissatisfied with the dominant work context and emotionally uninvested in the status quo. However, the nature of one’s emotional labor and dependence on the fantasmic frames of the organization and role identity had a profound impact on how individuals responded to the opportunity to participate in a new form of work. Correctional officers and operational managers who were heavily enmeshed in roles that required high levels of emotional suppression and distancing and who did not have social support from their colleagues, superiors, and subordinates were essentially imprisoned in their roles. They were desperately unhappy and carrying an unbearable amount of pain; yet, they saw no way to escape it. However, for those who were distanced from that form of emotional labor or for those correctional officers who already engaged in a more open form of emotional labor (despite the ridicule of their colleagues), it was easier for them to see the benefits the new work of the rehabilitative unit could provide. Furthermore, they heavily depended on having a leader who embodied both the traditional notions of masculine strength and the new ideals of “softer” approaches.

The findings from the second paper provide several important insights for policy makers and practitioners seeking to implement role-redefining reforms. While these findings cannot be
generalized, they do suggest that role-redefining reforms are more likely to succeed for some individuals than others, and it is imperative to identify the right leader for the new role.

The third paper examined the emotional dynamics that emerge as organizations try to balance competing demands – in this case, a prison seeking to balance punishment and rehabilitation. Managing the punishment-rehabilitation paradox through an ambidextrous structure created unintended consequences because the organizational-level paradox mirrored deeper individual-level tensions. While, in many cases, ambidexterity is a successful strategy for managing tensions (Ashforth et al, 2014), this may not hold in cases where paradoxes and tensions intersect across levels of analysis. In this way, this paper uncovered that there were unconscious links between the observable paradox of punishment vs. rehabilitation and the largely unobservable paradox of suppressing vs. confronting pain and trauma. This dynamic was enabled, at least in part, because of the work activities and the related socio-emotional dynamics that emerged in the rehabilitative unit. Ultimately, the ambidextrous structure formalized these emotional dynamics and complicated the organization’s ability to achieve both sets of demands and individual staff members’ need to heal from past pain.

In sum, these studies illuminate some of less obvious reasons why the public sector is so difficult to change and manage. While they provide many useful insights that could help inform future studies and reform efforts, they also explicate the inherently complex nature of human behavior in organizations. As such, the ways in which power dynamics, social identity, and emotions shape reform efforts are likely to vary in different contexts and depend on many other aspects of the group dynamics involved in the effort. Still, they help clarify new areas of importance that should be attended to in future research, policy, and practice.
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Appendix A

Section A: Background and Reflection

1. How long have you been in your role?

2. Tell me a little bit about your work here.

3. Can you walk me through your day yesterday?
   a. In what ways was yesterday typical or not typical? Examples?

4. How many people work on your team here?

5. What is your relationship with them like?

6. Can you tell me about a recent team meeting, or a time when the team was working together on something? What was that experience like?

7. Who do you take your cues from? Who has been particularly influential in shaping your thinking?

8. What do you see as the “right” division of labor between people in your roles and people in the schools? What are you (based on your role) “supposed” to do? What are they (people in other roles) “supposed” to do?

9. Can you tell me about a specific time or example of when you’ve seen [the policy] be really useful? What about detrimental?

10. Tell me about a time when you found your work in this role rewarding. What about a time when you faced a challenge?

11. What other roles have you had in the education system?

12. Why did you choose to go into this role rather than another role in the education sector?
13. What new insights or perspectives have you gained in this role? (Like what things do you see differently now that you’ve been in a policy role? If you went back into the classroom how would your perspective change?)

Section B: Relational Questions

1. Have you had any direct interactions (including email, phone, and in-person) with people at the district level recently?
   a. Can you tell me about one of those times?
   b. What was the interaction about?
   c. How did the conversation/interaction go?
   d. What do you think the other person/people was/were thinking or feeling about [whatever they give as the example]?
   e. In what ways was that interaction typical or not typical of other interactions you’ve had with people at the district level?

2. When you think of a typical “central office person,” what image comes to mind?

***Repeat series in regards to other role groups

Section C: Debrief

1. In general, what are your thoughts/reactions to this conversation? Does this resonate with your experiences?

2. Some of our early findings suggest that people in schools feel like they have trouble being heard by district and state officials, while district and state officials feel as if they are trying
hard to communicate. What do you see as some of the barriers to this kind of communication? What have you been able to do to address some of these concerns?

3. Can you give us an example of a time when you’ve worked closely with the field and achieved a good result?
   a. Why is what you achieved in this case so difficult to replicate on a more usual basis?

4. Any final thoughts, questions, or feedback?
### Table 1. Examples of Unconscious Group-Level “Tells” and Interpretations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field note excerpts</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example 1: Example of deflection, going back and forth</strong></td>
<td>A young officer expressed concern over what would happen when Deputy Johnson left. Deputy Johnson admitted to the group that he only planned to lead the unit for six to twelve more months. He went on to explain why he needed to leave, that he didn’t want to be “selfish,” and that he would help decide who would succeed him as the leader of the unit. He tried to reassure the group that the unit would “still run after I leave, probably better!” He continued, “Don’t be afraid.”</td>
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Deputy Johnson (responding to Officer Lewis’s concern over what will happen to the unit when Deputy Johnson retires): I will be honest with you guys, I don’t know how long I will be here, somewhere between six months to one year, but I don’t know. I have to leave, for my physical and mental health. I need to give someone else a chance to lead. He added, “I don’t want to be selfish.” When I leave, I will give the sheriff and the deputy sheriff two or three or maybe just one name of somebody who could take my place. I will tell them that if you want the RU to continue as it has been, these are the people who can do that and here’s why. He emphasized to the group, it’s not me, it’s us creating this. It’s something you can’t get rid of, we created something as a team it will still run after I leave, probably better! Don’t be afraid. Even when I leave, I’m only a phone call away. Do you feel better, Officer Lewis? |

Officer Lewis replied, “A little.”

Deputy Johnson joked back, “I’ll give you a hug at the break.”

Officer Lewis gave a slight smile, but then he emphasized, “but it’s a serious question,” suggesting that perhaps he was not satisfied with the way the deputy responded to his question or is joking comment about the hug. Officer Lewis added, “the inmates look at you like a father.”

Officer Harris joined the conversation, saying that he is not as concerned about the outside, but it’s the fact that in the other pods it’s pretty clear what you can and can’t do in the RU, it’s so fluid and gray. He mentioned the point that there are cameras everywhere and people are paranoid. He emphasized the point that Officer Lewis made, saying, “you always have our back, but still.” The phrase “but still” added to the feeling of apprehension and anxiety in the room - what happens when Deputy Johnson leaves? How will I be protected, especially in cases where things aren’t clearly spelled out in policy one way or another.

Deputy Johnson stressed that they’re not “doing” C-Unit, and that these approaches are just designed for the RU. | He closed by asking Officer Lewis if his explanation made him feel better. Yet, when Officer Lewis admitted that it only made him feel “a little” better, Deputy Johnson deflected with a joke about hugging him during the break. This deflection appeared to be an attempt to shift the group’s conversation in a different direction. However, Officer Lewis retorted, “but it’s a serious question.” He then doubled down on the importance of his question by shifting his focus away from the staff members (e.g., his own and his colleagues’ personal concerns about what might happen when Deputy Johnson left) and towards how his leaving might affect the inmates.

Immediately afterwards, another officer, Officer Harris, joined the conversation. He expressed concern over the gray areas of decision making in the unit and found comfort in the fact that Deputy Johnson had their backs. In the interaction between Deputy Johnson and Officer Harris, Office Harris continued pushing for reassurance, asking, “But is that spelled out in policy to protect us?”

In this interaction, the group-level “tell” was that the group refused to let the topic of Deputy Johnson’s departure drop, even after he attempted to shift the conversation by deflecting with a joke. Officers Lewis and Harris both pushed Deputy Johnson further about what would happen when he left. Additionally, the atmosphere in the room reinforced the anxiety that Officers Lewis and Harris were expressing; everyone was paying close attention and there was a palpable sense of anxiety. Thus, this group-level “tell” signaled that the group felt deep-seated anxiety about Deputy Johnson’s departure, and perhaps, that he provided
Officer Harris stressed the question further, asking, “But is that spelled out in policy to protect us?”

Deputy Johnson told the group that he has gotten calls from the sheriff and deputy sheriff to ask if he is okay with staff playing chess with the inmates. He explained that the deputy sheriff is a “shy guy, he's a good guy, he really is.”

Example 2: Example of ignoring and abrupt shifts

Sergeant Williams transitioned back to the group formation topic that she had skipped over on Wednesday. She put up a slide with the four stages: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing. Each stage had a definition next to it. As she went over the stages, it felt like no one was really paying close attention. She asked the group, “How many of you didn’t know much about the other people here?” People looked around the room and slightly nodded, as if they all agreed that they pretty much knew each other beforehand. Then someone asked, “Did we really know each other Monday?” A few started saying, “No.” Then they clarified that they pretty much knew everyone’s names, but that there were groups of people who knew each other better than others.

When Sergeant Williams read through the stages and talked about storming, she asked the group if there were any examples of “storming” from the previous day. Officer Baker raised his hand and said that when he and Officer Kelley disagreed about their views on the memorial. He said, “I guess we didn’t really disagree, but we had different perspectives on the memorial. Officer Kelley had just stepped out of the room, so she wasn’t around when he brought it up. Officer Baker said, “I wish she were here for this.” I think he wanted her to be in the room so she could respond to his comments. Sergeant Williams told him that we could wait.

While we waited for Officer Kelley to return, Sergeant Williams shifted the conversation back to the views of the sheriff and his role. She posed the question, “Should he be in the facility more?” A few people said, “Yes.” She said that some people had different views – some people might think his role is to be out in the community more.

Officer Kelley came back into the room, and Sergeant Williams asked her to share more about her experience when she attended the memorial [and the ensuing scrutiny she endured – my words]. Officer Kelley said that she was upset that people made fun of her and said that she only went so she could get promotions. She something or met some need for the group that no one else could fulfill.

Sergeant Williams tried to lead the group through a series of slides about the process of group formation, but no one seemed very engaged. However, once she raised the topic of “storming,” and Officer Baker offered up the example of the group’s heated conversation the previous day, the group became more engaged.

At that point, several topics emerged, including how officers treat each other (especially in the context of events like memorial services) and how female officers are treated (which was ignored altogether).

Sergeant Williams attempted to contain the conversation by saying, “If going to the memorial helps you, good, and if not, just understand that people experience things differently.” Yet, the group ignored her attempt to shift the conversation. Instead, the group acted out almost the exact same conversation that had unfolded the previous day (which is detailed in the findings section of this paper). They were preoccupied with their feelings about the sheriff and where the sheriff was the day the young officer committed suicide.

In this example, the group-level “tells” included the topics that were ignored (including the initial exercise about the four stages of group formation and how female officers are treated), as well as the moves that were ignored, like Sergeant Williams’s efforts to contain the conversation. The group’s lack of engagement during the session on group formation, compared with their intense engagement when the conversation shifted to topics like how staff treat each other and their feelings about the sheriff, suggests that they had a deeper need and desire to discuss the more personal, emotional topics.

In turn, these “tells” helped me triangulate with interview data how participants talked about topics like staff dynamics, their feelings about the sheriff, and their perceptions of the RU.
said, “I wanted to be there for [the young officer who committed suicide], even though I didn’t know him.” She went on to emphasize that everyone at roll call laughed at her, and “no one said anything.”

Officer Baker responded, “Shame on those people.” He went on to tell the group that he got emotional yesterday when he went home and got on Facebook. He realized that he’s been here 6 years and he knew 6 of the names on the wall of people who have died. He said to Officer Kelley, “I’m sorry if I offended you yesterday or if I was insensitive.” He went on to say that it’s just not how he wants to remember them – that’s not who they were, and I’d rather celebrate and remember them with people at a pub or something.

Officer Kelley responded, “I appreciate that you said that. I was upset about the reaction and the fact that no one said anything. No one ever confronts the negativitity.” She also mentioned that sometimes people make comments about women and say that women shouldn’t work in corrections, and whomever was in the room (“at least 10 other officers”) at the time just stood there. She was visibly frustrated and upset that people don’t say anything – her issue wasn’t with the fact that so few people went to the memorial service, but how people treated her for having gone and for the passivity of other staff.

Officer Lewis joined the conversation and said that he has strong feelings about the sheriff, and he admitted that he had never thought about what Officer Kelley said [I think the fact that she identified how passive people are and how they don’t really speak up about things.] There was a back-and-forth involving Sergeant Williams, Officer Lewis, Sergeant Williams again, and then Officer Turner, but I missed what they were saying.

Sergeant Williams tried to close this part of the conversation, saying that if going to the memorial helps you, good, and if not, just understand that people experience things differently. [Note: At this point, the conversation really picked up and intensified and I couldn’t write down everything.]

Officer Lewis then spoke back up, addressing Captain Nelson, saying, “Captain, you weren’t here so I want to explain myself…” he meant that because the captain had missed the conversation yesterday, he wanted to get him back up to speed. He expressed his frustration with the fact that the sheriff did not come to the facility the day [the young officer] committed suicide…

There was then a brief conversation about why the sheriff did not show up that day. Captain Nelson asked
if Officer Lewis knew why the sheriff did not show up. Officer Lewis did admitted that he did not know. Captain Nelson said that it’s possible he had been out of town. “We don’t know.” I wasn’t sure whether he was saying this as an effort to give the sheriff the benefit of the doubt, especially given his new position as a captain. I wondered if maybe because he is in a leadership position, he felt that he needed to frame the conversation in a way that at least allowed the possibility that the sheriff had a legitimate reason not to show up that day. Another officer said that it happened over Labor Day Weekend [so possibly he was out of town].