

“I’ve Had Cases That Have Gone in the Wrong Direction and That Has Affected Me”: A Qualitative Examination of Decision Making, Liminality, and the Emotional Aspects of Parole Work

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Parole officers are central actors in the penal system as their decisions can affect the timing of a person’s release from prison and also restrict or enable their freedoms in the community upon release. Existing research on parole examines how parole officers think about and govern ex-prisoners via techniques of surveillance, regulation, and support. Few studies, however, provide qualitative insight into how parole officers experience their occupational authorities and associated power over (ex)prisoners’ future, or the emotions generated by frontline supervision work. Using data from interviews with 150 parole officers in Canada, we explore the emotions associated with parole officers’ occupational responsibilities and authorities vis-à-vis the parolee, the public, and the parole officer’s employer. Participants experienced their duty to make decisions that impact their clients’ legal and social futures, and potentially public safety, as a source of emotional stress and concern, as they worried about how their decisions could negatively affect their client, the community, and their own professional status. In illuminating parole officers’ feelings and experiences, we show how parole—the “transition” between incarceration and freedom—produces an emotionally charged experience not just for (ex)prisoners, but also for those engaged in frontline supervision work.

INTRODUCTION

Parolees are subjected to an array of conditions, from regular meetings with their parole officer to more specialized obligations based on individual risk and needs assessment, such as nightly curfews, residency conditions (e.g., residing at a halfway house), no-contact orders and other mobility restrictions, and employment and program requirements (e.g., participation in rehabilitative programs) (Correctional Service of Canada 2019b). If parolees violate their conditions of release, they face the risk of reincarceration or other legal consequences. Research on parole highlights the uncertainty

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and legal vulnerability that result from this transitional status ex-prisoners are exposed to, or in the words of Turner (1969, 81; see also van Gennep 1960; Werth 2012) from being “betwixt and between” imprisonment and full freedom. Given that a parolee’s movement to freedom without penal supervision is contingent on their ongoing compliance with their parole conditions, their legal status and freedom in the community remain precarious. Existing studies have highlighted the emotional impacts of this “liminal” position, including feelings of fear, stress, and uncertainty experienced by parolees as they endure and navigate the continued gaze, regulation, and power of the penal state. For example, Werth (2012), in his ethnographic study with parolees in California, found that his participants sought to “visibly” and “actively” comply with their parole conditions in an effort to demonstrate their commitment to rehabilitation. But he also found that his participants experienced full compliance as stressful and unhelpful, given that many parole conditions are disconnected from parolees’ socioeconomic and life circumstances and therefore difficult to achieve (see also Werth 2007).

Opsal’s (2015) research with female ex-prisoners, too, found that parole conditions frequently limit parolees’ ability to (re)gain employment and reestablish relationships with loved ones, creating frustration for parolees. In McKendy and Ricciardelli’s (2021) study with female releasees in Canada, parole contributed to feelings and experiences of “social precarity” among parolees who felt the impact of living by an extensive set of conditions and associated expectations that were detached from their social circumstances. Stress, nervousness, and even anxiety are common feelings during transitions from prison to community (see also Western 2018). These studies speak to how ex-prisoners’ legal precarity or “liminal” status impacts parolees’ feelings as they reenter the community where the fear of being returned to prison creates one of the many “pains” of reentry (see also Durnescu 2019; Cnaan and Woida 2019; Maier 2020a).

In this article, we focus on what might be described as the other side of the “liminality” of parole, namely the parole officer’s occupational responsibility to supervise, report, and respond to technical violations/new offenses when they occur. The literature has conceptualized parole work as hybrid insofar as parole officers are tasked to serve as mechanisms of control and postprison supervision, and to provide help and support during (ex-)prisoners’ transition to the community (Werth 2013). In essence, parole officers, similarly to other penal workers in the community (e.g., probation officers, halfway house workers), are tasked with the dual goals of control/supervision (i.e., power) and treatment/care that “braid” together in the logics and practices of parole and other community-based penal measures (Hutchinson 2006, 443; Hannah-Moffat and Maurutto 2012). For frontline parole officers, this hybrid position of support and reporting, however, can create tension where parole officers working with recently released prisoners are to “be there” for their clients, but are also the primary individuals in charge of reporting on and responding to parole violations when they happen (i.e., turning their clients “in”) (see Werth 2013). Another, yet less examined, dimension of parole work involves officers’ duties to assess risk and provide support to prisoners while they are incarcerated. Parole officers working within the prison institution, too, occupy a hybrid, tension-laden role. They are tasked to act in a supportive and desistance-focused capacity, by facilitating prisoner access to rehabilitative programs and by preparing them for their eventual release, but their duties also

encompass risk assessment and making recommendations regarding a prisoner’s progress and readiness for parole, which can impact their legal future (e.g., result in the denial of parole).

Drawing on semistructured interviews with 150 parole officers in Canada, we explore how parole officers narrate their professional duty to supervise and make decisions regarding other people’s futures, focusing on the emotions and feelings generated by their particular occupational responsibilities. While we have a fairly robust understanding of parolees’ emotions during states of “liminality,” we know little about the emotions associated with parole officers’ work during this transitional time. We show that the “liminality” of parole, specifically the uncertainty of parole, affects how parole officers experience their duty to make difficult decisions that carry implications for (ex-) prisoners’ lives, their loved ones, and the community at large, which informs their occupational experiences, feelings, and emotional well-being. Our goal in this article is to add empirical nuance to quantitative and qualitative scholarship on parole by demonstrating how the goals and practices of parole work instigate a range of emotions.

The article starts with a brief overview of scholarship on emotions and punishment and the hybridity of parole work. In the empirical sections, we show how parole officers’ occupational responsibilities and authorities can result in parole officers’ grappling with feelings of worry, blame, and liability. We conclude by contextualizing parole officers’ narratives within a broader sociopenal context and proposing policy suggestions and further avenues for research.

CONTEXT: PAROLE IN CANADA

In Canada, parole officers act as “gatekeepers” of parole (Ostermann and Hyatt 2022) at different stages during a person’s punishment and in different capacities. Interviewees in the current study were employed by the Correctional Services Canada (CSC), the agency with responsibility for the incarceration and postrelease supervision of individuals with sentences of two years or more. CSC-employed parole officers work in a range of settings, specifically federal correctional institutions, parole offices, and community correctional facilities (i.e., state-run halfway houses). Those working in correctional institutions, called Institutional Parole Officers (IPOs), typically supervise caseloads of twenty-four to thirty-two prisoners and are a key part of prisoners’ case management team, with responsibility for monitoring prisoners’ progress toward their release plan while incarcerated. IPOs regularly meet with prisoners and assist them with accessing prison programs, while preparing reports and recommendations to the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) about whether a person should be conditionally released from prison (the ultimate decision lies with the PBC).

Parole officers working in the community, referred to as Community Parole Officers (CPOs), are responsible for the supervision and support of persons conditionally released from prison who are given the opportunity to serve the remainder of their sentence in the community. Prisoners are eligible for full parole after serving one-third or seven years of their sentence in the institution (whichever comes earlier), and they may apply for day parole six months prior to their full parole eligibility date. When parole is denied, prisoners in Canada are almost always statutorily released at the

two-thirds mark of their sentence, unless public safety concerns warrant their continued incarceration. Regardless of the type of conditional release, individuals remain under parole supervision until their warrant expiry date (i.e., the official end of their sentence). CPOs are authorized, and indeed required, to report on and initiate proceedings for the suspension of parole if there is a breach of condition or a potential increase in risk. CPOs are also authorized to recommend to the PBC that release conditions be imposed, modified, or removed when there is a change in risk level (Correctional Service of Canada 2019a).

Parole officers, by being at the frontlines of assessing, reporting, and initial decision making, have the opportunity and authority to set in motion recommendations and proceedings that can have either positive or negative effects on a person's legal future and therefore on their living conditions and realities either in prison or in the community. Yet, despite their central role in the penal system, their work, and in particular their legal authorities, there have been comparatively few qualitative studies that unpack how parole officers conceive of themselves and their working roles or how their specific authorities and responsibilities affect their feelings and emotions.

EMOTIONS AND PAROLE WORK

Parole work involves “dealing with people, with all their messiness, contradictions, and emotions” (Knight, Phillips, and Chapman 2016, 46), and it can be an emotional experience for parole officers themselves, too. Definitions and conceptualizations of emotions vary (Bericat 2016), and a thorough review of these various conceptualizations would go beyond the scope and goal of this article. In essence, we refer to emotion as the “*feeling* ‘inside’” (Crawley 2004, 412). Emotions can be brought on by internal and external stimuli, events, and environmental outcomes (Scherer 2005), as well as by social situations and relations (Kemper 1991, 1987). Specifically, Kemper (1991, 333) argued that emotions result from real, imagined, or anticipated outcomes of social relationships. Further, he argued that power and status, as defining features of social relationships, can instigate emotions; for example, when individuals gain or lose power and status, they experience certain emotions as a result (e.g., happiness, fear). Emotions, thus, are relational, situational, and contextual.

Several studies have used emotions as well as emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) as a lens through which to analyze the work, values, and challenges of criminal justice workers (see, e.g., Knight 2014; Phillips, Westaby, and Fowler 2016; Knight, Phillips, and Chapman 2016; Westaby, Fowler, and Philipps 2020). Emotions matter for criminal justice work because they impact workers' values, beliefs, and attitudes toward their occupational duties and their clients in positive and/or negative ways. Being conscious of one's emotions, what Knight (2014) has referred to as “emotional literacy,” matters equally as being conscious can lead to increased self-awareness and self-regulation—required skills for parole officers whose work demands that they build positive relationships with (ex-)prisoners. Emotions have been discussed in select studies on penal labor. For example, Westaby, Fowler and Philipps (2020) empirically unmasked emotions displayed by probation officers, including the factors that guide the specific use and display of these emotions. Participants in their study talked about sharing “empathy”

and “happiness” in interaction with clients, whereas they sought to suppress or mask other emotions, such as “shock and disgust”—feelings that could occur when clients discussed their offense—to maintain professionalism and boundaries (see also Hochschild 1983). Probation officers, as Knight, Phillips, and Chapman (2016) found, also use positive emotions such as pride or pleasure to encourage clients’ compliance with their sentence (see also Phillips, Westaby, and Fowler 2020). These studies provide insight into how emotions structure, and are structured by, penal work and associated norms and values. In parole work, however, emotions have received little attention. This is especially the case with the emotions parole officers feel toward their own role and responsibility for (ex-)prisoners’ conduct and legal futures.

Drawing on Kemper’s (1991) theorization that emotions result from the outcomes of social relationships, we show how emotions in parole work are shaped by the real, imagined, and anticipatory outcomes of parole officers’ authority, decision-making power, and perceived responsibilities toward their clients and the community at large. We argue that parole officers’ interrelated roles and duties, and specifically the tension that can arise in the context of navigating and balancing these different duties, generate a set of emotions that impact how parole officers feel about themselves, their work, and their occupational status.

THE HYBRIDITY OF PAROLE WORK: STRADDLING THE LINE BETWEEN SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT

Our article adds to quantitative scholarship on parole officer decision making by providing a qualitative analysis of how officers discursively and reflexively talk about their duties and decision-making authority. Quantitative studies have started to unmask the factors that shape parole officer decisions to pursue revocation proceedings in case of noncompliance. This includes recent work by Osterman and Hyatt (2022), who examined officers’ decision whether to refer a client to a community-based program before initiating revocation proceedings. A significant predictor of officers’ decision was whether a parolee had participated in “front-loaded” programs at the time of release, while other factors, such as the age, gender, and race of the client, did not have a significant impact on parole officers’ decision making (but see Steen et al. 2013). Other studies, like those by Grattet and colleagues (Grattet, Lin, and Petersilia 2011; Grattet and Lin 2016), focus on how officers’ own characteristics, such as their demographics, work experience, and caseload, influence the decision to proceed (or not) with a revocation. Given that parole revocations are a major contributor to prison admission rates, especially in the United States,¹ making an understanding of what drives parole revocation/suspension decisions at the frontlines essential, these studies offer critical insight. Few studies have focused on how parole officers *understand themselves* as decision makers. An examination of their perceptions and feelings is important, however,

1. In Canada, the majority of conditionally released prisoners (between 67 and 93 percent) do complete their conditional release successfully, but still, those who have their conditional release revoked usually experience revocation because of technical violations, meaning noncompliance with their conditions of release.

because conceptions of self, beliefs, and emotions are significant in relation to parole officers' practice and roles in society (Knight 2014).

While qualitative studies have examined how parole officers reflect on and navigate the conflict between supervision and support associated with parole work (Werth 2019; see further below), we maintain that their legal authorities and responsibilities are an understudied aspect of punishment and parole research. By shedding light on the experiences of parole officers working both inside the institution and in the community, our analysis, furthermore, expands the empirical scope of parole scholarship, which has largely focused on community parole work (Page and Robertson 2022).

Qualitative research on parole work offers rich insight into how parole officers think about, produce knowledge on, and govern paroled subjects. Although these studies do not specifically refer to feelings or emotion, they provide some insight into how parole officers feel about clients and their work. Werth (2013, 220) found, on the one hand, that parole agents viewed the "law enforcement" and "social work" components of their work as "discrete and potentially conflicting," yet, on the other hand, they were able to reconcile these two diverging elements into a "consistent and coherent" project by adopting an overall punitive, "tough love" approach toward parolees. Specifically, officers conceived of their clients as risky, dangerous, and in need of intervention (Werth 2013). These assumptions enabled them to prioritize surveillance and control as the preferred way to promote change and rehabilitation in parolees. These findings align with other studies that show how contemporary penal practices, including risk assessment practices, constitute paroled subjects as risky, dangerous, deficient, as well as in need of ongoing surveillance and deserving of punishment in case of noncompliance with parole rules (Werth 2019; see also Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat 2009).

Other research indicates that some parole officers seek out strategies to center the caring elements of parole, such as by connecting with parolees over shared personal experiences, to subvert the more punitive aspects of parole surveillance (Welsh 2019; see also Westaby et al. 2020). Worrall and Mawby (2013) describe how probation officers, another group of penal workers with a hybrid mandate, engage in "edgework" to make their work more meaningful, which includes strategies such as actively choosing to like offenders and sometimes even their offending histories.

To summarize, existing studies provide a nuanced view of how parole officers (and other penal workers) navigate the hybrid elements of penal work; they have less to say, however, about how parole officers may be affected by this dual nature or how their occupational duty to make high-stakes decisions about a client impacts them on a professional and personal level.

There exist a small number of studies that explore how correctional workers' decision-making authorities can be a source of emotional stress. In a study based on interviews with probation officers in Washington state, Drapela and Lutze (2009, 376), for example, found that probation officers worried about "being named in a lawsuit." Concerns for their own liability resulted from being responsible for the supervision of other people "every hour of every day." Viglione (2017) also found that probation officers worried that they could face work-related consequences from management in the event that a client reoffended. Concerns about their own liability led them to prioritize control and surveillance when dealing with high-risk clients. Other researchers have examined how other penal workers, who lack these same authorities, reflexively

make sense of their occupational responsibilities vis-à-vis other groups of frontline workers. For example, Maier (2020b) examined how halfway house staff engage in “boundary work” when they seek to differentiate their “intermediary” role from other roles, such as that of the parole officer. “Boundary work,” according to Lamont (2000), refers to the ways individuals and groups construct similarities and differences between themselves and others, which is done in an effort to create a positive sense of self. Halfway house staff identified some of the frustrating limits their particular role poses in terms of improving halfway house residents’ reentry and rehabilitation, while at the same time, they felt their inability to initiate revocation proceedings enabled them to take on a more supportive role compared to the parole officer; in short, their limited authority was perceived as an asset, not a limitation, in their work.

These studies provide some insight into penal workers’ understanding of their responsibilities and concerns about liability. A deeper analysis focused on parole officers’ decision-making powers and associated feelings, however, is lacking. To address this gap, we offer insight into how parole officers’ perceptions and experiences of their own duties and authorities vis-à-vis the parolee and the larger community shaped their emotions, or feelings. In doing so, we turn the focus of existing scholarship from how parole officers view parolees to how they view themselves and their occupational responsibilities, and the emotions that emerge in this context.

METHODS

Our analysis draws upon interviews with parole officers. We interviewed ninety-six participants working as IPOs, and fifty-four participants working as CPOs, all self-selected to participate, for a total of 150 participants. Interviewees were asked a range of questions, including how they viewed their responsibilities, the challenges and rewards of their work, the emotional impacts of parole work, exposure to vicarious trauma, and the impacts of COVID-19. Most interviews ($n = 145$; 96.7 percent) were conducted one-on-one over the telephone and in English. The remainder ($n = 5$; 3.3 percent) were organized as French-language group telephone interviews, which were translated in real time. Interviews were semistructured, and were approximately one-to-two hours in length. Interviews were conducted between August and October 2020, and, due to COVID-19 public health measures, occurred over the phone. Prior to COVID-19, we had considered, due to the broad geographic distribution of participants across Canada, conducting some interviews by phone. However, at study design, we intended to conduct the interviews largely in-person. While unintended at the outset of the study, the reliance on telephone interviews may have been beneficial, as researchers have found that being interviewed on the phone, rather than face-to-face, can make participants more comfortable discussing sensitive topics (Novick 2008). While we cannot determine whether using telephone interviews facilitated greater comfort, participants in the current study regularly discussed difficult or potentially difficult experiences with wraparound outcomes that do not distinguish between work and personal lives.

Research assistants transcribed interviews verbatim. We then undertook open-ended coding of transcripts to identify emergent themes, adopting a semigrounded

constructed approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2014). We developed a preliminary set of codes by independently and sequentially coding five transcripts. Subsequently, the research team coded the remaining transcripts, refining existing codes and creating new ones as they emerged from the interview data. We used QRS NVivo Pro to assist with autocoding and coding data into primary, secondary, and tertiary themes, and employed axial coding to make connections between and further develop these themes (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Our coding scheme included a comprehensive list of primary codes to cover the range of themes that emerged from the data, such as “Job Satisfaction,” “Public Safety,” “Trauma” (Physical/Psychological), “Organization Stress” and “Operational Stress,” and “Responsibility” (see also Norman and Ricciardelli 2022). Emotions were coded within the context of participants narrating the nature of their various occupational responsibilities. Differing emotions were also evidenced when participants experienced (and voiced) changes in temperament brought on by discussions of their occupational realities (e.g., feeling angry versus sad, raising voices versus shedding tears). We did not discount expressions as emotional versus emotionless; instead, our focus was on the emotions presented within each participant’s words, including how their expressions shaped the conversation. Beyond coding, reading transcripts in full, for the entire narrative, provided additional insight into participants’ emotional positioning.

Of the 96 IPO participants, 88 (91.7 percent) were working as frontline IPOs at the time of the interview, while the rest (8.3 percent; $n = 8$) had previously worked as IPOs but had since temporarily or permanently moved into managerial roles. The majority of CPO participants (94.4 percent; $n = 51$) were working as frontline CPOs at the time of the interview, while the others were previously CPOs but had since taken on assignments as parole supervisors ($n = 2$; 3.7 percent) or at CSC National Headquarters ($n = 1$; 1.9 percent). Most of the CPO participants were based at parole offices ($n = 48$; 88.9 percent), while the remainder ($n = 5$; 9.3 percent) worked at Community Correctional Centres (community residential facilities operated by CSC). Participants’ tenure working for CSC ranged from one to thirty years, with a median of thirteen years for the IPO group and 12.5 years for the CPO group. The sample included IPOs employed in the eight Canadian provinces in which there are CSC correctional institutions, while the CPO sample drew on participants from seven provinces and all three territories. We summarize participants’ (IPOs’ and CPOs’) basic demographics in Table 1.

FINDINGS: RESPONSIBILITY, POWER, AND EMOTIONS IN PAROLE WORK

We begin with a discussion of how interviewees narrated the nature and demands of their job as a background to analyzing the emotions and feelings that parole officers associate with their occupational realities. We establish *uncertainty* as a critical aspect of parole work that impacts officers’ thoughts and feelings. We explain how feelings of fear and worry are shaped by concerns about public and media responses, as well as how such feelings impact parole officers’ experiences of guilt, blame, and concerns about liability.

TABLE 1.
Demographics, Sample of IPOs and CPOs

	Participants (n)	Participants (%)
Gender		
Female	114	76%
Male	33	22%
No answer	3	2%
Age		
19–24	3	2%
25–34	21	14%
35–44	64	42.7%
45–54	42	28%
55–64	15	10%
65–74	2	1.3%
No answer	3	2%
Race		
Indigenous	2	1.3%
Racialized (e.g., Black, Chinese, Latin American)	15	10%
White	128	85.3%
No answer	3	2%
Other	1	0.7%

The section concludes with a discussion of “defensible decision-making” (Kemshall 2009) as a critical tool or coping mechanism for parole officers to deal with and navigate feelings of worry, guilt, and blame.

Responsibility and Power

Participants, whether they worked as IPOs or CPOs, used the term “responsibility” to describe the occupational demands and qualities associated with parole work. When we asked participant P112,² a male IPO with over ten years’ experience in correctional services, what he felt was the most challenging aspect of being a parole officer, he replied that it was “the amount of responsibility” parole officers carry, along with “the amount of work.” He added that “I don’t think people understand the scope of the job and the weight of responsibility on it.” P117, a female IPO, also identified “the personal responsibility that we do take for almost everything that happens on our caseload” as a defining feature of parole work. Another IPO, P025 (female), highlighted the difference in work and associated responsibility between desk work and what frontline parole officers are tasked to do, namely the *actual* work of supervising and making recommendations regarding (ex-)prisoners’ future:

2. Participant numbers are used to ensure anonymity.

Because whenever I talk to somebody who thinks they know what they're talking about, they say "oh yeah, 'cause you have to read all those files, that must be hard." And it's, that's not what it's about, it's not just sitting there reading files. It's actually having the responsibility of making recommendations about what happens to these guys.

To restate, IPOs are tasked with preparing prisoners for release, and assessing risk that impacts decisions regarding prisoners' institutional placements and transfers and their eventual release into the community. See for example how P001 (male, IPO) described his occupational responsibilities:

my job is to assess offender behavior and attitude and observe them over the course of their sentence to see if they're making necessary changes to their attitude, towards their life, their beliefs, how entrenched they are in their criminality, and then my role is to make a recommendation to the parole board on whether that offender, whether the risk is manageable in the community or if it's not manageable maybe he should stay inside the institution longer.

Once prisoners are released, CPOs take over the day-to-day supervision of ex-prisoners in the community, which encompasses a wide range of tasks, including regular meetings with parolees (at the parole office, parolees' homes and workplaces, or remotely, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic), assessment of clients' risk, report writing, program referrals and other supports, participation in parole hearings, and initiating "disciplinary action if necessary for any breaches or increase in risk" (P016, female, CPO).

Power, responsibility, and accountability are interrelated aspects of parole officer work. Parole officers exercise penal power in relation to the paroled subject, which requires that they make critical decisions of care and/or control. From the perspective of the officer, their decision-making duties and authorities are constructed as a form of deep responsibility for both their client and the safety of the larger community. Interviewees conceived of themselves as frontline agents responsible for and capable of helping (ex-)prisoners in establishing a life in the community while keeping the community safe.

Working at the Interface of "Reintegration" and "Public Safety"

Both IPO and CPO participants described their occupational responsibilities and associated authorities in the context of reflecting on the "twofold" (P012) goals of parole, which they explained guided their daily work and decision making; those are (1) the support/reintegration of (ex-)prisoners, and (2) public safety:

I feel like my job is twofold. My job is basically to protect the public, but also by assisting with guys' reintegration and if I can, you know, help them learn some skills and or set up resources in the community that will help them succeed. (P012, IPO, female)

I feel like it’s my job to help make good recommendations, solid recommendations that will help keep people safe while still; like, most of the offenders are getting out, and while still helping them get out in the safest possible way. (P026, IPO, female)

Being charged with the hybrid goals of reintegration/support and public safety/supervision demanded a high degree of awareness for clients’ needs, as interviewees told us, as well as an ability to carefully consider and balance different concerns (i.e., the client’s rights and needs and public safety concerns). As P027 (female CPO) explained, she considered public safety concerns when making decisions, while at the same time making sure to not lose sight of the client’s rights and needs:

so I always consider my decisions, what would the public, this is, these are the taxpayers, the citizens, and the residents of this country and expecting me to do certain job, how would they feel [about] this? I think about that all the time, I think that’s just a healthy way to make decisions. But I also, within that, it goes like, the Charter [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms] and the values. So the rights of the individual, also that. Do [we] have a right to take this action, are there, would there be human rights concerns with this action, are there other things I need to consider? Like, so those are questions, not just on the safety side, but also for the individuals.

Interviewees, like P012 and P026 above, agreed that individualized support and rehabilitation were important aspects of their job—an orientation that speaks to the more caring and human elements of parole work (Welsh 2019)—and that the provision of support and treatment were essential to ensuring public safety, as another interviewee, P018, a CPO (female), made clear when she explained:

lock ‘em up and throw away the key, that’s not how we do business here. People are gonna come back to the community, and don’t you want those people to come back to the community the best people they can be?

For P018, parole officers occupy an important role in society because “we’re helping everybody by helping these people [parolees].” While seeing inherent value to their helping and caring capacities, interviewees made clear that any decision making demanded they consider what they described as a balance between clients’ needs and “the best interest of public safety” (P016, female, CPO). P037, a female IPO with over ten years’ work experience, spoke about this balance when, in response to being asked about her primary responsibilities, she replied:

I mean, it’s public safety. And when I’m making a risk assessment, I have to keep that in mind. The potential that anybody could go out there and reoffend or hurt somebody. So that’s why I put more—see to me, the value in this job, is the more you know that person one-on-one, the better and more accurate risk assessment you can do, right? (P037)

As these interviewees' narratives show, individualized support (e.g., through conversation, building rapport with clients, establishing trust and good relationships) and safety of the public were not thought of as two fundamentally opposing duties; rather, good support and rapport, as P037 said, enabled "more accurate risk assessment" and, as a consequence, good decisions that serve to keep the public safe, while at the same time providing (ex-)prisoners with needed supports toward desistance. While participants did not find that there was an inherent contradiction between their various duties (see also Viglione 2017; Werth 2013), parole work was still experienced as tension-laden or "Janus-faced" and, as a result, as a source of emotional stress. Specifically, parole officers worried about the possibility of making the "wrong" decision and facing the consequences of their decision to self and others (i.e., the public, their client). Recalling that parole work takes place at a critical juncture in terms of time and place, parole officers are the immediate point of contact for individuals "in transition" trying to reestablish a life postprison, which necessarily involves being given the opportunity to regain their freedom and mobility in the community (Visher and Travis 2003). Parole officers know that (ex-)prisoners depend on their continued support to have a fair shake at reintegration. At the same time, their concerns about public perceptions and reactions, and the potential consequences they fear about releasing a person who might reoffend, as we go on to show, weighed heavily on them, demanding ongoing consideration and the balancing of different concerns. Parole officers have the capacity as well as the *authority* to make decisions regarding the most fundamental aspects of a person's life—to initiate decisions that can either grant freedom or result in the (continued) punishment and immobility of a person—a role they associated with high responsibility, which distinguished their role from that of other workers in the penal system (e.g., correctional officers). For parole officers, deciding on freedom versus punishment/supervision is always "on the table"—an inherent and tension-laden reality of the job that is shaped to a significant degree by the uncertainty and unpredictability parole officers must deal with as part of their everyday work.

The Uncertainty of Parole—Dealing with Fear and Worry

According to Lipsky (1980), despite having significant authority over their clients' lives, street-level bureaucrats, like frontline parole officers, have only limited control over their clients' behavior. As such, they have to be prepared to deal with uncertainty as part of their day-to-day work. Laced throughout interviews were discussions of concern and worry, even fear, that a client could violate their parole rules or worse, commit a new crime while on conditional release. Participants spoke about the volatility of parole work that demanded that they be prepared for unexpected situations. P100, a CPO, said:

Like, in the community it's very rapid pace, things could happen like people could have a breach, or be arrested and come in, and that whole day that you planned is completely not what it's going to be.

According to participants, flexibility and the ability to pivot in response to unexpected situations are key skills for all parole workers. But for CPOs in particular, the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with supervising ex-prisoners in the community whose behavior could not be monitored at all times was experienced as stressful and even anxiety-inducing. P024, a female CPO, discussed the stress associated with community supervision work as follows:

I think when I initially started in the community, I was a little bit more stressed out about it, because you’re like it’s the end of the day, and they’re not safely tucked into their cells in the institution, so what are they doing?

P024 had previous work experience as an IPO and was therefore able to reflect on the difference between working with (ex-)prisoners in the community versus the institution. The narrative describes the participant’s feelings and emotions: working in the community, P024 felt worried about her clients’ whereabouts and conduct during periods of lowered supervision. P024, as her narrative reveals, conceived of the community as a space with more risk potential (i.e., risk to reoffend, violate conditions) where supervising other people’s conduct is more difficult and riskier, as compared to the prison where prisoners are “safely tucked into their cells,” meaning incapacitated and unable to engage in behavior that may ultimately become the parole officer’s “problem.” For P024, community parole work made her “stressed” due to the inherent uncertainty that comes with supervising a “risky” population in a “risky” environment, where there is always the potential for wrongdoing. For P024 and others, any violation on the part of the client created the need for future decision making to deal with the situation, such as whether to initiate parole revocation proceedings, as well as added pressure to justify previous decision making—another source of occupational stress (see further below). P024’s description of the prison versus the community is also an expression of a controlling and incapacitative penal ideology that demonstrates her understanding of the prison as the default institution that, in her view, is the safer option for the penal worker who does not have to be concerned about their client’s whereabouts due to the more confining and immobilizing nature of the prison versus the community. Concerns about risk in prison, including risk to the client (e.g., risk of violence, abuse) are bracketed out; instead, the prison is conceived of as a space that reduces uncertainty for the parole officer, while the community is thought of as a space imbued with risk potential that increases uncertainty. Because parole clients are conceived of as always “at risk” of reengaging in criminal conduct (see also Werth 2019), for parole officers, periods of lowered supervision present times of risk, uncertainty, and insecurity. P024’s narrative speaks to the parole officer’s entrenched risk aversion—something perhaps learned on the job, but also something that may be inherent to the nature and demands of parole work. Parole officers exercise authority and carry responsibility under conditions of uncertain knowledge about the future, as P027, another CPO (female), pointed out:

I mean anytime you’re dealing with really dangerous people, something could happen. And human behavior is never an exact science and you cannot always intervene before somebody reoffends.

P027 recognized that while avoiding all risk might not be possible (“you cannot always intervene”), the uncertainty of parole supervision, and the potential for reoffending, meant that public safety considerations were always at the forefront of parole officers’ concerns, as P027 explained when she said that “It’s [public safety] always in the back of my mind.” The privileging of public safety concerns was also evident in IPOs’ narratives. IPO P015 explained that public safety “drives my decision making, it drives my actions, it drives my reactions,” but added that “. . . that’s probably my number one stress as well [laughter].”

For participants, working under conditions of uncertainty generated feelings of worry and anxiety as officers were concerned about the potential or “imagined outcomes” of their supervisory relationship with their clients (Kemper 1991). P05 (CPO, female) explained:

I almost caught myself like getting, a little, that feeling of anxiousness of, like, “oh what shit is going to be facing me now,” like it’s been a long [holiday] weekend and who’s screwed up, and what’s happened, and who’s been suspended or who’s breached?

Like P024, P05 felt particularly stressed about the uncertainty associated with periods of lowered supervision, like evenings, nights, and long weekends—lamenting over people’s behavior during such lowered periods of supervision—and the implications for the parole officer. P05 ended her narrative by saying that “you just never know what to expect”—a feeling that speaks to the stress associated with parole work always carrying some potential for risk and unpredictability. P107, a CPO (female), made a similar comment when narrating the difference between parole work in the community versus the prison:

I think it’s one of the drawbacks of being a community parole officer, as opposed to in the institution, because in the institution you know where your guys are right? They’re all in one place You hope every day that they’re not doing something really, really bad, because the last thing you want to be involved in is something, you know, somebody is getting seriously hurt or one of your guys are committing some violent offense. Like, that would be my worst fear, for them to go out there and harm a child or something like that, or commit a murder or something like that.

Being responsible for people whose behavior parole officers could not control at all times was described as “high stress, actually” by P057 (CPO, female) who elaborated:

in terms of the safety and the stress that goes with them [parolees], the responsibility of supervising and the how, even though it wouldn’t be our fault, we somehow feel responsible for the offenders if they reoffend. And, more specifically for major or violent crimes, that’s a big one for us as parole officers.

Like the above participants, P107 and P057 worried about things going “wrong,” especially about the potential for violent reoffending. As we go on to explain,

participants were worried about dealing with noncompliance and reoffending because they feared it could carry various negative consequences for themselves and others. Specifically, our data show how parole officers’ feelings around decision making were shaped by concerns for the well-being of their clients, the public, and their own occupational status and reputation. These different concerns again speak to the “Janus-faced” character of parole and the tension that arises from the authority and duty to decide on caring/supportive versus more coercive/punitive options when dealing with human behavior.

(Ex-)prisoner Concerns and Well-Being

Parole officers shared concern for their clients and the officer-parolee relationship in cases where they had to initiate parole revocation proceedings or impose other punitive consequences—a stressful reality, especially in cases where participants felt they had built good relationships with clients. Many interviewees described decision making that leads to a revocation of support as a necessary yet uncomfortable aspect of their job. P005 (CPO, female) explained:

I hate being that person that’s always calling someone on their shit, right? But you have to do that, it’s about being transparent and making sure that they’re actually, that there’s good boundaries in place and that the offender knows that’s expected of them.

CPOs’ supervision responsibilities can clash with their desire to help parolees integrate into the community and avoid recidivism—a tension between the “support” and “report” components of parole work (Werth 2013). P064 (CPO, male) provided an example that illustrates how he, as a CPO, experienced this conflict:

I don’t consider myself a bleeding heart . . . but when you have a guy on your caseload for years, and you get to know them, you get to know their spouse, you get to know their kids, you know, and then you send them back to jail . . . Meeting a guy and saying “I got to send you back.” He’s been out for over ten years . . . I said, “I’ll meet you at the police station,” and he’s there with his wife and they’re both crying, ’cause he’s a lifer [and] he doesn’t know when he’s getting out again, right? And I show up and he apologies to me, right, but I’m going “it still sucks.”

This interviewee talked about how they invested significant time and effort into building relationships with and providing resources to parolees, yet they must also make professional decisions that negatively impact the parolee, as well as their families or other close contacts. In essence, the report function of their supervision is in tension with their supportive role, and their professional actions at times will supersede (and even derail) that more supportive/caring side of parole work. Recognizing the emotional efforts necessary to build rapport, the consequence of revoking support is an emotional

one, too—emotions are variable as one tries to reconcile their occupational actions versus intentions.

Concerns about clients were not unique to the group of CPOs. Worries about how negative decisions could impact their clients' legal futures and relationships were also shared by IPOs. For example, P021 (IPO, female) reflected on a situation where she did not support a client's application for day parole. The participants felt aware of the impact her decision had on her client when she explained:

trying to work with these guys, and of course, I mean, it's their lives, they take it very personally when you don't support them so, . . . it's really hard to kinda keep that rapport going.

She continued to describe the situation where she denied support for her client as follows:

when I said I wasn't supporting him for parole, he immediately turned on me and it just got a little bit nasty. Like, he would have some of his inmate friends make comments if they saw me and, and all this kind of stuff, and I said to him, I said "it would be great if someday if we could have a discussion off the record, because I would love to tell you, you know, my, my real thoughts about you that I could never share."

As the quote reveals, decisions that deny support can negatively impact the parole officer–client relationship. For prisoners, their parole officer's recommendations and decisions are hugely consequential in determining the timing of their release from prison, which itself is stressful and nerve-racking. For parole officers, these situations require careful and sometimes difficult decision making based on risk assessment and judgment. While P021 did not go into depth about her "real thoughts," she continued her narrative, explaining that her client was eventually released "because of legislation," meaning at their statutory release date (in Canada, a release by law), but even then, P021's assessment was that "he's not ready, he's actually still not ready . . . so it's you know you just kind of cross your fingers and that's not the way I want to do corrections." P021 believed existing legal rules and frameworks have the potential to result in unsound release decisions, imposing further uncertainty, unpredictability, and stress for the parole officers to manage—a reality that challenged P021's desire to "do corrections" based on individualized risk assessment and judgment aimed at reducing uncertainty as much as possible. Here, P021's feelings that underpin her narrative emerge from the "anticipatory outcomes" of the parolee–parole officer supervisory relationship; in other words, the concern that the client may reoffend because they are not "ready" for the community.

Clients, as described in participants' words, have the potential to commit harm in the community and participants felt it was the parole officer's job to prevent this from happening. But they also felt it was their job to provide clients with structures and supports that encourage successful reintegration. Thus, denying or revoking support for a client generated feelings of personal concern and worry for clients' well-being

as well as that of their loved ones. Conversely, providing support to a client who was judged “not ready” (P021) could equally generate worry.

Public and Media Concerns

Interviewees also worried about public and media reactions that would ensue in cases where a released prisoner commits a new offense, especially a violent one. P023, a female IPO, said that public safety “definitely . . . weighs on my mind quite a bit,” adding:

I wouldn’t want to release a guy because I think he’s dangerous to the public, but it’s also because I wouldn’t want to release this guy because I wouldn’t want to be the one who released him A lot of the thinking is, do you want your name on the bottom of that report saying “oh he’s good to go”? No.

P023 was concerned about both public safety (i.e., releasing a “dangerous” person “to the public”) and their own liability. Although the ultimate decision-making power rests with the PBC, parole officers centered themselves as initial decision makers or gatekeepers, and as such, they felt they would be accountable for any “bad” outcomes, such as violent reoffending. The fear of making the “wrong” decision—misjudging a person’s potential for safe reintegration—was salient in discussions about public safety.

Participants shared deep concerns about having their name attached to a person who might reoffend in the community, as this would indicate bad decision making, failure of judgment, and lack of competence. Media reports on crime, which tend to focus on high-profile cases and criminal wrongdoing of ex-prisoners, heightened such concerns, as P002, a male IPO, explained:

I very much feel that what I do has perhaps not the most tangible definable value because if things go well, you know, your work has paid off. And it’s just unfortunately the nature of the business, we tend to focus and hear more about the cases that go wrong, so to speak.

P033, a female CPO, also spoke about the media when she explained to us the “Times test”:

Well, it’s funny, we joke around, and this has been like kind of a standing joke since I started as a parole officer, we call it the “Times test.” So, when we make decisions, you know, we kind of, you think about how it would be perceived if shit hit the fan and it ended up in the media.

P033 speaks to the temporal dynamics of parole officers’ perceptions of responsibility and accountability that emerge in the context of their discretionary penal power. The language of the “Times test” suggests that parole officers think in terms of a particular standard of time, set by the journalistic field, during which they feel particularly

concerned about their decision making, and specifically public reactions their case could attract. In other words, parole officers felt their decisions had to be able to withstand public attention and scrutiny for when a client's behavior could become newsworthy. But the "Times test," as interviewees also acknowledged, can come into conflict with parole officers' concerns for their clients' well-being. P033's narrative alludes to how parole officers felt they had to navigate and juggle public/media concerns versus client needs. Parolees' reintegration and well-being, which officers also cared about, go by a different timeline—one that is set not by news cycles, but shaped by the parolees' individual trajectories of reentry and the circumstances in which they find themselves. P033 spoke to this point when continuing to explain how she has "made some calls [decisions] that are not 100 percent kosher by the public but at the same time for me that's like my job is to help these guys reintegrate." P033 tried to make decisions that did not attract public attention, while recognizing that decisions that privilege public concerns may not always be in the best interest of their client's social and legal future or the parolee's reintegration, which is a long-term process. P033 reveals the tension-laden nature of parole that requires parole officers to straddle the line between what are perceived as competing concerns: not attracting (what is mostly) short-term media attention on the one hand, and making decisions with their clients' long-term needs in mind on the other hand.

Another interviewee, P022 (CPO, female), further problematized the lack of public awareness and recognition for parole work, describing the "invisibility" of parole work when things go well, but the heightened, negative attention that ensues in cases of client wrongdoing (which as we explain further below, is a rare occurrence):

and any publicity that we get is negative. It's always letting people out versus, you know, when we might actually do something that is protecting the public. It's always horrible people being let out of jail, or the bad decisions that we make, or the anything that goes wrong, people escaping, that hits the media. I don't think people have an understanding of the fact that we are a part of, I guess, law enforcement in keeping the public safe, that there's a lot of really bad people in the community that most people have probably no knowledge of it, and probably don't want to know anything about.

Parole work could generate frustration when participants felt their work was misunderstood, or when media accounts provided a one-dimensional account of parole and reentry, skewing people's perception of the parole system in a negative direction and thereby decreasing confidence in the work of parole officers and the system as a whole.

Liability and Concerns about Occupational Repercussions

Participants also had high concerns about clients' behavior in that they worried they could be scrutinized by their employer and face negative consequences if a client on their caseload reoffended. Reflecting on situations where parolees reoffend or violate conditions, P057 explained:

Well, they’re [upper management is] going to come and examine every single thing that you did. And did you, should you have done this differently? So there’s always kind of that looming stress over your head. That’s, that’s probably the least pleasant thing about my job.

Similar feelings were shared by P117 (IPO, female) when she explained how “wrong” decisions could carry negative implications for her career. For IPOs, such concerns emerged in cases where they had to make a decision regarding a person’s support for parole or a prisoner’s transfers to a lower-security prison:

there are some concerns that, like, if I do put someone at minimum security that if they, like, turn around and run away within two weeks I would, I would be held resp—like I, I, I’d be in very much trouble. I would, yeah like it, it would not—they would probably find a way to shift me out of intake and make my life not so pleasant if that had happened to me.

Though participants frequently stated that client wrongdoing “wouldn’t be our fault” (P057), their narratives demonstrate their concern about hindsight scrutiny of their work and fears of negative repercussions in their employment.

Together, interviewees’ narratives demonstrate an outcome-oriented penal ideology. Parole officers worried and feared “risk failure” (Kemshall 2009), in other words, making a decision where a client would later reoffend. Cane (2016, 287) writes that “the very point of creating roles and offices of authority and power is to promote certain outcomes. The prime criterion for evaluating performance of role responsibilities is not whether the agent tried but whether they succeeded” (see also Hart 1968). Indeed, it was worry about failure and imagining or anticipating “bad” outcomes, heightened by media accounts that focus on the failures in parole supervision, as well as concerns about negative occupational repercussions, that made parole work emotionally challenging. The fear of making a “wrong” decision was not an abstract worry; it was a real part of parole officers’ occupational realities that was experienced as particularly difficult and stress-inducing, as we move on to show below.

Responsibility, Guilt, and Blame

For some participants, the authority and responsibility of being charged with day-to-day supervision could generate feelings of guilt and blame where cases go “in the wrong direction” (P132). Responsibility is closely associated with questions of causality and the attribution of liability (Hage and Eckersley 2012). Responsibility is also linked to answerability, meaning the duty to explain and be accountable for past decision making (Dwyer and Minnegal 2012). Thus, in addition to talking about the stress that is associated with supervising and governing clients’ future conduct, many interviewees reflected on past events and decision making—what went “wrong” and what could or should have been done differently. As one interviewee said (P132, CPO, female):

yeah, and that's another thing, like I've had cases that have gone in the wrong direction and that has affected me because, like I told you before, it's "what would I have done differently?"

The interviewees' narrative suggests P132 sees causality between her work and decision making and the outcome of the case, leading her to question and reevaluate her own actions and recommendations. The interviewee then went on to provide more nuance on the issue of causality and responsibility when she explained:

but at the same time, you feel a sort of responsibility because you're managing these guys and you're hoping, you know, they're making the right decision and you're guiding them to make the right decisions, but you can't control what they do, but you'll still feel some level of responsibility. So I think that[] it has a sort of traumatic experience that you feel and it's an ongoing issue, but you just kind of learn to let it go.

Participants, like P132, reflected on what they believed *they* were responsible for versus their client's accountability. The feelings shared in this narrative may be described as a form of *secondary* or *mediated* responsibility. While attributing responsibility for the act itself (i.e., the offense/wrongdoing) to the client, participants felt responsibility for what they did or failed to do that ultimately led the parolee to violate a condition of their release or commit a new crime.

Other interviewees, too, reflected on past decision making. P001 discussed the emotional impact of making a release decision where the prisoner ultimately did later commit a violent crime in the community. Talking about the "the level of responsibility that comes with the job that I don't think a lot of people recognize," the interviewee recounted the following situation:

where we're making recommendations for guys that are to get out or stay in prison And if you're wrong, you pay a heavy toll for that and that in my experience in [year], I think it was, where I had recommended a violent offender to stay in prison and be detained to a warrant expiry And when I consulted with my colleagues in the community they felt that I was being overly conservative on the case and they thought I was crazy to not let him out, so I reconsidered and decided to go ahead and let him out and he did four months in a halfway house and then ran away and committed a first degree murder And I felt up until last year for like five or six years I felt very personally responsible for that murder Where had I just gone with my gut and trusted myself for sure that individual wouldn't have been murdered, certainly not by this person. And the victim had two young children and I had two children.

Here, the interviewee describes a personal responsibility for their client's ultimate wrongdoing, a decision that affected them many years later and led to emotional distress. Though rare events, these situations were experienced as particularly traumatic with long-lasting impacts on parole officers' emotional well-being. As the narrative

elucidates, P001 blamed themselves for both the outcome (i.e., the new offense) and the fact that they did not go “with my gut and trust[] myself.”

Making Defensible and Durable Decisions

In an effort to navigate emotions of worry and blame and limit associated stress, participants talked about the importance of making decisions that they felt were “defensible” (Kemshall 2009). “Defensible decisions,” drawing on Kemshall’s (2009) work, were ones that satisfied their professional standards (i.e., making sound risk assessment and judgment devoid of political or public pressures) and could withstand external pressure and scrutiny. Feeling they had made a “defensible” decision helped them deal with potential feelings of frustration in situations where parole officers’ judgment and recommendations were not shared and ultimately adopted by the PBC, yet they were required to carry the weight of doing the actual supervision work. P049 talked about this issue, explaining:

half the time they [the PBC] agree with me, half the time they don’t, and it’s very frustrating when you think you’ve presented this case and then, you know, somebody else says “yeah, sorry . . . ” And then we have to manage them. So if I say a guy shouldn’t get out or he should go back to jail and the board says “yeah, no sorry,” then I have to figure out a way how to manage him. That part’s frustrating, because I already told you, he’s not manageable. And now you’ve decided he is. But you have no part in managing him. That falls back to us. So that’s probably the most frustrating part.

Parole officers are working within a larger system of (post)prison regulation and control. Their work and duties, and the feelings generated by their work, are shaped by a variety of legal and organizational factors, including the organizational relationship and role responsibilities between the PBC and frontline parole officers. Feelings of frustration occurred when participants felt that PBC decisions did not align with their own judgment, yet they were responsible for taking on the on-the-ground supervision of a person who they believed presented risk, or was not “manageable” in the community. Knowing that they may not always agree with PBC decisions but still carry the weight of those decisions, participants highlighted how important it was for them to feel confident in and consistent with their own recommendations, professional judgment, and decision making, regardless of whether their recommendations were ultimately adopted by the PBC. P006, a female IPO, spoke to this issue:

So, I mean all I can do is my best assessment of risk to say whether or not he’s really, truly ready, and I have to just be not afraid to document that negative opinion in a risk assessment and present it to the parole boards so I can sleep at night. Because that way if they let him out and he reoffends, it’s on the parole board who actually released them, and I stood by my own recommendation. So, but it’s definitely, you can feel the push, like you’re, I feel like even now I’m looking at cases where I wouldn’t have considered supporting them for parole and now they’re getting to go home on parole.

When participants, like P006, talked about the “push,” they were referring to competing priorities and demands, stemming from their employer (i.e., feeling pressure to release individuals early) and the public (which they felt was not receptive to prisoner release and reintegration). As P026, an IPO, said:

we have the public pushing for some, one thing but also management pushing for another, and, like, they’re all, most of them are gonna get out one day and we have to be able to facilitate that safely . . . But the community is going “but why are you letting them out, though?” . . . They think that we’re just trying to get them all out and not worry or were not concerned about public safety.

Feeling they had made a “defensible” decision—one they could self-rationalize and justify to others, and that was consistent with their professional judgment—enabled participants to deflect responsibility for any “wrong” outcomes from the parole officer to the PBC, as P006’s narrative speaks to. “Defensibility” was closely related to the importance of making durable decisions, meaning decisions that parole officers felt confident about in the long term—that parole officers could “stand” by (P006). In other words, durability refers to endurance in decision making, confidence, and internal stamina in one’s decision making—important emotions that helped some participants neutralize feelings of frustration and accountability. P029 (IPO, female) echoed feelings of “defensibility” and durability when she talked about the importance of both defending one’s decisions and feeling confident about them:

I think the best piece of advice I was ever given, and I give this to all the new POs [parole officers], is we’re the ones making the recommendations, we’re the ones who have to defend the recommendations, not the person putting the pressure on us. So, when I make a recommendation to suspend or release or whatever, I’m very confident that when it comes down to it I can defend my actions, I’m not going to let somebody pressure me because I have to fall in line with a certain policy or certain agenda, which is not favorably looked on at some points.

As this quote shows, the abilities to not be swayed by external pressure, to make professional judgment, and to find confidence in one’s recommendations and decisions were critical ways for parole officers to deal with and seek to overcome internalized worries, frustrations, and emotions related to blame and responsibility.

DISCUSSION

Burgess (1936, 493), in a 1936 article on “Protecting the Public by Parole and by Parole Prediction,” described parole work as “the most difficult” but also the “most important” part of the criminal justice system. Burgess explained that parole work was difficult because parole officers have to deal with the failures of the front end of the penal system (e.g., inadequate rehabilitation in prison). They are charged with

“curing” these problems, while carrying the responsibility of doing the *actual* work that is involved in managing people on release and helping them during difficult transitions. We show that this work is often experienced as emotionally stressful and worrisome, especially during times where close-up supervision is reduced (e.g., on weekends, holidays).

Our data demonstrate that parole work is an emotionally demanding job. Officers do feel responsible for (ex-)prisoners’ well-being insofar as they are tasked with assessing and responding to situations appropriately. But for parole officers, it is complicated. Beyond their occupational mandate of public safety and the oversight of their clients, parole officers also focus on the well-being of (ex-)prisoners and how to best meet their needs and provide supports. The challenge is that parolees may experience periods of regression or relapse, and the role of the parole officer includes determining whether their actions constitute a revocation of their parole that must be acted upon. Parole officers basically need to be able to predict the future and minimize possible future offenses by enacting their authority with discretion when a negative behavior arises. The tension here is paramount; they are there to support and report, but reporting basically means to cut their support and reinterpret their clients’ actions within a legal framework of predicting recidivism rather than supporting desistance and reentry.

The rapport built with clients, the necessary trust to be a source of support, is revoked by reporting, straining the relationship and reducing the parole officer’s ability to provide support. The parole officer–parolee relationship can generate emotions, such as internalized frustration, when parole officers need to revoke support. Unlike other penal workers in the community (e.g., police officers), parole officers have ongoing contact with clients, some of whom will go on to violate their conditions or commit a new offense. Most, however, will complete their parole successfully and return to life in the community without further offending (Government of Canada 2019). Parole officers have to accept that negative decisions (e.g., suspension of parole) can impact their rapport with clients, possibly causing difficult emotions for themselves and others.

Existing studies on parole have been largely preoccupied with actuarial risk thinking and managerialism as the defining features of parole work (e.g., Feeley and Simon 1992; Hannah-Moffat 2005; Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat 2009). But beyond risk and managerialism, we have shown that parole is also a highly emotionally charged practice and experience, for (ex-)prisoners, parole officers, and also the public (Karstedt 2011). One of the reasons parole officers experience parole work as an emotionally demanding practice is that human behavior can never fully be predicted via actuarial risk assessment or other forms of judgment and supervision; as such, parole officers must always deal with some form of uncertainty when making critical decisions that they know have implications for their clients’ legal and social lives and that may come under the scrutiny of media, the public, and their employer. Parole is an inherently liminal position and experience (Werth 2013; see also Maier 2020a). Dealing with uncertainty in the context of the liminality of parole—a time and space of transition between freedom and incarceration—can be stressful for the parolee, but also for the parole officer who must make decisions between care and coercion under conditions of uncertain knowledge and unpredictability. Practicing penal power under such conditions results in internalized feelings of worry and fear and, as interviewees’ narratives show,

can even lead to feelings of blame and emotional stress when violations and new offenses occur.

Parole is an emotional experience for (ex-)prisoners, where feelings of nervousness, anxiety, and stress, but also joy about newfound freedom and hope for the future, are common (Maruna 2001; Western 2018). Parole officers described how in parole work, the priorities and needs of different actors and institutions—the client, the public, and the employer—merge and frequently collide. Parole officers see it as their task to balance these different priorities, make a decision, live with it, and possibly defend it in the future. Working under conditions of uncertainty made participants feel stressed and anxious. Feelings of anxiety were related to other emotions, such as blame and guilt, which emerged from officers imagining, anticipating, or experiencing real outcomes of “risk failure” (Kemshall 2009), which participants worried could affect their clients’ lives, the public, and their own reputations.

Participants sought to negotiate these feelings by affirming the importance of making “defensible decisions,” as defined by Kemshall (2003, 2009). In essence, this meant making “risk assessment grounded in evidence” (Kemshall 2009, 332), assessing the case in all its complexity, and resisting outside pressure. The confidence in making “defensible decisions” appeared to play an important role in helping participants deal with the weight of responsibility and accountability they felt, as well as with the stress and anxiety associated with dealing with real or imagined “bad” outcomes.

Although policy and practices that include recognition of emotions are difficult to design, we maintain that emotions are necessary considerations for parole organizations. Efforts to support the emotional regulation and literacy of parole officers are essential, including the introduction of additional psychological supports, particularly around experiences where parole officers’ support versus reporting roles can create challenge and internalized frustration (see also Knight 2014). Although reporting is, in some ways, a means of support, reporting can also feel like a violation and thus require nuanced actions to overcome the feelings of violation (and associated guilt) with the goal of maintaining rapport with clients. Additional training in leadership and trauma-informed care is also necessary to better equip parole officers when working with diverse clients, as each will assist with facilitating emotional literacy, both personal and in response to the actions and attitudes exhibited by clients (see also Westaby et al. 2021).

As our data have shown, the emotional demands of parole work can create work-life spillover effects (see Westaby, Phillips, and Fowler 2016), as participants were especially concerned about their clients’ behavior on days when they were not working and actively supervising. Parole officers need to feel able to emotionally disconnect from their work and responsibilities without fearing negative employment consequences in the event a client reoffends. To facilitate this, it is important that parole officers are given opportunity to express and reflect on the emotions associated with their work, including their concerns and worries. Reflecting on one’s emotions is associated with increased “emotional literacy” (Knight 2014)—a key component of positive and supportive supervision work. In addition to parole officer support, our data speak to the importance of offering enhanced support for (ex-)prisoners to help ensure their well-being, especially during times where parole officers do not assume this role. This is not to advocate for tighter supervision or release conditions, but rather for enhanced and coordinated supports that serve the dual roles of assisting (ex-)prisoners

during the transition from prison to community and releasing parole officers of their perceived responsibility of being “on call” all the time.

Beyond making internal and organizational changes, it is critical that we acknowledge the wider social and legal forces that shape parole practice and associated emotions and that cannot be dealt with via organizational and institutional change alone (see also Mawby and Worrall 2011). Parole officers experience their occupational realities in particular ways for reasons that are situated outside the realm of parole. Some participants talked about legal constraints (i.e., the release of prisoners at statutory release even though parole officers did not feel they were ready for reentry); others talked about the challenges and, at times, frustrations they felt in cases where the PBC did not share their recommendations, which speaks to some of the interorganizational challenges in parole and supervision work. Participants also voiced frustration over the public’s lack of knowledge of the parole system. These external factors could heighten parole officers’ worries and intensify certain emotions. Parolees’ reentry trajectories, too, are influenced by a range of wider socioeconomic forces, such as access to the labor market, housing, and health care. Such material needs are often difficult to achieve given the sociostructural barriers and disadvantage that put parolees at risk of unemployment, precarious housing, and lack of support and health care services (e.g., Sugie 2018; Western 2018). Criminological research has well shown that social marginalization and disadvantage are associated with increased recidivism (e.g., LeBel 2017), and socioeconomic barriers make it harder for people to comply with their technical conditions and desist from crime altogether. Because these wider socioeconomic realities shape parolees’ lives and reintegration outcomes, it is reasonable to argue that they also impact parole officer practice and feelings, especially when parole officers care about the well-being of their client and/or the safety of the community. Any policies aimed at dealing with parole officer stress and well-being will therefore have to consider the need for wider changes to both the penal system and society.

Many participants were concerned about the possibility that a client on parole could commit a technical violation or new criminal offense, especially a violent offense, that would garner public attention, challenge confidence in the institution of parole, and put their own name on the line. Public reactions to returning prisoners, research shows, are generally negative and stigmatizing, and are often fueled by sensationalized media accounts of violent offenses (Rade, Desmarais, and Mitchell 2016). Parole officers’ feelings were shaped to a significant degree by concerns about the possibility of such reactions. While participants were deeply concerned about and even felt guilt and blame in cases of “risk failure” (Kemshall 2009), there was a paucity of reflection on the more positive emotions associated with the successes of parole work, such as when a client completes their parole successfully and reestablishes themselves in the community. Statistically, this is the much more likely outcome, yet the possibility of “risk failure” appeared to have a much larger impact in shaping parole officers’ emotions and concerns. We call on scholars to empirically unmask the breadth and depth of the *everyday emotions* (Crawley 2004) generated by parole work, including emotions that may be triggered by “risk success” stories of parole. Research on probation provides evidence that community corrections work can generate a range of positive emotions, including happiness, joy, or relief when clients do well (Westaby, Fowler, and Phillips 2020)—an issue that needs to be explored also in the context of parole work. We also

suggest that a better understanding of the *range* of the everyday emotions of parole work is important for parole practice, as the display of emotions, especially positive ones, has been shown to produce positive effects on clients and the parole officer–parolee relationship (Knight 2014).

Our data do not provide insight into how and to what extent parole officers displayed their emotions in interaction with others (e.g., clients, colleagues). Future research should consider how, when, and why officers feel comfortable displaying emotions, including worry and guilt, or whether they feel they have to hide such feelings. Specifically, while research shows that penal workers often use positive emotions, such as empathy, in their work (Westaby, Fowler, and Phillips 2020), we lack understanding of the use of more “negative” emotions (e.g., worry, frustration, guilt), including how such emotions, if publicly displayed, may affect parole work and parole officer–parolee relationships. The feelings of guilt and blame participants expressed, we find, is a very human response that demonstrates self-reflection and accountability on the part of the parole officer, yet parole workers might be less inclined to share these feelings for fear it could signal lack of judgment, expertise, or professionalism. Future research on emotions in parole work should consider the effects of the use and display of more “negative” emotions such as guilt, blame, and worry on parole practice, such as whether the display of such emotions may strain or potentially serve to humanize the relationship between penal workers and subjects. Thus, future research should also consider how parole officers’ emotions, such as blame and guilt, affect their actual decision making and interaction with clients.

CONCLUSION

We drew on interviews with parole officers to analyze how, as a group of penal staff working at the interface of imprisonment and freedom, they understood and made sense of their legal authority over other people’s lives and future. Our findings reveal that parole officers see themselves as reintegration and public safety professionals. In this role, they have to make critical decisions that affect their clients, the public, and possibly their own professional status and emotional well-being. The article shed light on how uncertainty impacts parole officers’ perceptions and feelings toward their job. Being tasked with critical decision-making authority—what parole officers experience as high responsibility—under conditions of uncertainty generates a range of other emotional states, such as worry, fear, and guilt, which parole officers seek to navigate by making durable decisions that carefully balance individual needs for reintegration and public safety concerns and that are able to withstand scrutiny. We call on scholars to expand work on emotions and emotional literacy in parole work.

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