



The Continuum of Moral Harms: Correctional Officers' Perspectives of Prison and the Influence on their Wellness

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Abstract

We apply the continuum of moral harms as described by Litz and King (J Trauma Stress 32:341–349, 2019), ranging from moral distress to moral injury, to understand the impacts of correctional officer (CO) interpretations of prison, recognizing how experiencing prison work informs their personal views. In the current study, we analyze data from 93 COs with a maximum of 2 years of work experience, to understand how, reflecting on their occupational experience, they perceive the purpose of place of their work—the federal penitentiary. Findings reveal prison as a space that they believe should be rehabilitative but which is often adamantly perceived as not rehabilitative. Accordingly, these contradictory circumstances reveal most officers encounter workplace experiences that may be consistent with current conceptualizations of moral frustration, distress, or injury. Thus, we demonstrate how prison work can produce moral challenges for COs. We recommend further study into the conceptualizations of moral harm in prison work more broadly and how to inform proactive strategies to address sources of these deleterious experiences.

Keywords Correctional work · Correctional services · Moral distress · Moral injury · Personal experiences · Qualitative

Introduction

“We take people that society wants to pretend don’t exist and we lock them away in a warehouse, so people can go on and live their peaceful life and pretend that people don’t exist” (P345).

In Canada, prisons are spaces intended for rehabilitation and to remove People Who Are Incarcerated (PWAI) from society, with the intention of preventing societal harm (Gendreau et al. 1999). In prison spaces, correctional officers (COs) are responsible for the care, custody, and control of PWAI (Ricciardelli 2019).

Researchers have long studied the orientations of COs toward their occupations and PWAI, the effect of their work on the self and their careers, including the intention to leave the occupation, as well as the nuances of their work experiences (Liebing, 2011; McElligott 2007; Crawley 2004). Scholars, advocates, and government stakeholders have well conveyed the challenges inherent to prison living and work (Ricciardelli 2019). The focus is on challenges that can be understood as tied to the deprivations of prison (Sykes 1958), the importation of behaviors learned on the streets that limit rehabilitation potential (Irwin and Cressey 1962), a combination of deprivation and importation (Crewe 2011), or even “prisonization”—referring to the so-called socialization of PWAI into prison society (Clemmer 1940). Less recognized is how prisons individually and collectively form societies, with informal and formal structures determining acceptable and unacceptable behaviors (Akers et al. 1977; Crewe 2013; Ricciardelli 2014; Tittle and Tittle 1964; Trammell 2009; Wellford 1967).

Prison, for some, is where they “grew up,” visiting family and friends inside, with a role in their social living. There is a culture to prison life that extends to prison work, and this culture does create a dependency on prisons for meeting basic human needs as well as social needs once someone is genuinely embedded in the system. These realities become

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increasingly clarified for COs with increasing occupational tenure. The realities of prison and how they experience their work environment shape their perceptions of prison and PWAI and, ultimately, their view of the purpose of prison. Missing from analyses is how CO perceptions of prisons, emergent from these occupational experiences, can be interpreted through the lens of experiencing potentially morally harmful or injurious events which counter one's personal ethics and morals (Litz et al. 2009). When such experiences fail to align with one's ethics and values, the result may be moral harm. Within prison, moral harms may manifest in a variety of experiences, from being forced to take actions that counter the COs moral beliefs, to witnessing the inaction of others resulting in harm, to betrayals from trusted colleagues or the carceral system at large.

In the current article, we unpack how COs respond to the Canadian philosophy that prison is, or should be, rehabilitative, and interrogate the lived realities of that philosophy. We draw attention to the discrepancies between what a prison is "about" and how a prison is experienced, to centralize the effect on CO wellness and reveal how a contradictory lack of rehabilitation creates a space for moral harm, frustration, distress, or injury. The lens of moral harm, to our knowledge, has not been applied to prison scholarship. Our article thus empirically adds to literature on perspectives of prison, as routed in experience, and sheds light on moral wounds that may emerge through employment within the prison system. Theoretically, we contribute to understanding of how moral frustration, distress, and injury may materialize within prison work.

To this end, we use this article to explore the concepts of moral harm, more specifically the concepts of moral frustration, distress, and injury as placed on a continuum of severity, and how each may theoretically be applied in prison work. We first present our study methodology and results, ending with a summary of our empirical and theoretical contributions, suggestions for future directions in research and practice, and recommendations to address potential sources of moral harm in correctional work.

Moral Harms

Moral judgments, moral decisions, and potentially morally harmful experiences are a commonality of human existence, and people experience each in a multitude of situations across careers, cultures, and interpersonal dynamics. For example, there are many parallels that can be seen between prison and hospital work, where moral distress has been frequently examined (Jameton 1984). Here, we apply the heuristic continuum model described by Litz and King (2019) to describe and differentiate the possible types of moral conflicts and harms which may arise while working in a carceral system, escalating in severity from moral frustration to moral injury.

This framework critically differentiates how COs may experience the continuum of moral harm while employed in correctional facilities, and the deleterious impacts on well-being that may result from these experiences.

Moral challenges may be considered experiences which do not directly impact day-to-day functioning, either due to scale or lack of direct involvement, yet still impact our emotional responses. At one end of the scale, the emotions that arise from these challenges can be termed *moral frustrations*, wherein the individual may feel a sense of annoyance or contempt that is somewhat short in duration and does not have a significant impact on the well-being of the individual experiencing these emotions. An example of moral frustration that COs may experience is irritation toward PWAI who are actively working against the collective good of the prison, for example, by purposefully disregarding masking rules during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further along the continuum of severity is the concept of *moral distress* which arises from experiences that are considered moral stressors. Moral distress can be considered the psychological distress related to "being in a situation in which one is constrained from acting on what one knows to be right" (Jameton 1984). Despite their immediate magnitude, these moral stressors may elicit acute emotional reactions that are stressful, yet do not themselves have lasting impacts such as alteration of personal identity (Rosen et al. 2022). A morally distressing CO experience may include the conflict that arises when asked to put oneself in harm's way to ensure the safety of other COs in a dangerous situation, against the natural inclination to keep oneself safe. Moral distress may also be stimulated by negative public opinion of the prison environment, leading to feelings of anger or shame related to their career choices.

The least frequent, but most impactful, moral harms, termed moral injuries, may occur due to potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs), which are transgressions of omission or commission, or witnessing others' transgressions which go against deeply held moral values and beliefs (Litz et al. 2009). PMIEs are differentiated from activities that result in moral frustration and moral distress due to the longstanding nature and severity of their impact on the person. PMIEs, which lead to lasting deleterious impacts on mental health, personal identity, and social or existential belief systems, are consistent with the current understanding of *moral injury* (Litz et al. 2009). Moral injury may include longstanding feelings of shame in relation to personal acts of commission or omission, referring to actions people do or fail to do (Litz and King, 2019), anger, or guilt which redefine an individual's self-concept or personal identity. Such experiences within the correctional lens may include having to follow specific correctional procedures which the individual believes are unethical within the specific scenario, leading to feelings of institutional betrayal or acts of

commission that go against their personal beliefs. One example of a PMIE, as described by Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016), may be COs who have to violate trust developed with PWAI when enacting demands made by management in situations involving the application of punitive measures.

Current Study: Context and Methods

The sites of the current research project are Canadian federal prisons, which house those convicted of an offense and sentenced to two or more years in prison exclusively (Correctional Service Canada 2012a, b, c). Long recognized is how prisons are inherently punitive; they control, monitor, and limit PWAI movement. Yet, some, like those in Canada, try to be humane and welfare oriented (Garland 1985; Pratt 2008). Prison work, although shaped by the orientation of the CO, occurs within a system embedded in legislation, governance, and legal processes. COs are therefore restricted, not only in their actions but also their orientations, which are inherently informed by their perceptions of prison, and play a role in shaping the prison living experience for PWAI (Crewe 2009; Liebling 2004; Sparks et al. 1996). Scholars have developed typologies to explain diversity in CO orientations to their occupational work (Allaire and Firsirotu 1984; Farkas 2000; Kaufman 1988; Klofas and Toch 1982). Often, typologies reveal some officers are tended toward rule enforcement, negotiation, mutual obligation to staff, or PWAI rehabilitation. Some have looked at the moral positioning of prison management and how that comes to fruition in prison work (Crewe and Liebling 2011). Here, the notion that moral-dualists (i.e., COs who embody both rehabilitative and punitive orientations to varying degrees) does much to explain the variability in CO roles and orientations.

The current study is not about a typology of orientations, but COs' view of prison purposes, which can underpin orientations, but may also cause moral harm. Informing views of prisons among COs are personal experience, insight, exposure, media, and many additional factors—including their training and experience on duty. What is missing across these literatures is how prison work experience, which shapes COs' view of prison, can affect the wellness of the CO. What happens when a CO's interpretation of prison conflicts with their day-to-day work experience? And, in addition, what is the outcome of officers having to uphold mandated laws, which may create additional tensions that conflict with deeply held values, or are futile for supporting prosocial contact?

Starting in 2018, we conducted annual interviews first with CO recruits and then follow-up interviews each year with tenured COs. The current study draws on wave 1 follow-up interviews with 93 COs each with at least 1 year of operational experience. Although we have nearly 500 participants, those from wave 1 (2019–2020) are included in

the current study to ensure each participant has a similar scope of on the job experience. The smaller wave 1 sample was impacted by the COVID-19, as we had a Correctional Service Canada (CSC)–mandated pause in data collection from March 2020 to January 1, 2021. In response, interviews were conducted pre- and post-mandated data collection pause, and some were completed during their first few waves of COVID-19 in Canada, thus officers were working within the confines of public health measures.

The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed opportunities for probing for additional information and to follow the conversational paths put forth by participants (see Ricciardelli et al. 2021 for the study protocol). The interviewees ranged in age, with the youngest being 19 to the oldest in their late 50s. Participants worked in all five of CSC's regions, Prairie, Pacific, Quebec, Ontario, and Atlantic, at different federal institutions in the country.

To recruit participants during their participation in the CO training program at CSC, the primary investigator (Ricciardelli) introduced the study to recruits in class, either in person (prior to the onset of COVID-19) or virtually (during COVID-19 due to public health measures) at the National Training Academy or its satellite sites. In light of COVID-19 public health measures, the interviews we analyzed for the current study were conducted in person or by phone, only occurring after the interviewer ensured continued consent to participate. The duration of interviews ranged from 55 to 120 min, and were guided loosely by a 39-item open-ended interview guide. Each participant was asked to reflect on their experience working in prison, and in response how they view prisons. We interpreted from our analysis the effects of their perceptions of prison's purpose on their well-being. We digitally voice-recorded each interview and used participant numbers to ensure confidentiality, refraining from using pseudonyms because of the gender or culture each may impose on our sample. We also limited analysis by gender as no discernible differences arose across experiences of COs when stratified by demographic factors.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a team of research assistants and then coded for emergent themes. We grounded our analysis in the views of participants—based on their experience working in prison—using a social constructionist, semi-grounded (i.e., theory was not derived from the data and instead based on our prior knowledge given research does not occur in a vacuum) approach (Charmaz 2014). We used QSR NVivo software and constructed parent, child, and grandchild nodes to organize the codes within the data. We used emergent theme coding to group data thematically and unpack the nuances. Here, a theme was constituted when multiple participants expressed a similar experience, thought process, interpretation, or perspective. Both selective and axial coding were employed to remove less relevant information (Strauss and Corbin 1990). We removed speech fillers for readability, never impacting context, intention, or tone.

Results

COs' experiences of working in prison foundationally shape their perceptions of "what prison is about." Participants reported overwhelming support for rehabilitation to be the focus of prison, or at least having the primary intention of keeping the public safe. Although less commonly reported, participants nevertheless revealed perceptions of prison as inherently punitive. Regardless of the particular philosophy of the individuals who work in correctional services, our findings reveal moral harms are related to these perceptions in two ways. First, moral harms emerge when there is a discrepancy between the perceived role of prison and the lived experience of prison's purpose. Second, moral harm may also be created by the range of competing and often seemingly counterintuitive purposes of incarceration itself. In this results section, we explore these two aspects in turn.

Harmful Discrepancies

Participants revealed three dominant "purposes" for prison, and each of these may have created moral harms among COs in their partial success and/or failures.

Prison as Intended for Rehabilitation

Participants ($n=93$) overwhelmingly viewed prison as either "trying to be," "should be," "wanting to be," or to be "about" rehabilitation. Even participants ($n=27$) who rather adamantly stated, like P10, that prison is "no, actually not at all" about rehabilitation still felt prisons tried to be and were intended to be rehabilitative. P154, summarizing the words of many other participants, explains their role in PWAI's rehabilitation and that of the institution:

I still feel the role is to try to get them [PWAI] fit to live in society again and to try to help them with their trauma or to try to help them with their addiction. ... The counselling and all those different things, the elders, like all those things are in place and, maybe things here or there could be better with that.

P154 shares there are different programming and supports in place to aide with rehabilitation, but also recognizes that simply offering supports may not suffice because not everyone is ready to use the support effectively at the time offered. Thus, despite efforts, as P103, echoing others, explains: "I don't really think there's a whole lot of rehabilitating going on." The lived reality of the rehabilitation situation generates harmful realizations among COs.

Among all of the different aspects associated with a positive, "rehabilitative" environment, the lived reality of "time behind bars" was one of the most challenging and

therefore potentially morally harmful for COs. Contrary to the notion of ensuring purposeful activity for incarcerated persons, many participants ($n=36$) share P10's view that prison is largely a place to "pass the time." They felt that many PWAI, as per P31, "do their time, do their programs, and they don't cause issues" because "they just want to do their time ... and get out of here". Moreover, COs ($n=13$) perceived prison as serving as a space for some PWAI, both males and females, to "recharge" and stabilize themselves after life in free society. P149 speaks of the fact that prison, in this case a women's prison, serves as a temporary refuge (see Bucerius et al. 2020), explicating "a holding ground":

Almost all of our offenders are just addicts that come from terrible backgrounds and whatever and a lot of them will never get out of this cycle. But and it just becomes kind of a holding ground for them. It's not necessarily the most appropriate place for them to be but it's somewhere that they're going to spend their lives.

Although participants also see prisons as a space in which people live, they also see the temporary relief prison can provide. Interpretation here supports that prison, in this sense, is also a time for a sort of self-care for some PWAI. A time where basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, clothing) and some additional needs (i.e., mental and physical healthcare) can be met—and prison should be safe—thus, for some PWAI, prison is perceived as a space to regroup and organize to move forward. The fact prison has to serve such a function and there is not more humane alternative is a concern, not the focus of current paper, but also informs COs' potential experience of moral harm through working within the prison setting. COs live the reality that prison is the better option for some people, more desirable than "sleeping rough" or trying to assimilate into free society. Moral distress may emerge from the difficult realization that prison is a more positive space for some than free society, especially when encountering individuals who the CO may believe do not "deserve" to be imprisoned for the sentences they received. Living with evidence of such a fact can create challenging moral tensions COs must navigate in their occupational responsibilities.

Perceiving men's institutions as a space for temporary refuge, P18 notes some PWAI are "actually trying to figure their shit out and get out and get back on the streets. There's guys here that have been here that have gotten out that openly say I want outta this life style." Thus, here they use prison as a place to "figure their shit out," to reassess and readdress their life choices before returning to their lives outside prison. P10 explains prison, "it's just passing the time until they get out and then they get out and literally I dropped guy off at the bus stop, three days later he's back. Because it's a place to stay. They get meals, there's not

repercussion on anything that they do, they can talk to you however they want....” The participant’s words clarify the perception that prison is a space of temporary refuge, even for men, because their basic needs are met—food, shelter, and clothing. P16 also perceives prison as a temporary space where needs are met. They explain:

I think that our prisons are an absolute joke, I think that they get treated here [better]—I mean everyone has your basic human rights. But the things that these guys get here is insane, like it’s almost half these guys would rather be in prison because they get more here than they would if they weren’t.... Life is better inside for a lot of these guys I’ve talked with a lot of inmates and [they] said that they rather; they get out and they’ll do something just to come right back.

P12 confirms the sentiment expressed by P16, PWAI “have it way better like than I do on the outside, better than people on welfare have it on the outside. They have it better than like when comes to getting programing and getting help I guess and I understand that’s a part of the rehabilitation but like there’s people that purposely come back to jail because they have it better here (laughter) than they would on the outside like.” Most evidenced here, across participants, is the dependency the correctional system creates, which may be a morally injurious experience to realize that the system which they uphold is, in fact, working in some cases against the rehabilitative beliefs that the CO holds about the system. The difference between the rehabilitative orientations and the reality of the system may create feelings of betrayal by the larger system they work to uphold. Living the reality that people want to be in prison or need to be in prison challenges rehabilitative orientations and is morally challenging—how can COs reconcile their interpretations and perspectives over the reality that prison is home for many and desirable?

The so-called revolving door of prison was inherently harmful to COs. The system is complex and can, from the perspective of COs, create dependency among PWAI where some, over time, choose to be there. P12 feels, for example, that in their prior experience, the chances of assisting with rehabilitation among PWAI was more possible—they worked in youth and women’s facilities at a provincial level. In the federal system, however, “a lot of people here, especially federal because it’s more of a long-term sentence, they’re going [to] get involved in the prison culture and learn things. I think it’s very hard to come into a place like this and change your life around. I’m sure it happens, but I think it’s very hard and I think it becomes harder.” They draw attention to the networks and associated dependencies developed in prison, including the embedded antisocial behavior (e.g., “learn things”), in explaining how prisons create dependency among PWAI, which makes engaging in rehabilitative

processes challenging as engagement within the prison society means “living the lifestyle.” These moral challenges also come into play as P108, who sees PWAI keep returning to custody, explains “even in my two years here, it’s like ‘oh, he’s back again’. Like it’s the same guys coming back again a lot of the time.” The constant “revolving door” of prison is discouraging in that PWAI, who COs want to see succeed in re-entry, too often return despite their efforts.

These potential moral frustrations are at least in part attributable to the recognition that prison living creates dependency on prison living, for social networks, food, housing, etc., making rehabilitation a difficult choice representing change. The situation is discouraging, particularly when a CO sees their occupation as, in an ideal, intended to support PWAI rehabilitation, here understood as changing lifestyles. Here, P38, notes “I’ve only been here about a year and I’ve seen people come and I’ve seen people go. The same people. Not that they weren’t given the resources, I don’t think they were able to comprehend how to use them, etc., etc. you see some people who don’t even go to programs.” P38 speaks to seeing rehabilitative efforts fail, largely because not all PWAI know “how to use them,” at least in part as a consequence, there is a cyclical nature where the same PWAI leave, do not thrive in the community, and then return. This return to prison represents the dependency, where PWAI know prison living. To further exemplify, P154 describes moral stressors in seeing the cycle of prison living—the dependence on prison—as an injustice that they are helpless to change. They explain “it’s a struggle for a lot of them [PWAI] because a lot of them were born into it or even their families have, their mom has come to the same prison. It’s a family affair so to speak. Some of them, it’s much more of a struggle than others and some it’s their trauma that has got them there.” P154 echoes others, seeing the family dependency on prisons, where prison living becomes a family affair, a place where family members reconnect with each other, support each other, and continue to move in and out of the system. The dependency across generations is, as some learn, a way of life that is rooted in almost more systematic than spontaneous re-entry into prisons.

This dependency, the “revolving door that can be prison,” underpins how despite rehabilitative efforts, including access to programming, working within the federal correctional system may create numerous experiences of moral frustration and moral distress. P105 feels prison “should be about rehabilitation,” but instead, despite efforts, “once they get out, they get right back into it and it’s a revolving door again.” P105 explains the “programming here is pretty good, they get to go to school and carpentry, and they get to have their grade 12 so they can at least get out and find a job,” yet despite these programs, prison remains a place of return. Thus, the fact some PWAI cycle through prison sentences was concerning, and participants found it difficult to support PWAI who did not use programming or want

support or where the programming and support were insufficient or a combination of both. The challenge arises when all their rehabilitative efforts start to feel futile because of the dependency. This feeling of futility and understanding of the inadequacy of programming may be at odds with COs' deeply held beliefs regarding their responsibility to facilitate rehabilitative efforts within the prison system. Here, P364 said: "I know the focus is rehabilitation, that's one reality that I found that I had to stomach working here... a lot of them are just stuck in their ways. There's not enough resources to help them change or they don't want to change. It's a reality check, you realize it very, very quickly."

P364's latter sentiment nods toward another source of potential moral frustration or distress—the motivations of PWAI themselves. Tensions may arise when officers see PWAI choose not to avail of opportunities for rehabilitation—they interpret the individual as choosing not to "make good" (Maruna 2001) and instead opt out of opportunities for self-betterment. The general sentiment was, as per P100, that prison is "about rehabilitation, about trying to help the inmates become law abiding citizens," but, as P107 succinctly suggests, "a lot of it boils down to whether or not they want to make the changes themselves." For PWAI willing to authentically use the available resources, processes, programs, and services exist to support them in their preparation for community re-entry. P63 explains in prison "we do try we do offer programming and we give them job skills and things like that for them when they do get out ...". The role of the PWAI is therefore also central to the ability of the institution to fulfill rehabilitative objectives and, in consequence, even when prisons try to be rehabilitative, success is contingent on the person incarcerated. Accordingly, P108 believes that prison is about rehabilitation, but concludes that the goals are not delivered and P63 further ventures that staff (or the higher-level management that dictate prison systems) "don't know how to fix it."

Here, P104 explains "it's very discouraging knowing that the people are in there to get rehabilitated. Like they did a bad crime, they're there to get rehabilitated but they choose not to be rehabilitated." This notion, that one chooses not to engage, was frequently apparent—the notion of the individual who has opportunities but elects to disengage. The belief in the rehabilitative ideal for prison makes more challenging the reality that not everyone wants to be rehabilitated at the time the opportunity (or in the way the opportunity) presents. P106 too feels prison "in theory" is about rehabilitation but recognizes that "in practice it's pretty tough to help people that don't want to help themselves so." There is likely moral frustration in watching people not take advantage of the opportunities presented to them. This moral frustration may lead COs to feel acute anger, resentment, or pity for PWAI who do not engage in rehabilitative opportunities, yet these instances

likely will not fundamentally shift how COs view themselves or others (i.e., the requirement for an experience to become a moral injury).

Participants remembered when PWAI choose to transition to being law-abiding citizens and to respect the opportunities that can come with incarceration. Participants, like P119, are discouraged because they did not feel PWAI were interested in working toward rehabilitation: "I also don't think that there's a lot of people in a maximum [security penitentiary] that want to be rehabilitated." This theme was dominant across participants, who felt it takes a personal desire to change that is not evident across all PWAI and the lack of interest impairs the institution's ability and that of the COs to support rehabilitation.

Participants also expressed moral frustration when PWAI are perceived to use rehabilitative processes to "manipulate" the correctional system to their advantage. Examples of such practices include completing programming to try to secure early parole or to visit with friends. For instance, P21 describes seeing PWAI use rehabilitative programming to navigate the justice system, specifically PWAI who:

just follow the programs, I feel sometimes, to get released sooner. When you give the choice to the inmate to do something about his life—his lifestyle—most of them won't want to. They're just doing their time and when they get out, they still have the same friends and still have the same lifestyle and they come back and they get out again and they come back until they really want to change.

Specifically, P21 describes the potential moral challenge of watching an individual continue to harm despite the opportunity to change their life and feeling as though they [the CO] are unable to do anything to stop this from occurring. Their words encompass the perception of both dependency and manipulation of opportunities, which is an inherent challenge for COs in their daily working lives. Similar tensions arise when we consider the discrepancies generated from another, arguably more neutral prison "purpose"—that incarcerating individuals serves to protect members of society in general. However, even within this arguably less-ambitious agenda, moral harm may be generated through the disparity in the lived experiences of this goal.

Prison as Protection for Society

Some COs ($n = 11$) perceived prison as "protection for society," a way to "warehouse" PWAI such that they are removed from the opportunity to harm others in free society. For example, P150 explains that prison is about public safety:

it's more about a protection of society, like there are people who are a risk to themselves and others and just need to be managed in an environment where they're safe from themselves and harming other people.

P150's words reveal the perception that prison is intended to prevent further harm—both self-harm and harming others. Their perception, which was echoed by others, reinforces, as per P152, “prison is about keeping the public safe, rehabilitation is up to the individual.” Here, participants individualized rehabilitation, placing the onus on the person incarcerated, while articulating their work as centering on safety. Likewise, P21 explains that “I don't think it's [prison] about punishment. I see prison more as protective for the population... you protect the public from the inmates for a few years.” However, participants were often critical of prison's ability to facilitate that safety in a broader sense. Inherent in that discussion is the assumption that prison will create individuals who are no longer a threat to society at large. However, although some PWAI want to change their lives, to be released and engage in pro-social living, many others become “prisonized” (Clemmer 1940) or simply engulfed in federal incarceration such that they want to return to prison. Here, two pathways emerged that COs ($n=51$) perceived as a direct result of prison living. The first, and less commonly noted than the second, is that PWAI learned a way of life in prison that requires being criminalized—explicitly creating affiliations and practices that lend toward continued criminal engagement—they feel welcome into a society. The second and more commonly noted pathway was that prison created dependency. Here, participants felt some persons thrived in prison—they felt better off in prison than in free society and used prison as a place to both recharge and for meeting their basic needs—another source of possible moral harm.

Regarding the former, P56 notes that “They're learning to be better inmates,” while P4 explains:

some guys are here and they thrive, they love they're with their buddies, they're with their bros, they don't act up, they follow their correctional plan. They get out on the streets, they don't know what the heck to do, so is that punishment for them? Maybe being released is punishment for them.

The irony is not lost in P4's words. The idea that the true “punishment” for PWAI is their release reinforces the friendships and pseudo-families that emerge in prison. PWAI learn a way of life and feel accepted among their peers. Thus, the push to remain or return is perceived as strong. P99 further explains the sentiment: “as an inmate, it's just a place where you can come and better your skills, like, it's basically Con College. If I'm doing time and there's another guy doing time, obviously we're going to share information: ‘Oh I got away with this cause, I did that, or this is how you do that.’” P99 talks about learning

criminalized ways of life in prison—the irony is not lost that PWAI may be learning from other unsuccessful criminalized individuals (i.e., people who were caught and sentenced)—but they still learn.

Perhaps not surprisingly, P24 notes that: “I think that some guys come in here and it's only the sense of belonging they've ever felt in their lives and then they just become so institutionalized. And then they become worse because they get put brought into a gang... and then they just learn worse things than they maybe knew prior to being here so.” Here, moral frustration is possible due to the very idea that individuals “choose” prison counters rehabilitative potentialities many COs believe are the underlying purpose of prison. Likewise, P100 describes the situation in prison as.

The reality is they [inmates] never leave. Ah, it [prison] festers and produces more criminals to be quite honest. They network here. It's a networking system for the inmates.... I know that something has—someone has been maybe stabbed or killed at another institution hours before we find out here. Through our own institution. I find it absolutely incredible. I don't know how these inmates find out stuff, but someone could be murdered in ah, New Brunswick, on the other side of the country and I will know that happened within thirty minutes of it happening in that side of the country. Ah, through the inmates here. Ah, but CSC won't make the announcement until two or three days later.

P100 speaks of the society that is prison, the complex social network that builds across institutions and PWAI, where each is aware of the details of incidents occurring across institutions. Prison is a society within a society, and the interconnected subpopulations that constitute PWAI are pronounced in P100's words, who experiences the impacts of the network, both in producing more “criminals” but also in providing supports for each other and awareness of incidents within their communities. This is further reinforced in the perception that, as per P16, the system produces more criminalization because the system is not set up to support PWAI successes post-release. They explain:

when guys get released out of here, I think that they make it very difficult for them to stay out.... I think it's absurd, I think there's a lot of rules and regulations for these guys when they get out of here that keeps bringing them back.... We end up with all these guys that are coming back here because it's damn near impossible for them to stay out.

P16's words reveal that although the institution is supposed to be about rehabilitation, the justice system itself is not

supportive. Here, moral harms, such as moral frustration, may arise as rehabilitation is subverted by the “need” for incarceration. In this way, COs understand the system is understood as creating dependency. Here, P54 explains “some people are in and they’re gonna stay there because they just they’d never be able to survive on the outside after so many years.” P54’s words suggest institutionalization is at play, where the ability to “survive on the outside” is largely compromised after years spent living in prison. Participants expressed that survival skills—those necessary to meet basic needs—deplete when in prison. Thus, PWAI’s abilities to secure employment, housing, thus food, shelter, and clothing, decrease, which leaves them susceptible to dependence on prison to meet their basic needs as well as their social needs.

P28 notes that “I’ll try my best [to help with rehabilitation] to do what they can and people really try their best to help these guys but I feel like at the end of the day some of these guys are just beyond help and they’re just there really are some guys who are just better off in jail.” Their words evidence how embedded the dependence is for some PWAI, P38 overheard, at the courthouse, a person incarcerated say “Oh I miss jail.”

Conversely then, prison practices could arguably be contradictory to the goal of creating a safer society if PWAI are likely to continue or even strive toward further illegal activities. The very fact that some people want to be in prison and/or learn criminal behaviors while they are incarcerated may be morally challenging for COs due to the disconnect between the role the CO believes prison “should” serve and the role prison takes on. As frontline representatives of CSC, COs must then enter into morally ambiguous and distressing experiences in their daily work as they navigate their role within a complex system.

In the following section, we recognize the significant number of COs that recognized a punitive purpose of imprisonment and the implications of this opinion in possibly creating moral harms.

Prison as Punishment

Many participants ($n = 70$) did believe prison was “about punishment.” However, this punishment was understood as simply related to restrictions and deprivations—the fact that PWAI were removed from free society—rather than unnecessarily poor living conditions or arbitrary discipline: “the only punishment is they’re not free in society” (P4). Apparent here is, as many described, the recognition that the purpose of the custodial officer role is neither to pass judgment nor to make life more difficult for those in their custody and care. Instead, they ensure safety within a deprived living environment. P49 explains that: “We’re supposed to be federal peace officers and our job isn’t to make their, their

lives worse, it’s to just make sure they’re inside our walls and everybody’s safe.”

That said, participants here also disclosed that they felt they had no means to “discipline” PWAI who cause harm to others in prison, and thus punishment, outside of deprivation as enforced by the courts through serving a sentence, was centralized. P69 explains “the government is running it right now, it’s not really punishment cause we can’t really punish them for anything.” They continue to explain that their hands are tied, which may lead to forced acts of omission during potentially morally injurious events, such that even when incidents occur in the institution their only course of recourse is to “lock you up but then release you (the PWAI) a couple hours later.” The lack of ability to impose consequences when harmful behaviors occur in prison between PWAI furthers the perception that prison was not punitive in terms of policing PWAI’s behaviors—it was only punitive in terms of deprivations.

COs also found challenging the lack of consequences in prison. The reality they lived suggests that there are no tangible and life-impacting consequences (i.e., in free society one is incarcerated for harming others, but PWAI are already incarcerated) for PWAI. The consequence for many incidents was perhaps simultaneously served time or being fined. This includes for incidents where a person incarcerated’s actions result in a CO being harmed or dying. To exemplify, P27 explains the moral stressor of this punitive measure stating that “I mean a \$50 charge for an assault. If a staff member wants to press outside charges, that’s all well and good. They can do that. But if it was a staff assault and they didn’t want to charge outside, the max fine for that is \$50 to the inmates.” P27 reveals in their words how they feel their life is not valued and, no matter what the incident, the consequences are mild. The same occurs when altercations occur between PWAI. P143 explains:

with inmates stabbing each other, [as] we had recently, other than being in their cells for like maybe a day or two, they’re going to come back and then we’re going to walk around them like nothing happened. There’s no punishment at all. It’s pretty much hard for them to get a punishment for having stabbing weapons or assaulting an officer.

Thus, there are probable moral consequences for COs due to the system-level betrayal wherein harm occurs without perceived consequence; moreover, there is a constant reminder (for COs and PWAI) an event happened—as the perpetrator returns “like nothing happened,” because the physical and social environment has not changed. The perpetrator is back on the unit, the victim (hopefully) is too, as well as all the witnesses and responders. This reality may constitute, for some, a possible moral injury wherein

longstanding psychological and behavioral outcomes, such as shame, guilt, or anger due to the perceived systemic betrayal, may occur. To further exemplify, P143 feels PWAI can “get away” with a lot without consequences. They feel second rate when compared to PWAI, undervalued, and unappreciated as well as at risk of harm. Moreover, if harmed at the hands of a person incarcerated, they feel there are no tangible repercussions. P143 laments: “maybe like a \$20 fine for risking our lives and stuff. There’s no punishment at all anymore,” and P185 elaborates in their response that after an incident:

if you write a fine, it’s like \$5 and then they do the little thing here where it’s like ‘well, if you show good behavior for ten days that \$5 fine is gone’. And I don’t know how you fix that, but it is extremely frustrating when you see—and then that’s the thing I’ve seen here is with co-workers as well most don’t even bother anymore because it’s just—we feel pointless like why, why even try [to rehabilitate?]

This feeling of work being “pointless” and “frustrating” expresses the extent of probable moral frustration and distress. The feeling is not only directed toward harm of staff being without repercussion but toward harmful actions between PWAI. Here, P109 explains that “people would be surprised at what these guys get away with—if you found out ‘hey this guy went to prison because he executed my so and so, or raped my so and so’, and they still get anything they want, I think people would get more offended but that’s just me.” Likewise, P10 reveals frustration first in their perception that “there’s no repercussion” for negative behavior (i.e., bring in contraband) or failing to complete responsibilities (i.e., go to school).

Exacerbating such findings remains the perceived difference in treatment oriented toward PWAI versus staff. P10 explains the perceived difference between themselves as an officer and a person incarcerated:

An inmate has a cell phone there is no punishment ... that is the one biggest security risk cause if I were to bring my cell phone in, I would get in trouble versus an inmate gets a cell phone, there is literally no trouble for them, there’s nothing (P10)

P10 describes differential treatment between themselves and the PWAI, explaining the lack of fairness in how each is treated around the same topic—having a cell phone in prison. This perception—based on a lack of equity and equality in treatment—left the officer feeling they were inferiorly placed to the person incarcerated and awarded less respect. This is echoed by P106 who too finds difficult how “it doesn’t ever seem that there’s a great deal of negative consequences for negative behavior... they seem to retain a vast set of rights.” In the same way, P28, explains that “Some days, I’m working short-changed and these guys are

still sleeping and I’m like ‘yeah, some days it wouldn’t be bad just to not to do anything’ and I’m like ‘I kind of get it at the same time’ and I’m like ‘oh this still also sucks so.’”

It is clear that there are significant discrepancies between the roles that COs feel prison should serve and those which it does or should serve, which, as we have demonstrated, is a significant component in the generation of potential moral harms. However, our findings—which themselves reveal the range of different purposes of prison—demonstrate that there are clearly vast discrepancies in the opinions of what prison itself should achieve. Not all of these goals are complementary, which prompts discussion of the potential moral harms generated by these competing agendas in themselves.

Harmful Competing Agendas

Despite how they perceived prison, as punitive, rehabilitative, creating dependencies, or protecting public safety, moral harms became evidenced across perceptions ($n = 73$). The underlying perception, the rehabilitation perception of prison, is key to this sense of moral injustice. It is morally conflictual, at its core, to want to see people succeed but to also witness and *be part of* informal and formal systems prohibiting such success. For example, processes intended to rehabilitate were experienced as doomed to fail due to the many systematic and individual challenges. Being the individual to uphold these processes, while holding the knowledge that they are “doomed to fail,” may constitute a morally frustrating, or in some circumstances, morally distressing, experience. Consequences, for instance, do not really exist as they do in free society for PWAI and PWAI become dependent on correctional services as well as on the people they meet in prison creating a cycle (i.e., a systematic challenge), the result being that moral beliefs in the importance of rehabilitation are countered in experiences that reveal many factors that stymie rehabilitative efforts.

The perceived different treatment received by PWAI versus COs further extends to access to healthcare services. P172 says: “that’s how I see things in CSC—like I feel bad for senior citizens in care homes who are paying for their own care and they’re getting worse care than the inmates, it’s backwards.” The officer, P172, echoes others in explaining how PWAI are treated better than staff (and people in society) with similar healthcare needs. There is perceived injustice to such realizations, not based on wanting to see PWAI treated worse, but wanting to see citizens treated better.

P12 also talks about discrepancies in healthcare, focusing on mental health services, explaining:

it’s unbelievable... the things that they can [access], if you have physiological issues out in the real world

you're going to be on a wait list for months and months and months. Here, they get their psychology on hand, they get seen right away, there's doctors to come in here all the time, they're more of a priority in here than the regular public. I mean that's the opposite of punishment.

The inequity extends to physical healthcare provision as well. Here, another challenging source of moral frustration due to perceived injustice is the access to the physical health care that PWAI receive in comparison to them. P109 explains:

I have mild sleep apnea or moderate depending [on] what side I sleep on and I wasn't approved for a CPAP machine through my benefits. But I've personally taken an inmate on an escort to get a CPAP machine, and I think it's a year and a half [or] a year in the public system—they [PWAI] can just get it fast tracked within months. I am waiting for colonoscopy for, I don't know like years, perhaps I should get in jail so I can get that faster [laughing].

P109 talks about an inequity in access to healthcare where they themselves have waited longer than PWAI for resources, interventions, and treatment, even not been approved, where PWAI are treated immediately. They go so far as to suggest they would get better care being incarcerated and breaking the law.

In addition, it appears that the potential moral harms are not only emergent from CO opinions of themselves and the contradictory nature of the work they do, but from their concern about the public-facing nature of their employment. COs noted the public misconceptions of the COs' occupational role as a source of moral frustration and perhaps moral distress. COs felt the public largely viewed their occupational role negatively—they feel stereotypes tied to media presentations of COs as thugs, keepers, and guards prevailed in public discourse at times—and the prevalence of these perceptions was harmful toward their self-concept, as well as at odds with why many COs chose their careers. Using the example of prison segregation, a now ruled charter right violation, according the supreme court of Canada, P107 reflects on prior to the introduction of the Structured Intervention Units and the misconceptions that laced discourses:

A lot of the times, they're down there [in segregated] because it's for their own safety. Even though the public or certain media outlets [are] trying to portray [us] as 'we're punishing them by segregating them from the

general population', it is never used like that. I never once thought it was going to be used like that and since [SIUs] started, it's never been used like that.

P107 described how the public perception of COs, in this case as associated with discussions of segregation, create narratives about COs that are inaccurate, stereotypical, and that reduce the role of the CO to a punitive and disgruntled position, failing to see their rehabilitative focus. Across excerpts, evidenced was probable moral frustration or distress that can result from the narratives in popular media about COs—and COs were particularly affected because they have no voice or recourse to counter the narrative. COs are unable to provide a counter narrative or to share their side of the experience due to confidentiality, legalities, and the protection of the person incarcerated.

Discussion

COs' views of prison, their rehabilitative oriented motivation to enter the field (Lambert et al. 2014), underpin the potential moral harm, distress, frustration, and even injury within the COs' experience. Data reveal that COs feel the discrepancies created between their perceived purpose of prison and its lived realities, in conjunction with the competing multipurpose of incarceration more broadly generated potentially morally harmful experiences. COs describe how their view of prison—such as a facilitating rehabilitative philosophy and/or the lack of consequences for harmful actions—creates a space conducive to moral frustration and distress. They find it difficult that people often apparently 'want' to be in prison—that despite the hardship in prison some people prefer prison living to free society—and find it incomprehensible that people do not take advantage of the opportunities afforded in prison, and how there is no consequence when harm occurs. Perhaps they feel duped in entering the profession because this reality is unclear prior, as they feel entering the field they will make a difference in the lives of PWAI as they prepare to re-enter society as law abiding citizens. They feel the frustration from inequities, where PWAI appear to have "better" access to healthcare than many in free society, for physical and mental health, and feel the hurt from the public interpretations of COs as, simply said, thugs instead of peace officer responsible for public and institutional safety. That said, COs did not want to decrease access to care for PWAI; they only wanted better access to care for themselves, their colleagues, and people in free society. The realities of prison work then appear to

accumulate into frustration, a frustration informed by their morals, where injury may occur as they lay witness to the realities of individual choices in their lifestyles and rehabilitative interests.

Our data also suggest that part of the challenge is in the understanding of rehabilitation that laces prison work—the notion is heavily tied to education, employment, and action, rather than meeting a person’s needs incrementally as needs evolve and people heal. To this end, we propose rehabilitation as a concept to be re-operationalized, even reconceptualized, to include “meeting a prisoner where they are at,” suggesting that what is rehabilitative differs across people, time, and space. A more individualized understanding of rehabilitation may then serve to provide PWAI with needed supports at the time of need, without pressures of adherence to realities which may be well outside their scope of ability at a given time (i.e., employment, education). This may also serve to reduce the morally harmful implications of witnessing such stark contrasts between one’s ideals of the job and the realities of such.

Conclusion

Through interviews with COs, we demonstrate how the increased acknowledgment of potentially morally injurious experiences as a possible contributor to deleterious mental health outcomes in other service-oriented populations is also true of those working in prisons. We evidence the essence of how prison work can affect psychological well-being and recognize the impact of moral harms, which is necessary to continue to legitimize mental health concerns and to decrease the stigma surrounding mental health and associated treatment seeking. In light of our findings, we recommend further study into the continuum of moral harms, from moral frustrations to moral injury, within prison work more broadly to fully understand the impacts and to help inform proactive strategies to address sources of moral harm. Further scholarship is required that includes the voices and experiences of front-line workers as well as PWAI. Moreover, there is a need to examine the sources, and structured experiences, that create these morally challenging and harmful experiences. COs’ rehabilitative orientations are challenged by perceived systemic betrayals that make maintaining rehabilitative orientation near impossible, which may further exacerbate deleterious mental health outcomes stemming from repeatedly bearing witness to and/or transgressing personally held moral values. COs are also well positioned to see challenges in the system that require improvement. For instance, why do officers feel that they could die in the line of duty and that there will be no repercussions for the perpetrator (i.e., will not impact their conditions of confinement, may lengthen their sentence, but many of these PWAI do live in prison

and this is partially a consequence of having a correctional system)¹ or that society seems unaware of what their job entails and thus they feel their work is undervalued. There is truth to that feeling. COs were late additions to Memorial Grant in Canada and often they do not come to mind in discussion of first responders.

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Data Availability Data are not available due to qualitative nature making the data potentially identifiable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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¹ If another first responder dies in the line of duty, the perpetrator goes to jail. For a correctional officer, the perpetrator (most often) already lives in jail—it does not impact their life directly, which makes them feel there are actually no repercussions. This is not to be interpreted as an interest in making prisons more punitive; the very rehabilitative interpretation of prison ensures that these officers believe the prison is “about rehabilitation.” Thus, we have a potentially morally injurious experience—they deal with internal moral conflict due to possible feelings of betrayal from the system in which they serve, as well as witness physical harms perpetrated against them due to their role within the carceral system. Moreover, the effect is exacerbated because if another CO dies in the line of duty—their colleagues—they must live with the recognition of the very real risk of death tied to the occupation. They are now legally responsible to provide care, custody, and control to the very perpetrator—they have a constant reminder of their lost colleague and the risk. Moreover, they manage this within the context of preexisting relationships with the “perpetrator(s)” —whoever they are—and the victim(s).

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