“Hesitation Gets You Killed:” Perceived Vulnerability as an Axiomatic Feature of Correctional Officer Working Personalities

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Abstract

Research on correctional officers (COs) has expanded over the past two decades, giving us a broad picture into the mental health, culture, and discretionary practices of a traditionally overlooked branch of law enforcement. However, gaps in this portrait remain. Drawing on 131 semi-structured qualitative interviews with Canadian COs, I demonstrate how COs' perceptions of vulnerability powerfully shape officer actions and working personalities. To explain this, I introduce the concept of the vulnerability axiom, a cultural heuristic that frames how officers perceive their position within prisons. COs describe themselves as vulnerable to threats posed by incarcerated people, managers, and other officers, and act in specific ways to mediate these threats. The vulnerability axiom shapes how COs perceive their position within the prison, impacting relationships with managers and incarcerated people and shaping officer control behaviors. I conclude by discussing how the vulnerability axiom may help to reframe future CO research.

Keywords: Correctional Officers; Perceived risk; Prison work; Violence; Officer subcultures

Introduction

Modern research on correctional officers (COs) describes them as conservative, control-focused, and suspicious, with varying levels of professionalism and distinctive subcultural beliefs that inform hostility toward incarcerated people (Higgins et al., 2022; Liebling & Kant, 2018). Work on CO mental health provides a slightly different picture and suggests that work-related stress meaningfully shapes prison work (Worley et al., 2022). Yet while researchers detail officer work cultures and show how stress shapes COs' actions (Higgins et al., 2023; Ricciardelli et al., 2022; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2023), there is little insight into how job stress and officer work cultures connect, or how these factors shape CO actions on a daily basis.

Research by Sierra-Arévalo (2021) suggests that a "danger imperative"—a cultural heuristic that places risk at the center of every decision police officers make—links similar issues for police officers, informing their actions in distinctive ways. However, there is little insight into how something like a "danger imperative" fits alongside CO duties like relationship-building and discretion (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021; Liebling et al., 2011), which are well-established components of the "domestic character of prison work" (Tait, 2011). This means that existing research on CO perceptions of risk cannot effectively reflect a central pillar of CO literature (Higgins et al., 2023), nor fully consider how COs relate to each other—a topic of increasing concern (Burdett et al., 2018). In summary, while something like a broad danger/risk framework clearly impacts how COs do their work, exactly what this looks like remains unclear.

In this article, I draw on 131 semi-structured interviews with Canadian COs to show that perceptions of vulnerability profoundly influence officers' job approaches and working personalities. I adapt Sierra-Arévalo's (2021) danger imperative concept to fit correctional work, demonstrating how COs employ a *vulnerability axiom*—a corrections-specific cultural heuristic

informed by unique features of prison work, which sits at the center of how COs perceive and interact with most aspects of their job. Perceived vulnerability serves as a primary lens officers use to locate themselves with relation to incarcerated people, managers, and other COs. I describe the scope and influence of the vulnerability axiom by asking 1). How do COs use vulnerability as a cultural frame to understand their position within prisons? And 2). which factors do COs specifically identify as creating perceptions of vulnerability?

Literature review

Research on COs' everyday actions has grown over recent years. We know that the most effective officers engage in relationship-building, characterized by discretion and so-called "peacekeeping" (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021; Liebling et al., 2011). Maintaining control of prison environments is both a key component of organizational culture driven home through CO training (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2022), and a central feature of CO subcultures (Rubin & Reiter, 2018; Schultz et al., 2021). Scholars describe COs as conservative, cynical, and loyal to other officers, and suggest they may tactically employ hypermasculine aggression in their daily work (Horowitz et al., 2021; Schultz, 2023). Officers carefully differentiate themselves from incarcerated people, contributing to hostile relationships and efforts to manage the social taint of prison work (Eriksson, 2023; Garrihy, 2022). Such mindsets represent a consistent feature of how COs have approached their work for at least 50 years (Schoenfeld & Everly, 2023). Scholarship also suggests that security level, violence, and local/national context all influence the 'codes,' or cultural frames—"forms of public culture that capture how workgroups give meaning to tangible features of their work" (Higgins et al., 2023, p. 4)—that COs employ (Mears et al., 2022). In aggregate, these frames create distinctive officer subcultures.

Overall, researchers agree that CO subcultures are problematic, and cite them as a cause of conflict associated with the mistreatment of incarcerated people (Higgins et al., 2022; Worley et al., 2022). However, there is little consensus over what underpins these cultures. Some researchers have identified flawed hiring practices (Burton et al., 2023), while others have pointed to the challenges of prison work and the influence of organizational structures (Schoenfield & Everly, 2023; Schultz, 2023). Higgins et al. (2023) have approached these questions using cultural sociology, specifically focusing on how COs construct and employ cultural frames around risk. Consequently, "a preoccupation with danger within prison" (Higgins et al. 2023, p. 6) shapes COs' responses to individuals in a wide range of settings, including friends and family, prison administrators, and incarcerated people.

Higgins et al. suggest that perceived danger represents the most important feature of COs' cultural frames and decision-making. Other authors provide alternative concepts, such as perceived dangerousness (Lambert et al., 2018), perceived risk (Ferdik, 2018), and pervasive uncertainty (Ricciardelli et al., 2022), but generally agree that some form of broader danger or threat is a central feature of CO work. Supporting this, many other descriptions of prison work peripherally highlight the role risk/danger/fear play in shaping officers' worldview. Bucerius and Haggerty (2019) mention how fears of illicit opioid contamination shape COs' daily routines, while Eriksson (2023) and Garrihy (2022) describe how officers lie about what they do to family members to protect them from the realities of prison work. And, COs routinely describe incarcerated people as violent, thereby using assault risks to justify poor treatment (Johnson et al., 2017; Schoenfeld & Everly, 2023). Overall, these articles describe work-related fears—especially fears of assault and attack—as influential factors shaping how COs do their work.

The broad consensus I describe here disguises several gaps in how COs describe risks and threats. Each of the articles cited above presents a different conceptualization and definition of 'risk,' with competing implications. Likewise, these articles consistently employ violence by incarcerated people against COs as a proxy measure of how much 'threat' and 'risk' exist in any given prison (Ferdik, 2018). For example, Higgins et al. (2022, 2023) generally examine assaults by currently and previously incarcerated people, while Ricciardelli et al. (2022) suggest that the "pervasive uncertainty" they analyze emerges from violence against officers. Of course, such an operationalization is logical and straightforward: research consistently describes officer assaults as a problem (Lambert et al., 2018; Ricciardelli et al., 2018), and CO mental health research suggests officer assaults are a key stressor for prison staff (Schultz, 2022; Wills et al., 2021). However, uncritically employing officer assault as the central operationalization of 'risk' in prison blinds us to how COs discuss other features of their work, and may mischaracterize how COs interact with their environment. First, such approaches implicitly rely on the veracity of CO accounts, which commonly overestimate the amount of anti-officer violence in prisons and tacitly support dogmatic organizational messages and socialization processes around risk and danger (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2023; Lambert et al., 2018). Second, such approaches shed little light on how COs perceive risks *beyond* assaults from incarcerated people. To phrase this differently: using assault as a proxy for CO risk perceptions means we are bound to a narrow view of what prison work looks like, one influenced by CO subcultures and organizational descriptions of danger and risk (Ricciardelli, 2019). Consequently, this lens limits our insights into how other features of prison work shape CO outlooks (Burdett et al., 2018).

These limits become clearer when we compare CO research to police officer research. Scholars have carefully detailed how flaws in organizational risk messaging and police officer

risk perceptions influence the way officers interact with members of the public. Sierra-Arévalo (2021), for instance, suggests that police officers employ a primary cultural frame he defines as a "danger imperative"—a structuring heuristic which ensures officers filter *every decision they make through cultural perceptions of policing-related risks*. Sierra-Arévalo describes how police officers informally learn the danger imperative in training, and details how organizational structures, cultural artifacts, and subcultures reinforce it daily. According to Sierra-Arévalo, the danger imperative validates problematic use-of-force decisions in officer training and real-world scenarios. It also shapes mundane behaviors. Police officers routinely draw on the danger imperative to frame civilians as safety risks, thereby justifying suspicious and aggressive attitudes. Likewise, officers define seatbelts as 'risks' that reduce firearm access, and refuse to wear them (Sierra-Arévalo, 2021, p. 90). Within this framework, police officers weaponize the danger imperative to reframe inoffensive, quotidian actions as serious threats to their safety.

We have insights into how parts of a CO danger imperative might work. For instance, Higgins et al.'s (2022, 2023) recent work shows how COs use the perceived dangerousness of incarcerated people to shape their actions in and outside of prison. However, the limits of the danger/risk lens this approach uses means we lack insight into how COs perceive normal, day-to-day features of prison work as making them vulnerable, or how such descriptions impact COs' everyday actions. Nor do such frames engage with broader work that relates to COs' daily practice, such as relationship-building and legitimate practice (Schultz & Ricciardelli, 2022). To phrase this differently, we have little insight into how COs interact with things analogous to the public relationships and seatbelts Sierra-Arévalo (2021) describes. This is an important gap, especially when we consider how the police officer danger imperative negatively shapes

mundane actions such as policy compliance and routine police/citizen engagement (Sierra-Arévalo, 2021).

Because of their near-exclusive association with officer assault, I argue that existing risk frameworks are too narrow to describe the complex range of CO experiences, or the broader implications of COs' culturally-informed actions. I suggest perceived vulnerability more accurately reflects CO experiences, as officers consistently define their personal vulnerability as an axiomatic truism (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), a persistent, self-evident, and self-reinforcing factor they use to shape approaches to life and work. Broader than perceived risk (Ferdik, 2018), CO descriptions of vulnerability routinely interact with ordinary concerns that have little connection with violence or physical danger (Ricciardelli et al., 2022; Worley et al., 2022). In aggregate, I suggest these perceptions form a *vulnerability axiom*, a distinctive heuristic tool that shapes COs workplace cultures and informs their actions toward other people (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). The vulnerability axiom emphasizes real and perceived threats, which officers use to understand their work and relationships, thereby reinforcing preconceptions and shaping CO working personalities. Although the vulnerability axiom shares characteristics with police officers' danger imperative (Sierra-Arévalo, 2021), it is broader and possesses unique facets reflecting the distinctive nature of CO work. Serving as a central feature of the CO working personality, the vulnerability axiom draws disconnected areas of prison work together, creating a framework that shapes CO outlooks and conduct. While assaults and risk are key parts of the vulnerability axiom, I suggest that a broader framework depicting how COs perceive themselves as vulnerable allows for a more comprehensive and consistent portrait of prison work.

Method

I draw on data collected as part of the University of Alberta Prisons Project, a qualitative team-based research project interviewing incarcerated people and COs at four provincial prisons in Western Canada (see Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021 for study protocols). Two of these prisons were maximum-security remand centers. Exclusively housing men and women awaiting trials, remand centers are volatile spaces holding everyone from accused murderers to people serving time in lieu of paying fines, and provide limited programming or recreational opportunities (Pelvin, 2019). Rocky View Remand Center (RVRC)[1] held 1700 men and women, and experienced frequent violence and significant gang activity. Crestwood Remand Institution (CRI) held approximately 700 incarcerated people and was dealing with a wave of opioid overdoses during our access (Bucerius & Haggerty, 2019). The other two prisons were medium-security sentenced institutions, housing people sentenced to less than two years in custody. Harbor Bay Correctional Center (HBCC) held approximately 350 men, while Silverside Correctional Centre (SCC) held 500 sentenced and remanded men and women. SCC and HBCC were less crowded and provided more educational and recreation opportunities than the remand centers. In total, 131 COs participated, 55 from CRI and RVRC and 76 from HBCC and SCC. I interviewed 110 of the 131 participants, while other research team members interviewed the remainder, usually when they had developed a relationship with a specific officer. Participants ranged from new recruits with less than a years' experience, to veterans who were in the process of retiring after 40 years. Of the 131 total COs, 21 were women, and 10 were visible minorities; the remainder were white men. This proportion approximated broader officer demographics.

Table 1: Service Time	0 to 1 years	2 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	11 to 20 years	21 to 30 years	30+ years	Total
RVRC	2	17	13	5	0	1	38
CRI	1	7	4	3	2	0	17

[1] All names are randomly generated pseudonyms, but roughly reflect the individual demographics of officers.

SCC	1	14	10	8	7	4	44
HBCC	1	5	7	9	5	5	32
Total							131

We recruited participants and collected data in several different ways.[2] First, prison administrators sent emails to all officers, inviting everyone to participate. Second, our team made announcements at daily staff briefings, explaining the purpose of our research and repeating our broad invitation to participate. Neither of these approaches were effective, as COs were suspicious of our intentions. As a result, we changed our approach, and leaned on a semi-ethnographic "deep hanging out" approach (Geertz, 1998). As COs consistently saw us go onto "their" units over several days or weeks, we were able to build trust and recruit participants. This approach, which bore similarities to so-called "snowball" sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), helped us recruit over 50% of our participants. My positionality played a significant role in this, as I spent five years working as a CO before starting graduate school. Many participants accepted me as an insider or "trusted outsider" (Bucerius, 2013), something that allowed me to attend unofficial CO events such as weekend brunches and ice hockey games. My positionality had strengths and weaknesses. Officers were willing to share unique perspectives about how prison work made them feel vulnerable, but I did not have ability to ask questions naïvely—something other qualitative researchers have discussed as an advantage (Bucerius, 2013). When ethically appropriate, I took field notes of my observations, which I label as such when quoted. Interviews took place in offices, during quiet moments on prison units, or at nearby restaurants. All participants agreed to be recorded. Afterward, interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and assigned randomly generated pseudonyms.

[2] *Blinded* Research Ethics Board approvals Pro00061614 and Pro00062785.

Epistemologically, our research team used a grounded theory framework to approach our research (Charmaz, 2014), a strategy built into the initial design of this project due to its successful use in other prison research (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Following transcription of our initial interviews, I worked with the PIs and another research assistant to develop a thematic coding scheme. We first employed the open and axial phases of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), reading randomly selected interviews and allowing themes to organically emerge. We remained open to new themes and analytical concepts, re-adjusting our prompts and analytical frameworks as new topics emerged from the data. Throughout data analysis and collection, we used a constant comparative method where we compared our initial themes and codes with new emergent themes. We identified patterns and gaps in our initial coding scheme and developed new conceptual categories to address these (Silverman 2011). This process was particularly important as we visited different prisons and encountered differences between institutions.

Through this process, themes including "Violence" and "CO culture" emerged, with subthemes including "Assaults," "Attitudes about incarcerated people," "Vulnerability," and "Attitudes about managers." We complied these themes into a systemized coding scheme, then tested the scheme against more randomly chosen transcripts, tweaking it to improve accuracy until we reached between 85 and 90% inter-coder overlap. At this point, we conducted line-by-line coding of each transcript, allowing the themes in the data to organically emerge.

Findings

Risk and vulnerability

Researchers often describe COs' duties as domestic or peacekeeping work, something that highlights the service provision and conflict resolution duties officers perform (Liebling et al., 2011; Tait, 2011). Research on CO discretion and decision-making reinforce this

categorization, demonstrating how officers supply privileges and services and deliberately overlook minor rule violations to maintain relationships with incarcerated people (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). COs in this research were no different, highlighting the key role of relationships in their work: "You're in jail already. This is your punishment for your actions. I'm not here to punish you, I'm your janitor, I'm your milkman, I'm all the services you don't get on the outside, and it's so much easier if we have a relationship" (Quinton, RVRC).

Yet, even as COs deliberately invested in relationships with incarcerated individuals, they framed such actions as strategic, tactical efforts to reduce their own risk of being assaulted:

> *Jessica (CRI):* I'm just trying not to get stabbed, right? There's a really big power struggle going on … there were lots of shivs[3] on the unit. In a span of five days, we found nine shivs. … we finally did a massive search and we found the bit [of metal] they were using and then we found two more shivs. Going back to the rapport—one of the shanks was handed to me by an inmate, saying "I don't want this in my cell, I found it in my mattress, you need to get rid of it." That was 9.5 inches, and metal. So, there's something to be said about rapport. And I have yet to actually feel my life is in danger or my partner's life is in danger, in any danger. I don't feel that. They're going after each other, so that helps, but still knowing and having to go on that unit, it's tough.

Jessica demonstrates the applicability and suitability of CO risk frameworks here (Higgins et al., 2023) by discussing assaults and framing incarcerated people as a source of danger. Yet, Jessica's example differs from danger frameworks in crucial ways: rather than focus on how much risk COs face every day, Jessica instead discussed how doing prison work the 'right' way helps reduce her odds of assault. By focusing on how "there's something to be said about

[3] Homemade prison knives.

rapport," Jessica spoke for many officers by demonstrating how COs framed relationship building through their own personal vulnerability. Greg (CRI) built on this, by describing how he intentionally built relationships to reduce his odds of assault: "Nine times out of ten, I'm not worried about the inmates at all because I feel like I've built such a good rapport with these guys, I pretty much know for a fact that if they corner me in a cell, they wouldn't stomp me." Such perspectives even influenced how some COs used force, as Mitchell (SCC) described: "You have to take into consideration how the inmates view you based on your [use of] force … I put [an incarcerated man] in a half mount, and I was on him but I wasn't like squishing him on the floor. He knew that, and now we have a great relationship."

However, doing prison work the 'right way' only addressed portions of the vulnerability officers perceived, something Jessica (CRI) quickly clarified: "it's Canada, they always get out. I've seen inmates on the outside. Other officers have too and gotten stabbed or whatever, or beat or threatened or followed." COs contextualized their examples of relationship building and discretion with stories of assaults on officers, thereby reinforcing perceptions of vulnerability:

> *Jack (HBCC):* Yeah, obviously, you wonder, 'cause I've told a guy "No, you're not doing this. This is how it's rolling. This is what policy says." You wonder, am I going to get sucker punched? At least like the guys who are with me, I can call a code and use what I've learned to contain the situation. But there's always that I don't know. I don't know if they got a shank in their fucking shorts. … You don't know. Like chairs could be used as a weapon, right. Like, anything—a broom handle… And it happens, right? Do you remember that guy from RVRC who threw the hot water at the CO? He was here. … he has to get [hot water] with a meal, [and every time I gave it to him, I wondered] am I getting this right in the face? You don't know, right?

Jack's comments demonstrate how uncertainty about individual safety influenced CO cultural frames, centering vulnerability as a key means officers used to understand their everyday duties. The constant, unspoken question Jack describes—"Am I going to get sucker-punched for doing my job?"—was one many officers expressed, as COs described assault as a realistic outcome for enforcing basic rules irrespective of their clarity and fairness. Jack's comments also demonstrate how stories of vulnerability functioned within the broader CO cohort. The 'hot water' example he uses took place months previously at a prison 200 miles away, but represented the most accessible example he drew on to describe his own vulnerability. This incident, and others from institutions across the province, formed shared narratives officers used to socialize each other into a shared cultural frame (Higgins et al., 2023) that highlighted personal vulnerability.

Vulnerability as a justification of control tactics

Violent incidents and assaults served as a starting point for perceptions of vulnerability. By discussing these incidents with each other, COs systematically reinforced cultural frames highlighting their own personal risk. As Jared (CRI) describes, "It's always corrections, corrections. Usually we talk about work if we're not absolutely loaded out of our minds." Stories highlighting officer vulnerability played a central role in these discussions:

> *Julian (CRI):* I think it's more dangerous in the jails [for COs] than in the streets for [police] officers. When we had our strike a few years ago, the RCs [Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers] were like "I don't know how you could do this." The RCMP were scared to do our job and they were going in with their Tasers and all of their gear except for their firearm. Well, I go in with my mittens[4] and my handcuffs [every day].

[4] Kevlar-lined leather gloves.

Officers in each institution brought up an incident that had occurred several years previously. During a CO strike, police officers had taken over and had done CO duties for several days. Participants like Julian depicted police officers as 'scared' to do COs' everyday duties, despite high levels of training and equipment. Julian, and other officers like him, used these stories to reinforce narratives around how prison work was more dangerous than work on the streets.

Influenced by narratives around assault, and reinforced by stories that highlighted the risks of prison work, perceptions of vulnerability quickly became a structuring feature shaping how COs viewed their relationship with the broader organization:

> *Curtis (HBCC):* I think people are really vulnerable right now. 'Cause they feel like they don't have an avenue to do their jobs. And because they get yelled at all the time. Like screamed at. Threatened. We just feel like we don't have the tools to [do our jobs]."

> *Rob (SCC):* "You're dealing with officers [who are] dealing with this conflict, every. Single. Day. How can you separate your job, even, from your home life? When you know you can go to work at any time and the chances of you being in an altercation with an inmate are really high? You may not hear them talk about it, but it has to be in the back of their mind all the time.

Stories of conflict, such as what Curtis and Rob share here, played a central role in reinforcing vulnerability as a central lens COs used to understand their position within the prison. Other cultural values reinforced these lenses: as Rob implies here, most officers enacted forms of hypermasculinity, meaning they were unwilling to discuss anything that made them appear weak (Schultz, 2022; Wills et al, 2021). In these cases, vulnerability provided officers with a means of partially addressing sources of stress, without appearing weak. Officers tactically employed

narratives around the external sources of vulnerability, thereby allowing COs to delicately address the stress and cognitive dissonance they experienced without breaching other strongly held and taken-for-granted aspects of CO occupational culture (Wills et al., 2021).

COs suggested these perspectives shaped their actions. Research has highlighted the important role CO cultures play in shaping misconduct toward incarcerated people (Higgins et al., 2022; Mears et al., 2022), something officers in this sample agreed with. A common area of tension centered around using force. Fights between officers and incarcerated people were commonplace, and while officers and managers stated that most incidents were legally justifiable, they also admitted that each prison had COs who were willing to commit illegal assaults (Schultz, 2023). Violent officers relied on solidarity as cover for questionable actions, meaning that COs who disagreed with using force found themselves in complex situations:

> *Matt (RVRC):* That's the thing that's almost terrifying. You go into a code [fight]—there's certain officers that I work with, I'm like, "Alright, if he decides to go and fight an inmate, I have to have a game-plan in mind." There's a potential lawsuit—yes, I could lose my job, but that's not the worst thing. I could be dragged down and potentially charged, right? … But my go-to is, if there's a fight, I'll restrain the legs. Once he [the prisoner] gets on the ground, I just grab his legs and stand there, kinda backed out, holding his legs and looking at the camera.

Matt described a common situation. COs who found themselves involved in questionably legal use of force events faced investigation alongside their colleagues, even if they had little to do with the incident. These officers found themselves caught on the figurative horns of a dilemma, as they had to either break subcultural rules and "rat out" their colleagues or lie to investigators and perjure themselves. Officers like Matt devised specific strategies to mitigate these risks: by

"restraining the legs," Matt was able to fulfil officer subcultural expectations by participating in the fight. However, his actions simultaneously allowed him to avoid the 'bad' parts of the fight, thereby reducing his risks of managerial investigation and discipline.

Despite such risks, most COs continued to discuss and describe force as an effective way to "send a message," which helped officers retain institutional control (Schultz, 2023). Officers explicitly connected these decisions and actions to perceived vulnerability:

> *Mitchell (SCC):* [Officer culture is] awful. My theory is, it's based on a lie that we keep telling ourselves. That we're in control, right? This comes back to the whole, "We think we're in control but we're not because there's fifty of them and there's two of us on a unit" thing, right? So we have to tell ourselves this lie, that we have the illusion of control, and the whole culture is a feedback system to give us confidence.

Mitchell's comments are particularly useful in helping us to see the connection between use of force and vulnerability, as he discusses how COs used vulnerability to justify aggressive and hostile actions. COs framed coercion and use of force as strategies to gain and retain control over incarcerated people (Schultz et al., 2021; Schultz, 2023), simultaneously citing officer vulnerability as a justification for such actions. As a result, vulnerability informed a broader feedback loop: COs used their perceived vulnerability to justify using force to maintain control of incarcerated people, but simultaneously justified control and use of force as a distinctive intervention that reduced reduce CO vulnerability. As Mitchell describes, this "feedback system" provided officers with "confidence," but efforts to address perceived vulnerability simultaneously enabled and justified some of the worst features of CO work.

Vulnerability and organizational relationships

Primed by these experiences, COs also used vulnerability as a lens to explain how they interacted with bureaucratic elements of the prison. This was particularly obvious in how officers described their relationship with prison managers. On one hand, officers described individual supervisors as supportive, outlining positive relationships and productive supervision. Cathy, an officer at HBCC with less than a year's experience, told me "There's a lot of managers you can approach if you have an issue and they're really good about working it through with you and giving you direction." On the other hand, officers consistently added caveats to such statements: "And like, there's some managers I definitely wouldn't approach with anything, just go the opposite way (Cathy)." Clint (RVRC) was even more blunt: "Managers in this center [don't] take anything seriously [because] they're not the ones who have to deal with these inmates 24/7 … I've got a family outside this building, my loyalty is to my family. My loyalty is not to these ding-dongs upstairs. Because I can't trust, and don't trust our management to [take care of] us. No." Likewise, Greg (CRI) was deeply ambivalent about how management treated front-line officers: "I feel like managers don't have my back if something were to go south, if I were to get charged by this inmate for whatever reason, I feel like they would nitpick at the littlest things."

Management interpretations of officer actions play a direct role in shaping how COs engage with their work (Liebling et al., 2011). Officers understood this was part of the job, but also resented managers who ignored staff concerns or did not 'back' COs. Alyssa outlined how managers' bureaucratic decision-making processes left officers feeling exposed, especially in cases where a situation reflected poorly on management decisions:

> *Alyssa (CRI):* [Corrections is] a high-risk job and it's a high risk in almost every aspect you look at. Feeling unsupported by management is probably the worst part. Like if you

have managers that will throw you under the bus to save their own skin, that's an unnerving way to feel about your job.

Conflict between managers and staff is a well-established theme in the CO literature, as are descriptions of disgruntled prison staff (Jacobs, 1977; Lambert et al., 2023; Schultz & Ricciardelli, 2022). Such conflicts meshed with cultural frames around physical vulnerability, leading officers to apply the same lenses of vulnerability that influenced their relationships with incarcerated people to management decisions. Officers expressed frustration with organizational decision-making, believing that in the case of an incident, management would 'side with the inmates' and 'screw' officers to reduce potential institutional liability (Schultz, 2023): "Yep, because that's often how a lot of shit happens. We're at the bottom of the shit pile, so whenever shit comes down, it always lands on us. No matter what happens in the jail, they'll nail one of us quicker than anybody (Heather, CRI)." Demonstrating this, COs typically ignored officer behaviors and structural pressures that shaped management decisions, choosing instead to lean on broader frames of vulnerability that described managers as unsympathetic and vindictive.

This dynamic left COs with a sense of resentful anomie toward their work, which further reinforced narratives that described managers as a threat to officers' livelihoods. As Liam (HBCC) described, "You're gonna get fired, you're done, they'll just can [fire] you. Even though they all do worse shit, way worse. You're fired. So that's what I mean." Officers expressed resentment against the bureaucratic system that enabled decisions they perceived as unfair, believing that officers would automatically receive blame for problems irrespective of fault (Griffin, 2001; Lambert et al., 2023). Moreover, COs framed managers as being on the lookout for minor non-compliance or small mistakes they could use to punish or fire an officer:

> *Heather (CRI):* The one thing you need to remember about this job, is that you are a number, you are replaceable, and this is a business. The sooner you can understand that you can be replaced like that *(snaps fingers)*, no matter how many years you've been in here, the better off you're going to be.

Officers like Heather drew on vulnerability frames to describe themselves as disposable, easy targets for managers looking to reduce institutional liability, and consequently framed managers as distinctive threats to their career security. Such attitudes permeated how COs interacted with the broader organizational frameworks of prison, as officers perceived management and policy actions as making them vulnerable. Managers I spoke to dismissed such complaints as paranoid and unreasonable, but COs consistently used perceived vulnerability to justify reading into everyday interactions with managers, leading to attitudes of hostility and distrust from all parties.

These frames also extended into how COs interpreted managerial orders. Many officer complaints and critiques arose from perceptions that managers had little understanding of the work front-line COs did every day, so much so that officers described management orders as directly threatening their health and safety. By focusing on the potential risks they faced, officers suggested that managers had little sympathy for the potential consequences of prison work. Tension here was particularly obvious when it came to novel challenges to prison operations, such as exposure to comparatively new drugs like fentanyl (Bucerius & Haggerty, 2019):

> *Heather (CRI):* Now with all the stuff that's coming in, you don't know what the hell you're getting into. So it's like you want to do your job, but you want to be protected properly and to know that the management actually gives a flying fuck … it's terrifying. I don't wanna not come home to my kids. I don't want to overdose. I'm not afraid of the inmates. That's not it, I'm not ever worried about the inmates … I'm never so much

> worried about my personal safety from that aspect as I am from a "Do what management tells you and go in and search the room," you know what I mean? It's more of a—I don't know how to describe it. I'm more afraid of getting told what to do and getting hurt because of it than just doing my job.

Heather, and many other officers, described receiving orders from management telling her to do something that she perceived as excessively risky, leading her to fear for her safety. In Heather's case such perceptions related to environmental drug exposure (Bucerius & Haggerty, 2019). However, officers also provided examples where managers officially or unofficially ordered COs to do something exposing them to the risk of violence, legal liability, or even prisoner escape. If they did not comply with these orders, officers faced disciplinary action or open conflict with management. However, if they complied, officers perceived themselves as placing their safety, careers, and even health in jeopardy. COs described this dynamic as an impossible bind: while they perceived themselves as physically vulnerable for *doing* something, they also perceived themselves as facing career risks for *not doing* these actions.[5] These situations created massive stress, damaging mental health and reinforcing officer narratives of vulnerability. As Laura (RVRC) put it, "Some people can't handle it, right? They get really stressed, overworked, or whatever, and they take everything personally—the job itself, the managers, the inmates. You can't take this job personally or you're going to die."

COs consistently described managers as uncaring and out to 'get' officers. Most of these descriptions relied on broader framings of officer vulnerability, which catastrophized the potential risks COs faced and downplayed the legitimacy of managerial decision-making. Yet, such frames also had distinctive, concrete impacts on how COs accomplished their duties:

[5] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insightful point

> *Greg (CRI):* I'm hesitant. [An inmate] came charging at me but then he stopped right before me. And you know what, I hesitated because I feel like the bosses don't have our backs and they're going to critique, like "Maybe you should have backed out of the cell as fast as you could" but I was, I was confined in there, I only had a split second to think and I hesitated. And when you hesitate, hesitation gets you killed. And I hesitated because those things are running through your mind all the time, like the managers don't have your back, the managers never support you. I've been told the managers have called police on members that work here because of an incident that they have done. I have been told that by multiple sources and multiple times, it's managers that have called [the police]. So that kind of thing is running through our minds all the time.

The actions Greg describes here represent a direct contravention of institutional policy and the training he received. COs spent six weeks training in use of force techniques and scenarios, designed to provide officers with the ability to recognize appropriate scenarios to use force. Greg's training defined this scenario as an aggressive situation where he should have used force to reduce the risk of a serious injury to himself. Although CO failure to follow training practices is not surprising (Calavita & Jenness, 2015; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021), the role Greg ascribes to a hostile management environment is. His comments suggest that perceptions of vulnerability colored how COs perceived managerial scrutiny, suggesting officers expected investigation for every decision they made, no matter how justifiable on policy or safety grounds.

The dark side of CO solidarity

Given the breadth of vulnerability frames that COs employed with relation to incarcerated people, daily practice, and managers, it is unsurprising that officers told me the only people they trusted to 'have their back' were other COs. Research describes officer solidarity as

a crucial part of prison work, a protective structure helping COs manage the challenges of prison work (Chenault, 2014; Eriksson, 2023), and participants described their coworkers as the biggest reasons they were able to do their job. The word "trust" was the most common theme tying all 131 officer interviews together. COs described earning trust, proving trust, needing to trust, broken trust, and how they demonstrated trust to other officers in profound ways:

> *Jared (CRI):* I wouldn't be in this career if I didn't [trust my coworkers]. If I had any doubt and my safety was in jeopardy or someone didn't have my back in a situation … I would be out of this. I would quit tomorrow … At the end of the day though, everybody has each other's back, and that's the way it should be and that's the way it's supposed to run, too.

Although officers complained about coworkers and expressed dissatisfaction with institutional politics, every CO described trust as a crucial part of effective prison work—something they contrasted with their distrust of managers. Officers directly connected trust to broader cultural frames, describing solidarity as an antidote to other forms of vulnerability. As Mason (HBCC) put it, "If I know that I'm working with somebody that I don't truly trust, then I'm not gonna feel comfortable." Such views shaped what COs did. Elisa (HBCC) expanded on this, explaining how trust allowed officers to be comfortable with the volatility and violence they observed:

> *Elisa:* Our trust has to be high because, you know, if I'm getting the crap kicked out of me, I need to know there's going to be four people behind me … I choose to believe that our staff are okay and not doing [illegal actions]. 'Cause otherwise, you're gonna to just turn on each other and that's not a good environment.

Officers in each institution performed their group loyalty in emphatic terms (Goffman, 1959). However, as Elisa implies with her comments about "choosing to believe" in her

coworkers, officers admitted that CO solidarity also *created* specific forms of vulnerability. Young COs described situations where experienced officers made unethical or illegal decisions, demanding silence because of their status. Others described incompetent coworkers or working with deceitful colleagues who manufactured confrontations for personal entertainment. These situations sometimes ended up under police investigation, forcing COs to choose between perjuring themselves to maintain solidarity, or telling the truth—described as 'ratting'—on colleagues and breaching the all-important sense of trust (Lerman & Page, 2012; Schultz, 2022).

Consequently, although officers consistently discussed CO solidarity as the backbone of their work, some did so reluctantly, identifying inconsistencies between the cultural frames they employed and the reality they encountered. This was particularly obvious when COs discussed how unethical coworkers misused their position to informally punish coworkers they disliked:

> *Elizabeth (RVRC):* Like if staff don't like each other, I've heard staff [at two prisons] say, "If [a specific officer] was getting assaulted, I'd be slow to call a code." That's hard to hear because everything you do is on that unit. I depend on my partner to be watching my back. If I get dragged into a cell, I depend on him to be calling a code, saying what cell I got dragged in … I'm dependent on my partner watching me, so it's hard to hear comments like that. Like, that hits hard when [my partner] says "I'd be slow to call a code on him."

Vulnerability frames ensured that COs viewed officer solidarity as an indispensable feature of their work. Solidarity was therefore uniquely susceptible to abuse, and COs shared examples of coworkers who faced reprisals for 'ratting' on coworkers or otherwise breaching subcultural rules. Such reprisals could be fierce: as Elizabeth describes here, unethical officers ensured that coworkers knew that the speed and efficacy of their response to an assault was conditional on

how well they liked the officer under attack, leaving COs at risk of life-altering injuries. Threats like this weaponized perceptions of vulnerability, reinforcing the worst parts of CO culture.

While officers described trust as a crucial component of their work, the descriptions COs employed around trust sometimes took a performative tone (Goffman, 1959). Cody (SCC) described it this way: “Corrections is broken. Everyone bitches about how much they hate it, no one trusts management, everything is us versus them. I don’t trust staff. I’ve never had a con ever try to go after my livelihood, but I’ve had staff do it.” In a space where officers framed nearly every aspect of daily life and work through lenses of vulnerability, COs like Cody chose to reluctantly trust their coworkers because facing the alternative would have been impossible to deal with. Consequently, although officer solidarity was one of the most important factors in helping COs manage the prison environment, participants also described solidarity as a distinctive source of vulnerability within the broader cultural frames they used.

Discussion

COs across these data described perceived vulnerability as a central, structuring feature of their work. Vulnerability informed how officers understood their relationship to prison work, as no matter the context or situation, COs described interpreting their work, actions, relationships, and position within the institution through lenses of personal vulnerability. The broad nature of vulnerability in these data suggests it acts as an axiomatic truism for COs, a persistent, self-evident and taken-for-granted cultural heuristic that shapes how officers respond to every scenario they encounter. COs used vulnerability as a primary means of highlighting real and perceived threats, thereby reinforcing their preconceptions and shaping their actions and worldviews. Perceptions of risk/danger, such as officer assault (Higgins et al., 2022, 2023; Ferdik, 2018), were important components of the axiom. However, officers drew on a far broader

range of factors, including officer culture and career security, to create a broad and cohesive presupposition of vulnerability which officers then used to situate themselves and their actions within the broader field of prison (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The vulnerability axiom shares some characteristics with police officers' danger imperative (Sierra-Arévalo, 2021). The danger imperative focuses on potential violence, meaning that police officers make and justify extreme responses—including lethal use of force—by the perceived dangerousness of what a situation *could become,* rather than what a situation *is* (Sierra-Arévalo, 2021). The data here suggests that vulnerability serves a similar function for COs. Officers cite vulnerability as something that preemptively shapes how they interact with incarcerated people, as they use their perceived vulnerability to infer what situations *could become,* rather than what they *are.* Such decisions affect everything from positive relationship-building to use of force. Likewise, vulnerability frames shape subcultural solidarity and preemptively color how officers interpret management decisions, no matter how legitimate.

However, there are important differences that highlight the unique nature of prison work and the need for a corrections-specific concept that encompasses a broader range of what COs do. The risks COs discuss are broader than those discussed by either Sierra-Arévalo's (2021) participants or by the current CO risk/uncertainty/danger literature (Ferdik, 2018; Higgins et al., 2022, 2023; Ricciardelli et al., 2022), something that suggests 'danger' is only one part of a larger framework for prison staff. Likewise, nuances in how officers describe vulnerability reflect the unique pressures of prison work. For instance, officers frame prison administrators as a source of vulnerability, reflecting the unique influence of managers and bureaucracy on the prison environment (Bennett, 2023). Confrontational relationships between officers and administrators, especially when COs perceive managerial decisions as placing officers at risk,

reinforce solidarity and tacitly emphasize the ‘disposable’ nature of prison staff (Eriksson, 2023; Garrihy, 2022). The ‘disposable’ nature of corrections work sharply contrasts with the ‘heroic’ framing of policing that operates on both individual and organizational levels (Sierra-Arévalo, 2019), something COs use comparatively to underpin their narratives of vulnerability. And officers described vulnerability as a major contributing factor to the stress and mental health challenges they experienced (Schultz, 2022), while others used vulnerability to justify questionable use of force decisions (Higgins et al., 2022; Mears et al., 2022).

The vulnerability axiom and CO work

Viewing vulnerability as an axiomatic component of CO working personalities allows us to reframe how we view prison work in several ways. Vulnerability allows us to reconsider the “mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16) that inform the ‘right’ ways to do prison work. Furthermore, considering vulnerability as an axiomatic truism underpinning other CO cultural frames allows us to consider how it possesses an anticipatory function. To phrase this differently, COs preemptively assume they are vulnerable irrespective of the situation in question, act on these assumptions, and interpret outcomes in ways that support their preconceptions. This may cause officers to inflate perceived threats, equating them with ‘real’ risks (Lambert et al., 2018). Such actions may help us to understand inconsistencies in the CO role; for instance, by using vulnerability as a cultural lens, we can understand how COs simultaneously demonize incarcerated people (Higgins et al., 2022) and invest in relationships with them (Liebling et al., 2011). In short, considering vulnerability as a central feature of CO decision-making helps us to reevaluate how and why officers make the decisions they do (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021).

The vulnerability axiom also allows us to reconsider CO solidarity in unique ways. Believing themselves to be at risk from a wide range of amorphous but significant threats, officers described closing ranks to reduce the impact of such threats, even when they identified other COs as equally significant risks to their career or safety. Solidarity perversely reinforces the saliency of vulnerability: despite identifying coworkers as significant hazards, narratives and socialization processes ensured officers consistently framed pressures originating *outside* of the CO cadre as far more threatening to them in personal and career terms, thereby justifying and reproducing beliefs that reinforced the worst parts of staff culture such as harassment and abuse (Burdett et al., 2018). Officers' pressing need to protect themselves against perceived threats to their safety subsumed larger questions of justice, exploitation, and legality, and drove home the relevance of CO solidarity (Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022).

Vulnerability also helps us understand how COs employ culture to justify using force (Schultz, 2023). Research has examined how officer cultures play a role in shaping use of force (Higgins et al., 2022; Mears et al., 2022), and the need to maintain control over the prison environment is one of the most well-established and consistent features of CO research (Rubin & Reiter, 2018; Schultz et al., 2021). This article reinforces the saliency of control when trying to understand CO actions, as officers consistently framed these efforts in terms of their personal vulnerability. By highlighting perceived vulnerability as a central feature of the CO working personality, we can reconceptualize officers' pursuit of institutional control as an intervention designed to reduce their own vulnerability. Furthermore, the vulnerability axiom helped officers address cognitive dissonance about use of force by driving home its perceived "necessity" in terms of establishing control (Schultz, 2023). To use officer Mitchell's words, such actions were part of a cultural "feedback system" designed to preemptively address perceived vulnerability.

By using vulnerability as a lens to understand use of force actions, we can see how they relate to broader features of the CO working personality and other aspects of prison work. Likewise, this approach may help explain why increases in officer training and professionalism have not meaningfully reduced CO brutality (Higgins et al., 2022; Worley et al., 2022).

Policy implications, areas for future research, and limitations

The vulnerability axiom also allows us to re-examine the relationship between COs and prison managers. Over the last 30 years, the centralization of power in management and bureaucratic positions has reshaped prison operations and reduced officer decision-making powers with the goal of reforming prisons (Bennett, 2023; Liebling et al., 2011; Rubin & Reiter, 2018). This is unquestionably the best practice—but this article suggests that COs may now view managerialist practices as a direct threat to their work and career safety. Officers describe themselves as powerless, vulnerable to things managers expected them to do, and vulnerable if they refused to follow orders. In extreme cases, COs suggested managers strategically employed their positions at the levers of power to reduce institutional liability by unfairly shifting blame onto officers, and described situations where oversight caused them to question their training.

Of course, there are two sides to this issue, as such conflicts centered on the axiomatic presumptions of vulnerability that shaped how officers perceived management orders. While some managerial orders may have threatened individual welfare, vulnerability lenses meant that officers regularly described routine and innocuous management requests as threat to their safety. Such suspicious and reactionary views increased tension and alienation from organizational goals (Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022). Reflecting this, officers rarely mentioned the complex pressures managers faced, focusing instead on narratives that consistently highlighted their own vulnerability. In this case, the vulnerability axiom inflamed relationships between officers and

managers, complicating prison operations, reducing trust, and creating resentment among all parties. Overall, management decision-making processes limited the worst excesses of CO behavior by actively limiting the scope of officer actions (Marquart, 1986). However, the broader perception that managers were uncaring and would "screw" COs at the first opportunity created resentment and a sense of powerlessness among front-line officers, thereby perversely reinforcing the vulnerability axiom's influence on CO worldviews.

As managers and administrators are usually leaders in implementing prison reforms, this relationship has broader policy implications. The vulnerability axiom shapes how COs view a wide range of subjects, implying that officers will always assess prison reform efforts through a lens of individual vulnerability and collective solidarity irrespective of the inherent worthiness of the reform in question. Consequently, prison reform efforts which fail to address CO safety concerns, whether real *or* perceived, are likely to encounter significant resistance from officers and union members—an important factor, and one which reflects findings in a range of settings (Calavita & Jenness, 2015; Lerman & Page, 2012). Given the central role prison staff play in shaping the direction and philosophy of a prison, such considerations may determine the success or failure of new reforms. In short: no matter how unreasonable, CO perspectives carry weight.

The vulnerability axiom may also provide researchers with new methods of examining mental health and officer cultures. Until recently (Worley et al., 2022), academics have examined CO culture and mental health as separate concepts (Higgins et al., 2022; Ricciardelli et al., 2022), and there is little overlap between these areas in the literature. Examining perceived vulnerability as a structuring feature of CO subcultures allows us to link these siloed research areas, as officers suggest that job-related stress and cultural frames both arise from efforts to address the vulnerability axiom. The vulnerability axiom may provide an analytical connection

between concepts like uncertainty (Ricciardelli et al., 2022), cultural frames (Higgins et al., 2022), risk perceptions (Ferdik, 2018), and mental health (Worley et al., 2022). Future work may be able to use vulnerability as a tool to analyze connections between these areas, shedding new insight into how COs impact prisons and vice versa (Schoenfeld & Everly, 2022). Likewise, examining how officers use vulnerability to frame practices such as relationship building may allow researchers to approach CO professionalism literature in a new light (Liebling et al, 2011; Tait, 2011), thereby creating an integrated picture of what COs do and why they do it.

This article also has limitations that point to areas for future research. Examining how COs discuss vulnerability in a different prison setting seems like a logical first step, as does a closer examination of the relationships between officer mental health and the vulnerability axiom. My positionality as a former CO meant officers were comfortable discussing sensitive topics with me, such as how officers misused and weaponized culture. Other researchers may uncover different insights into CO relationships and management-staff interactions, both of which deserve far more sustained inquiry. Finally, I focus on the perspectives of front-line prison staff. Research with administrators may reveal different nuances, something that stresses our need for research with criminal legal system decision-makers.

Conclusion

This article suggests that cultural frames of vulnerability shape CO attitudes and argues that officers consistently use their own perceived vulnerability to shape the decisions they make. In combination, I argue that we can best understand these perceptions as grounded in a broader vulnerability axiom, a taken-for-granted cultural heuristic that structures CO working personalities and shapes officer responses to managers, incarcerated people, and each other.

Centering vulnerability lets us understand COs and their worldview differently. It is an open debate as to whether the threats described in this paper are as serious as officers describe—but, for COs, this is often a case where perceptions are more important than any reality. Consequently, understanding how vulnerability shapes officer perceptions takes on new urgency. Understanding vulnerability's role in shaping CO worldviews is not synonymous with sympathy for the actions that such perceptions engender, as officers use such narratives to justify deeply problematic actions. However, understanding how such perceptions shape the day-to-day work of front-line COs may help in the pursuit of new kinds of research and prison reform, with productive outcomes for officers, managers, and incarcerated people.

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