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Regular Article

"We're not worth it": Canadian parole officers' self-worth contingencies — a valuation for job fitness?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the social environment of Canadian federal parole officers (POs) through a study on seven self-worth contingencies (i.e., recognition, images, comparisons, ideology, kinship, competence, and virtue) adopted for public safety contexts. We qualitatively investigate 28 POs' perceptions, taking a semi-grounded constructivist approach to interview data, and learn how parole officers experience esteem at work. We demonstrate how participants come to recognize themselves through comparisons with other public safety roles, and we situate our findings within the broader literature on probation/parole officer mental health. Using self-determination and introjection theory as our conceptual framework, we identify a paradox. We observe that POs who seek esteem by comparing themselves to others and use techniques to project self-worth likely experience greater distress. In contrast, we surmise those whose self-worth is rooted in authenticity, reflected through abstracted self-construal and an internalized locus of controlexperience greater well-being. Limitations to our study's findings and the implications for future research are offered while theorizing how human resources may be improved in correctional work.

1. Introduction

In Canada, probation and parole officers (PPOs) are public safety personnel "at-risk" for developing occupational stress injuries (e.g., Ricciardelli, 2019, pp. 1–9). Studies show many PPOs report mental health disorders, with up to 63.2 % of one studied sample screening positive for conditions such as major depressive disorder (Carleton, Ricciardelli, et al., 2020, p. 8). A qualitative study unpacking these findings revealed organizational stressors, particularly interpersonal dynamics in the workplace, were key contributors to illness or injury (Norman & Ricciardelli, 2022). This study aims to explore how contingent self-worth, mediated by occupational placement (see Furnham, 2001, pp. 223–251), influences PPOs' experiences with symptoms of depression; and how perceptions of their roles may be harmful when comparing themselves to other, more recognized, public safety personnel. While there is significant overlap between probation and parole officer roles, our study focuses exclusively on federal parole officers (POs) employed by Correctional Service Canada (CSC). We explore workplace characteristics impacting depressive symptoms and self-worth while referring to both roles as PPOs when discussing the literature.[1]

We expand conventional understandings on esteem in correctional treatment literature by centralizing human service when relating with criminalized people (Bonta & Andrews, 2024); and exploring self-regulation theory as capacity building for therapeutic alliances—a core function of the PPO role in correctional practice (Lewis, 2016; Norcross & Wampold, 2018). We argue correctional interventions can improve relational dynamics in the workplace and self-efficacy of correctional personnel by studying the contingencies on which correctional workers may stake self-worth. We operationalize self-worth for POs as a factor mediating both their professional and subjective experiences, suggesting self-esteem is a moderator of job satisfaction. As such we structure the article first by reviewing literature on self-worth and mental health in context of self-determination theory and PPO performance before discussing our methods. We then present our findings, focusing on seven adopted self-worth contingencies grounded in POs' experience and providing a novel application from the original contexts in which contingent self-worth has been previously studied (for a review

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[1] The distinction in Canada is PPOs operate in provincial and territorial jurisdictions, whereas CSC POs operate exclusively at the federal level.

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see Crocker, 2010; Park & Crocker, 2008). Therefore, our findings are structured according to seven contingencies salient among POs—*recognition, competence, kinship, ideology, images, comparisons,* and *virtue*—and applied to PPO literature delineating theoretical and practical implications for future research in this area. In this article, we explore how self-worth shapes the professional identities of PPOs, serving as a buffer against negative mental health outcomes. We do this by examining how beliefs mediate personal, professional, and occupational performance in parole work—a core function of public safety in Canada.

2. Literature

2.1. Self-worth, mental health, and probation/parole officers' performance

Research on contingent self-esteem reveals two primary interpretations: one focuses on the extent to which self-esteem is based on certain external attributes. The other examines the specific attributes that shape how esteem is formed—these are the contingencies on which self-worth becomes staked (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2020a). Recognition is a key component to shaping emotional responses in workplace stressors, such as competence or ideology mediating operational or organizational outcomes, and thus moderating personal well-being (Duxbury & Higgins, 2009; Lamont, 2023). One central concept in this area is self-construal, referring to how individuals perceive and define themselves in relation to others (Cavanaugh & Sweeny, 2012; Updegraff et al., 2010). An abstracted self-construal is thought to offer greater flexibility as people interpret adversity more adaptively. In contrast, a rigid self-construal may lead to introjected regulation where external expectations are internalized to help foster an externalized locus of behavioral control (Cavanaugh & Sweeny, 2012; Updegraff et al., 2010; Uzun & Aydemir, 2020). "Concrete" or rigid self-construal is an organizational issue given the association with personal factors including vulnerability to neuroticism (Cavanaugh & Sweeny, 2012; Ferris, 2014, pp. 127–142; Updegraff et al., 2010) which means staff experience depression or perceive work more negatively than those interpreting events as benign (Crocker, 2010; Judge & Bono, 2001; Kernis et al., 2008).

The connection between neuroticism and negative affect including anxiety, depression, and hostility is established in contingency self-worth literature (Crocker et al., 2004; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sturman et al., 2008). Emerging findings demonstrate correctional workers are vulnerable to neuroticism due to their employment tenure (McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2022; Suliman & Einat, 2018) representing a psychosocial hazard to PPOs' well-being as staff operating within the correctional workplace environment (Montoya-Barthelemy et al., 2022).

The mental health of PPOs, as public safety personnel, has been a focal point in research investigating how organizational factors impact personal interpretations and occupational stressors for personnel in a given role (Edgelow et al., 2022; Norman & Ricciardelli, 2022). Gayman and Bradley (2013) found that organizational climate, particularly role ambiguity and workplace stressors significantly contributed to exhaustion and burnout for PPOs. However, their research concluded the "association between length of job tenure and mental health may be largely spurious" suggesting depression was more associated with one's occupational role than tenure (Gayman & Bradley, 2012, p. 339). A limitation here is subsequently finding a large proportion of PPOs report major depressive, generalized anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorders (Carleton et al., 2020a, 2020b; Ricciardelli et al., 2021) with the heavy reliance upon statistical techniques using self-report survey data. Qualitative findings offer a clearer picture about how the correctional workplace produces an atmosphere moderating role conflict and ambiguity unresponsive to human needs (Taylor, Ricciardelli, & Shively, 2024), thus furnishing uncertainty predictive of ill-being among Canadian correctional workers (Ricciardelli et al., 2021).

When self-worth is tied to external factors, such as occupational success or belief-driven judgments—including assessment of criminalized behavior—it exemplifies an external locus of behavioral control. For example, risk assessment practices increasingly characterize the PPO role (Fitzgibbon, 2007)—forming the basis of organizational performance metrics—and imparting a locus of control beyond the PPOs' capacity (Taylor, 2023). For PPOs, contingent self-worth is thought to be predicated on external validation which drives depressive symptoms (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Here, introjected regulation refers to inauthentic performance, contributing to emotional distress and mental health challenges, as individuals adapt to the values and beliefs of their social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Uzun & Aydemir, 2020).

Contingencies of self-worth—domains people base their self-esteem on—offer a framework for understanding how people navigate social environments or fit within workplace organizations (Carbonell & Ricciardelli, 2023; Furnham, 2001, pp. 223–251). For PPOs, working in a highly evaluative environment where performance is assessed according to safety,[2] contingencies are theorized to affect emotional well-being. For instance, a parolee violently reoffends affecting the PPOs' self-worth when performance is tied to risk assessment and framed negatively in news media (Ricciardelli et al., 2023, pp. 40–58). Such concerns relate to being perceived as "soft," leading PPOs to align with workplace values around "toughness" (Robinson & Ugwudike, 2012)—a form of introjected regulation.

The external pressure to conform to certain ideals reinforces rigid self-construal and generates a cycle of misrepresentation (McNeill, 2018), where the true scope of safety and its complexities when applied to correctional work tend to be misrecognized (see Reason, 2000; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). Recognition thus underscores correctional work, mediating professional identity, and is theorized to foster feelings of inauthenticity, amplify neuroticism, and contribute to mental stress injuries (Lamont, 2023).

2.2. Seven self-worth contingencies: contextualizing PPOs' well-being

Adopted from Crocker (2010) and others,[3] we delineate seven contingencies of self-worth—*recognition, competence, kinship, ideology, images, comparisons,* and *virtue*—by theorizing how PPOs may self-regulate emotional responses to inform their professional identity (Crocker et al., 2003, 2004; Crocker & Knight, 2005; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). These contingencies, derived from self-esteem theory, provide insight into the challenges PPOs may face in their work environments and how self-worth mediates emotional resiliency. The contingencies, applied to PPOs, are as follows:

Recognition, as a contingency, relates to the desire for others' approval or regard. For PPOs, recognition from colleagues, supervisors, and society is fundamental for shaping their self-worth. A lack of recognition—or misrecognition—particularly in comparison to other public safety occupations, can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, and exacerbate mental health challenges (Crocker, 2010, p. 148). Literature on correctional work tends to characterize

[2] Safety, in this context, refers to a dynamic non-event—where correctional work ostensibly aims to foster rehabilitation or desistance. Yet, a paradox emerges: success is far harder to operationalize than failure, which is typically marked by observable non-compliance, reoffending, or the criminal event itself.

[3] To date, no known studies have examined the Contingencies of Self-Worth within the context of public safety personnel. Instead, the model has primarily evolved from studies involving college student samples. For context, we briefly list the seven conventional contingencies alongside our adopted terminology: (a) others' approval or regard (recognition); (b) physical appearance (images); (c) competencies (competence); (d) love from family or God (kinship); (e) outdoing others in competition (comparators); (f) virtue; and (g) faith (ideology).

probation/parole myopically either by misrepresenting its function or misrecognizing what it entails (McNeill, 2018; Phillips, 2015).

Images refer to how individuals perceive themselves in comparison to social standards, especially related to physical appearance and outward projections (Patrick et al., 2004). For PPOs, societal stereotypes about law enforcement and correctional personnel, including perceptions of officers as tough or apathetic, can influence their self-esteem, undermine their perceived value, and contribute to role conflict (Beehr & Glazer, 2005; DeMichele & Payne, 2007; West & Seiter, 2004). These externalized projections are theorized to inform emotional well-being and professional identities when PPOs adopt them as a contingency of their self-worth.

Comparison involves contrasting oneself against others, often within the context of competition, hierarchical status, or "outdoing others" (Crocker et al., 2004). PPOs who compare themselves to other public safety professionals, such as police officers or fellow correctional workers, may promote feelings of inferiority if interpretations lead to devaluation or being seen as lesser-than or incapacitated. Correctional work is occupationally associated with lower pay and poor professional prestige, if compared to other occupations, the consequential stress can contribute to burnout (Montoya-Barthelemy et al., 2022).

Ideology is the contingency reflecting internal beliefs and values, such as "faith" or moral convictions, which shapes one's identity around their role (Crocker, 2010; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). PPOs whose personal values align with their professional role are theorized to experience higher job satisfaction. However, when personal and professional values diverge, dissonance leading to distress can become 'morally injurious', further exacerbating strain and job dissatisfaction (Griffin et al., 2019; Ricciardelli et al., 2024; Shay, 2014). While ideology as a contingency is known to predict certain communal activities and support solidarity (Li et al., 2020), research is needed to explore how ideological commitments are internalized versus externalized and *vice versa* (Crocker & Knight, 2005).

Kinship, in the literature, refers to "family support" (Crocker et al., 2004; Crocker & Knight, 2005; Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2020b; Park & Crocker, 2008; Sturman et al., 2008), "family love and support" (Li et al., 2020), "love from family" (Crocker, 2010), and even "family and friends" (O'Mahen, 2003, p. 27). We operationalize kinship to mean relationships characterized by love, friendship, and "warm and trusting relationships" (Kernis, 2003, p. 12), which for PPOs could represent bi-directional support including for/from clients, colleagues, friends, or loved ones.

Competence, a tenet of self-determination, is the contingency referring to the belief in one's ability to perform work-related tasks effectively (Crocker, 2010; Crocker et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The literature typically centres around academic competency and may be tied to educational qualifications or job performance standards (Crocker, 2010; Li et al., 2020). For PPOs, perceiving themselves according to competencies such as their achievements may moderate self-esteem, but equally could mediate self-worth when those same values are underappreciated (i.e., resulting in frustration and professional disconnection).

Virtue, as a contingency, is associated with moral self-evaluation and the willingness to engage in self-sacrifice for others, particularly in the context of care ethics (Crocker, 2010, p. 148; Li et al., 2020, p. 886; Dominey & Canton, 2022). PPOs often experience this contingency in relation to their duty to rehabilitate clientele and tend to see themselves as "people people" (Worrall & Mawby, 2014, p. 352). When this commitment goes unrecognized (i.e., the preoccupation with non-events framed as public safety), such infidelity can create a sense of burnout and unfulfilled purpose. Meanwhile, PPOs who lead by forgoing external rewards are recognized to represent the virtue contingency.

We remain curious about how participants engage in attaining self-worth through their contingencies. When self-worth is threatened or unmet, we posit esteem—as a fundamental human need—is thwarted, thereby exacerbating mental health issues, including depression. We theorize that contingencies of self-worth shape POs' occupational identities—mediating workplace stress and moderating emotional well-being and mental health. We focus specifically on how these contingencies may become 'staked' in PPO work to inform their self-worth in the pursuit of esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), rather than on whether these particular domains universally apply.

3. Methods

The current study draws on data from Ricciardelli et al. (2022, pp. 1–74), exploring the experiences of 150 POs employed by CSC, which supervises individuals sentenced to two years or more. The role is divided between Institutional Parole Officers (IPOs), who support pre-release prisoners, and Community Parole Officers (CPOs), who oversee parolees' reintegration. In Canadian federal correctional services, POs are deployed nationally and work in both institutional and community settings. Yet, sentencing administration remains a provincial/territorial matter where probation/parole officers facilitate less intrusive forms of community supervision (e.g., probation, conditional sentences served under house arrest) or perform investigations and deliver pre-sentence reports to the courts (for a discussion see Bourgon, 2024). Individuals sentenced to imprisonment or two years or more are handled federally within CSC's jurisdiction.

We conducted semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share the experiences they found most relevant (Brinkmann, 2020). Interviews took place in August and September 2020, lasting 75–120 min, during COVID-19 restrictions, which limited access to physical locations. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation and audio-recorded in-depth interviews were conducted via telephone and transcribed verbatim. As participants were employed nationally across Canada, interviews by phone proved vital. The Union of Safety and Justice Employees (USJE) commissioned our research project. Both CSC and USJE provided support disseminating information via internal mailing list for participant recruitment. Our university's review and ethics board granted oversight and approval for this research project (file no. 20201495), and the second author was principal investigator.

We approached analysis inductively and then, by grounding our observations of the data in extant literature, abductively interpreted findings as the study progressed (Reichertz, 2019). We term this approach semi-grounded constructivist (Taylor, Ricciardelli, & Spencer, 2024; Taylor & Ricciardelli, 2023) because we interpret empirical data and then theorize the data based on meta-discourses across interdisciplinary and sometimes disparate fields (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, refraining from theoretical impositions, we did not aim to construct theory from our findings as is the convention among many grounded theory traditionalists (Johnston et al., 2023). Instead, we developed a framework for interpreting meaning about self-worth, focusing on the shared discourses through which we privileged salient themes and disregarded those deemed unimportant in the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Our interpretive contributions are grounded by certain qualitative canons, and may be appraise according to credibility, originality, usefulness, and resonance (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin, 2016).

In practice we coded transcript data across numerous members of our research team, all of whom signed confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements, through a three-phased approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). First, open coding was achieved inductively by three members of the research team tasked with independently coding five transcripts sequentially. Following their lead in constructing a codebook, research assistants supported axial coding and abducted original observations with nuance and specificity. Due to resource and research agreement limitations, we were unable to conduct member-checking with participants directly. However, we promoted reliability by all team members discussing findings to establish inter-rater consistency, otherwise known as 'consensus coding' (Hemmler et al., 2022).

Data was consolidated in this iterative process of interpretation where insights generated new themes until saturation based on our

collective discussion and teamwork. We employed QSR NVivo software (v. 1.7.1 1534) as a measure of consistency across initial coding, all of which was accomplished manually to ensure no codes were generated using artificial intelligence. Axial coding of the transcript data produced themes in our final codebook, which included over 140 nodes and various sub-categories. The thematic findings of this study were constructed based on a single node, which was coded to mean descriptions used to express how POs felt the public perceives them or how they are seen within their organization. Informatively, the node featured a temporal component that revolved around discussions about parole work as 'essential' during the pandemic, a topic we included in the interview guide.

In the third and final phase of selective coding, conducted by the first author (a doctoral candidate) and validated by the second author (their PhD supervisor), a total of 85 participants were identified in the exported NVivo node titled 'perceptions of POs,' which contained 199 references. References interpreted as self-worth and esteem were selected from the data, and a final coding schedule was developed based on the seven contingencies explored (see Table 1). We also reviewed demographic survey data collected during the interviews.

Participants (n = 28) were selected from the full sample (n = 150), categorized as Institutional Parole Officers (IPOs, n = 18) or Community Parole Officers (CPOs, n = 10) based on whether their work was in a prison or community setting. We gave each participants an identification number, noting their job role, and gender (see Table 2). The sample was predominantly female (n = 21), consistent with the larger research project, where females comprised 75 % of the 150 POs interviewed. Compared to the larger project (64 % IPOs), our sample had a more balanced distribution of roles (54 % IPOs vs. 46 % CPOs) than the full sample.

Despite some variations in role assignment, all participants reflected on their experiences as POs within Canada's national correctional service. Findings are presented as transcript excerpts and sometimes revised for minor syntax but always remain true to participants' original context. To minimize bias based on names or pseudonyms, which suggest ethnic and other characteristics, participants are referenced by identification numbers. We organized findings by thematic salience in accordance with the seven self-worth contingencies discovered in the literature.

4. Recognizing parole work

> "We're not worth it … I think a lot of the … officers spend a lot of their time … justifying their existence, and that's frustrating" (P1).

As expressed by P1, participants recognized the value of their work in ways we analyzed, framed by the seven self-worth contingencies in the following sub-sections. However, recognition was the most salient theme representing a thread across all other findings. Participants often recognized their work in parole by comparing themselves to more esteemed public safety roles, using images to define and contrast their identity. However, these comparisons were complex, overlapping, and varied. For example, one participant noted, "the general public really has no idea of what corrections is—they think we're all knuckle-dragging gorillas [despite] the average correctional officer [possessing] at least one degree" (P9). Here, recognition for parole work invokes the image of being competent, despite the implied stereotype that prison workers are generally unintelligent or aggressive. An interpretation of this excerpt reflects the ideological commitment to competency and being recognized for having a more meaningful purpose in prison work, thus appraising self-worth in terms of being educated or intelligent.

Table 1
Selective coding schedule results.

Contingency	References (n)
Recognition	58
Images	42
Comparators	37
Ideology	23
Kinship	17
Competence	13
Virtue	13

Table 2
Participants by role and gender.

Role	Gender	# of Participants
IPOs	Female	14
CPOs	Female	7
IPOs	Male	4
CPOs	Male	3

Overall, self-worth contingencies were implicit when recognizing how participants staked their self-worth. They often emerged in the context of participants reflecting on images to project meaning or using comparisons to seek recognition for their occupation. The salience of ideological commitments followed, where participants explored conditions produced by the workplace environment. As aforementioned, participants used the competency contingency to invoke meaning about educational attainment (e.g., a bachelor's degree as a role requirement), renumeration, or pay. Then, kinship focused on work-life balance and relationships among family, friends, and co-workers. Finally, virtue emerged as themes of gratitude and intrinsic motivation, altruism, and care ethics indicative of authentic self-esteem.

4.1. Recognition: identity, image, and social comparison

Several participants used the term "radar" to locate their occupation and position their role within the organization, emphasizing how POs were often seen as undervalued or less-than. Participants described how POs, as per P24, felt invisible: "continu[ing] to fly under the radar, and nobody knows what we do and how we do our work." The use of radar reflects a lack of recognition, where being unseen led to devaluation, which in turn affected self-perception. P24 elaborated on how public perceptions, and their own awareness of being unseen, contributed to their sense of feeling undervalued: "We're just not a big enough group, and we're not on their radar. There was no sort of like recognizing, like even the parole officers in the community [who] are basically [at] higher risk … I think it's out of sight, out of mind" (P50). This comparison to other correctional workers, across various roles, underscores how POs understand their value, compared to other public safety personnel, as introjected through self-regulation:

> I didn't know what the difference between probation and parole officer was, right, and I didn't know I wanted to be a parole officer until I got into federal corrections. 'Well, that's a cool job why didn't I know about that,' right, which was so under the *radar* that I don't think that you know unless there's a headline in the news (P64).

> As soon as I get out, I make sure that my ID is under my shirt and no longer outside of my shirt. So, like someone on the street's not going to instantly think oh that's a [prison] worker … society doesn't know, like I didn't know what a parole officer was before being a student (P126).

Participants interpreted social images to solidify their experiences in pursuit of recognition and esteem. However, at times, recognition was seen as undesirable. Thus, 'radaring' was used as a literary device to describe how officers position their awareness, especially regarding the visibility of their work, as in the identification badge noted by P126, or when comparing the PO role to probation work in P64's case. This pursuit of recognition underscores the need for visibility, as officers come to understand themselves within the broader context of public safety.

Being "under the radar" revealed ambiguity around the PO role, prompting participants to compare themselves to other correctional workers in pursuing esteem and solidifying their professional identity. This lack of clarity meant that the value of their work—forming therapeutic alliances to aid rehabilitation—went unrecognized, as did their competencies in effecting change. In this context, "images" not only represent self-perception but also function as social signals, emphasizing the tension between security and rehabilitation roles and how these roles are internalized or introjected by the self:

> we don't respond to emergencies … so I will never claim to be on the same level with those essential workers. But we still … work and we still must come to a high-risk institution and perform our duties. Even a lot of staff around here didn't realize that we continued to work … from home [in the pandemic]. They thought we were simply off work (P143).

P143 alludes to working from home, which, from an institutional perspective, made them invisible to on-site colleagues in the prison workplace. Recognition then became a way of signaling belongingness within the workplace.

Visibility emerged as a key factor when comparing the PO role to other public safety roles, such as police, as P116 stated, "I don't wear a uniform, and I don't handcuff people." This comparison between security and non-security staff was significant, as many officers viewed the "uniform" (P14, P28, P97, P121) as a status symbol, but one that created division within the organization. As P97 observed, "it seems unless you wear a uniform, you're not recognized." P121 and P38 expanded here, emphasizing a perceived disparity in how different staff roles were valued:

> I don't wear a uniform and carry a gun … when you think of law enforcement you think of police and CBSA [Canadian Boarder Services Agency] and even fire fighters and paramedics, like first responders, but you don't think of parole officers as … public safety (P121).

> I think some people are of the mind its's a holiday or, you know, it's an easy ride. The people that are going into the office are more essential than those of us that are working from home … there's even a side of myself that says, 'I'm working from home—am I that essential [compared to] the people that are going in every day?' I've been reminded that 'yeah, you're just as essential, you're still doing the work, you're just doing it from home' … anytime a manager or a colleague has tried to get a hold of me, I'm always there. It's not like I'm out sun tanning (laughing, P38).

POs used images of other public safety personnel as comparators to validate their self-worth and pursue esteem. Said differently, they sought to affirm their value by aligning themselves with other public safety roles. For instance, P40 expressed frustration: "Having the same classification as somebody that gets sent home has been frustrating." The ire with being classified similarly to someone perceived as 'non-essential,' reinforces feelings of inadequacy and professional devaluation.

Similarly, P38 emphasized how the workplace social environment shaped officers' perceptions of their roles, while P121 extended this idea, illustrating how the broader societal context influenced officers' self-perception. This dynamic suggests officers assessed their own value by comparing their work to the other's work. Acclimating to the workplace involved internalizing self-images to establish a sense of relative worth—positioning themselves by their competence and perceived value in public safety.

4.2. Ideology: how beliefs inform self-worth

The pandemic and public discourse around expendable workers or essential work shaped correctional staff's sense of self-worth, especially amid prison understaffing and rising hostility. While POs prioritized client care and therapeutic alliances, many felt pressured to project 'toughness' to signify their legitimacy:

> I would say that there's a lot of conflict between the [CX] officers and the parole officers cause the [CX] officers have the security aspect to handle and to apply daily and they don't really know what our work is and they just think we're believing everything the offenders are saying and we're just living in 'fuzzy land' … so we face these two realities … we have to justify our work to the institution staff [who] sometimes don't understand what we're doing … we have to justify ourselves (P146).

> it would be nice if changes could be made in the institution with how staff treat other staff … it's the uniform versus non-uniform staff basically. The way that I perceive it … upper management in CSC need to change the way that they operate to promote a healthy workplace for it to be good for everybody … there's a high burnout rate … There's not enough correctional officers … [and] there's not enough … being done in addressing … workplace harassment … I've worked in another workplace for CSC, I was a community parole officer, and it was different … its something that I realized inside an institution … we're not all on the same team (P28).

P146 and P28 highlight the stark contrast between security and rehabilitation, noting that role differentiation among correctional workers—such as institutional and community parole officers, correctional officers, and program officers—can lead to conflict, particularly in maximum-security settings, and shape an emotional atmosphere that influences how staff perceive themselves and their work. In the security-dominant environment, security staff were regarded as essential, their physical presence seen as critical to daily operations. In contrast, rehabilitation efforts were perceived as less tangible—often viewed as "fuzzy" or misunderstood—particularly when security concerns overshadowed their ability to support re-entry preparation. As a result, both institutional and community POs had to navigate credibility across competing priorities—security versus rehabilitation—while contending with factors like gender and role perception, each shaping how their contributions were valued:

> in the institution, just because there's so many—like I'd say 80 % of the correctional officers are male, so I find you have to kind of toughen up your attitude … you definitely need to toughen up when you go in the institution (P40).

The pressure to "toughen up" was especially strong for female POs in male-dominated prison settings, where toughness was essential for navigating institutional culture. The pressure to align with security needs did create stress—especially when security clashed with rehabilitative values and job-role responsibilities. As P114 observed, legitimacy was shaped by both public perceptions of the PO role and workplace displays of toughness, often resulting in a lack of respect for the job's mental health toll and reinforcing feelings of invisibility and undervaluation:

> people needed correctional officers to continue to work to provide the security at the institution [and] parole officers needed to continue to do that kind of work in the institutions and in the community to provide security for members of the public. But that's not seen the same way as police because they're right out there, or firefighters, or paramedics, that sort of—you know, other occupational sort of stress [vocations] … the general public has less understanding … we're hidden … we're not out there with uniforms like police officers … I think there's a perception that parole officers … come in late and leave early … CSC as a whole, I don't think that they've always respected what parole officers do … the impact of the job from a mental health perspective … remember when they'd say, 'going postal?' (P114).

As P114 highlights, compromised mental health due to occupational stress is real for POs—though the experience of the stress varies across public safety roles and is further shaped by personal factors, including gender expression. The workplace environment tended to reward officers who signaled toughness in line with the dominant security logic, while compounding the emotional toll on those for whom such a persona felt inauthentic. This strain echoed the broader cultural image of "going postal", an adage invoking stress-induced hostility and burnout. The notion of thanklessness—linked to the virtue contingency—reflected how the PO role is often perceived as self-sacrificial, demanding commitment to essential yet frequently misrecognized work:

> I think POs are always seen as the bad guys so when I was in the institution the correctional officers didn't really get along too well with the parole officers cause they always saw them as like 'con lovers' you know, uh, hugging the offenders and stuff—when that's far from reality, so there's always that animosity between like security staff and intervention staff but then there's also offenders … [sometimes] they just see us as limiting their life, making them go through more hoops … we're just bad guys to our offenders. And then, like the offender's family see us as part of the system, especially I find, like Indigenous families where they have that kind of history (and) animosity towards the government, you know, the residential school system did a lot too to destroy that relationship between the government and First Nations communities. So there's a lack of trust that comes with the position as well (P108).

As P108 explained, feelings of perceived worthlessness emerged in an environment where officers had to navigate derogatory labels like 'con lover'—a term suggesting excessive empathy toward incarcerated individuals. They noted how distrust toward POs stemmed from their role as government employees and agents of the criminal justice system. As a result, officers internalized the emotional weight of their environment, leading to a felt sense of "personal responsibility for almost everything that happens on our caseload" (P117). This introjection of responsibility underscored the systemic issues raised by P108 and reflects the self-conception articulated by P117. In turn, conflicting identities were linked to how self-worth, once internalized, shaped perceptions about clients—particularly when the work itself was experienced as unsafe:

> You're dealing with really dangerous people, something could happen, and human behaviour is never an exact science and you cannot always intervene before somebody re-offends, and so I always consider my decisions … what would the public, these are the taxpayers, the citizens, and the residents of this country—expecting me to do a certain job, how would they feel? I think about that all the time (P27).

For P27, the concept of 're-offending' reflected an ideological preoccupation with failure, where service users' setbacks were interpreted as evidence of failed rehabilitation. The belief system—shaped by the values and expectations of the broader environment—positioned officers' self-worth in relation to public accountability, particularly the perceived obligation to satisfy "taxpayers." Here, worthiness was introjected through a system which seemed to equate professional value with the successful, yet often unrealistic, execution of occupational duties. Thus, projecting toughness became both a coping strategy and a socially sanctioned means of earning esteem, reinforcing ideological commitments within the workplace culture while simultaneously undermining officers' professional identity as agents of change.

4.3. Competence: qualifications and pay

Participants conveyed the competence contingency by referencing education and pay, both of which symbolized status and served as key factors for determining self-worth. For instance, P126, when discussing educational attainment in comparison to 'knuckle-dragging' correctional staff, equated education to esteem and compared the degree requirements of POs, program officers, and correctional officers. POs are required to have a degree for hiring, whereas neither program officers nor correctional officers do: "We need a university degree, and they don't" (P6). Additionally, there was a desire for hazard pay or, at the very least, greater compensation given the educational requirements of the role:

> I think they said something like twenty five percent of parole officers walk out of the job in the end with PTSD. And I'm like that's not normal … So, I feel like pay … is kind of counter balancing that a little bit. I don't actually think we get paid that hugely considering all of us have degrees (P26).

> nobody cares what degree I have. They just care that you have a degree, and you can fill a spot as a PO … when I worked at programs I didn't need to have a degree but I did happen to have a degree, but I get paid the exact same amount that a program officer does. Yet, I'm required to have a degree for my job. So in that way, I feel like they do not appreciate what we have to do to get in that [PO] position, cause first of all, we have to, we have to go to school (P117).

These participant's words highlight the comparisons they make between themselves and other roles, where remuneration and educational attainment function as the competency contingency. In the words of P26 and P117, these contingencies were valued measures of self-worth. Such images of education and compensation informed their self-perceptions and, in turn, affected the occupational identity of POs.

4.4. Kinship: belonging, protection, and validation

The kinship contingency was evident when participants shared statements such as, "I have lots of conversations with family or friends" (P22) and "I just debated my brother yesterday; he's a correctional officer—I grew up in a very correctional officer family—but the correctional officers in general don't understand what a PO does" (P1). Family and friends served as key sources of kinship for participants. However, POs expressed frustration when, even with those they felt closest to, their occupational role was underappreciated or misunderstood:

> even my family members, who know how hard I work because I put in a lot of overtime. And I'm not compensated for it, and they know that! They'll still even make jokes like 'oh it must be nice to have a government job and work from home'. Like really? (P117).

> I have my work friends but … of all my friends growing up I'm the only person that works in corrections. I find that most people have no idea what I do for a living … I'm [an] institutional parole officer … people have an idea what a parole officer is … in the community (P123).

P46 and P123's words illustrate how discussing their work with family members—"from just speaking to my family, my family members that aren't involved [in corrections]" (P33)—makes them vulnerable, as they perceive their occupational role as unrecognized. As P46 noted, "I feel like we get kind of a bad rep[utation] and stuff because even my own family and friends don't completely understand my role." This lack of understanding led participants to explain their work to their families to validate their self-worth through a sense of belonging: "I try to explain to my friends and family what it is I do" (P128).

Many expressed seeking their family's approval, while also providing for and protecting them. For example, P6 shared: "I can still Google myself [due to a case]," lamenting, "'How about you don't publish my name, you idiots, how about you protect my family?' I've had to delist my address and phone number myself." Here, the participant expressed hostility when their efforts to protect their safety, and that of their families, were undermined by the demands of their work:

> it's dangerous for your family, my family has been threatened before, you have to live in sort of an alternate universe, so, I think the last thing you want is to be really recognized. There're big parts of my life that aren't public knowledge, that's for a reason (P101).

As P101 states, parole work can create hazards for both officers and their families, with both requiring protection. The ability to protect loved ones and be understood by family—having them feel proud of their role—became a significant source of self-worth, especially when the job felt thankless. In these moments, officers felt the need to provide and protect their families, and this responsibility played a key role in their sense of value.

4.5. Virtue: selflessness and recognition

Although less prominent, the virtue contingency emerged, particularly when officers provided reflexive accounts suggesting an internalized locus of control, often expressed through gratitude, which invoked a sense of esteem. For instance, during the pandemic, one officer selflessly refrained from returning home, where an immune-compromised relative resided (P81). The uncertainty and risk of contagion could be seen as an ethic of care, acting out of concern for others. Despite the common framing of the PO role as a "thankless job" (P22, P139), one officer stated, "You don't go in for the recognition, right, so I feel good knowing that I'm doing my part to help society" (P107). This reflects altruism, a core element of the virtue contingency, where performing parole work—regardless of recognition—was viewed as civic responsibility and self-sacrifice.

Statements like these highlight the sense of selflessness that motivated some officers, suggesting they did their job for the impact, not for recognition, thereby demonstrating virtue: "I don't know that I ever pay attention or care if I get respect from others for what I do" (P22). Thus, gratitude was framed as an intrinsic virtue, where external validation was less relevant. However, this theme also took on an extrinsic dimension when participants described moments of external acknowledgment: "An email comes from our commissioner and says thank you for all your work" (P116). Other officers shared varying degrees of similar observations:

> management … have been sending out emails saying 'thank you, we appreciate the work you're doing' … but I often don't read those emails … I don't think my immediate manager has [said thanks] or even his manager—which would have been nice (P91)

> there hasn't been really any emails, or anything directed at parole officers saying, 'thank you'. … There's been nothing along those lines. … Other than like our–my direct manager … she'll write you … or talk to us and thank us for our work, but nothing particularly higher than that (P123).

Managerial recognition was held in high regard by many participants. However, the extent to which contingencies were staked and the degree to which interpretations converged also varied. Thus, gratitude emerged as key to the virtue contingency, which officers staked their self-worth in relation to others:

> when we look around and we see people unemployed and losing businesses and jobs … I'm personally like 'thank god' I'm thankful for the job that I have. And whatever I need to do to adapt and continue to maintain that job and feed the family is paramount to me. … But if you're asking do we get kudos or whatever—uh, not really—but again, I don't expect that. I look on it as—this is a job, and we're rewarded uh every two weeks (P2).

With these words, P2 expressed gratitude for their employment, noting how their sense of self has evolved throughout their PO tenure. They highlighted a positive self-regard for receiving rare acknowledgments such as "a thank you, thanks for your time, thanks for trying to help me" (P139), which, though uncommon, made the work feel worthwhile. The gratitude expressed—especially during the unique circumstances of the pandemic—was more frequently heard through phrases like "thanks for coming in" (P50) and "thanks for continuing to work" (P89). Together, these expressions of thanks positively illustrate how gratitude was a key component of the virtue contingency. One participant remarked, "I understand that it's hard to promote the job we're doing" (P129), which instilled a sense of hope: "It's just an education piece … in our organization and how they choose to … promote us" (P22). P22's words highlighted key dimensions of self-worth, including authenticity in self-construal but which were often extrinsic despite few instances of intrinsic motivation within the virtue contingency.

5. Discussion

Our analysis highlighted how self-worth contingencies shaped the professional identities, well-being, and emotional experiences of PPOs, particularly female-identifying POs employed with CSC. One interpretation of our findings is how POs who seek recognition in their pursuit of esteem—by comparing themselves to other public safety roles and relying on an externalized locus of control—may experience greater distress than those whose self-worth is grounded in authenticity, as reflected in the virtue contingency. Our finding here aligns with Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) critique of self-esteem contingent on external validation, which links to negative outcomes in self-regulation, relationships, and mental health (Crocker, 2002; Crocker & Knight, 2005; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). While external comparisons may provide a sense of short-term esteem, they are theorized to contribute to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and experiences of burnout over the long term, ultimately affecting job satisfaction and turnover intention in PPO work (Gayman et al., 2018).

We found that external validation within the kinship and comparison contingencies mediate and moderate PPOs' self-worth and professional identity. Misrecognition by family, friends, and colleagues added stress, compounded by the pandemic and need to balance caregiving roles. Female-identifying POs, in particular, face added cultural and economic burdens, enriching the concept of "spillover" with this gendered interpretation of negotiating work-home life (Westaby et al., 2016). The dynamic connects emotional distress by mirroring existing research on how individuals 'fit' within their workplaces (Furnham, 2001, pp. 223–251) and indicates how the social environment shapes perception.

A key theme we observed was the ideological conflict between security and rehabilitation roles. Security-driven environments may heighten role conflict for POs, where the pressure to appear "tough" leads to introjected regulation—potentially contributing to neuroticism and intensifying workplace stress (Judge & Bono, 2001; Kernis et al., 2008). Gendered dynamics within a masculine prison environment further suggest presenting as tough or stoic is an adaptive strategy to self-regulate and maintain safety (Ricciardelli et al., 2015). However, this external locus of control may reinforce inauthenticity, affecting experiences with job satisfaction and mental health. Therefore, we observe a paradox for POs who seek esteem by constructing their identity through social comparison or external images. In doing so, they may overlook their own vulnerabilities and experience greater distress than those whose self-worth is grounded in authenticity and a more abstract self-construal—an orientation theorized to offer greater mental flexibility when reconciling life events.

As with the virtue contingency, we interpret some officers derive self-worth from self-sacrifice, a sense of moral commitment or civic responsibility—aligning authentic self-esteem with altruistic values. However, the sense of self-worth was challenged by a lack of recognition from both coworkers and the public—responses often perceived as inflexible, concrete, and rigid. These findings align with self-determination theory, which suggests public servants internalize social and political challenges and self-regulate to manage cognitive dissonance related to their work (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The tension between

altruism as self-sacrifice and obtaining social status aligns with descriptions around the invisibility of probation/parole work (Shah, 2020), exacerbating experiences with misrecognition, misrepresentation, and elucidates insight about PPOs' ill-being (Lamont, 2023; McNeill, 2018).

The introjection of external expectations—such as public perceptions of what PPOs believe they should be within a highly evaluative environment—perpetuates a self-propagating cycle of stress, reinforcing both burnout and depression (Cambron & Acitelli, 2010). This cycle aligns with behavioral plasticity in self-esteem models, suggesting individuals with external contingencies and high in neuroticism are more likely to perceive benign work events negatively (Ferris, 2014, pp. 127–142). Overall, the experiences of stress are endured through physiological responses such as elevated cortisol levels, which are also linked to depression (Crocker & Knight, 2005). On the other hand, unconditional self-acceptance literature shows that individuals with non-contingent self-worth experience greater levels of satisfaction (Jibeen, 2016). Our study extends this theory, showing how self-worth contingencies shape professional identities and contribute to mental health vulnerabilities in probation and parole work.

5.1. Strengths and limitations

The concept of self-worth contingencies offers a framework for understanding the mental health challenges faced by correctional workers. Our insights contribute to self-worth theory and provides practical avenues for organizational research in corrections. By integrating self-determination and introjection, we show how self-worth, influenced by external validation, mediates self-construal and moderates emotional distress in highly evaluative PO workplace environments. This understanding can inform more effective recruitment, training, and retention strategies, particularly by aligning self-worth with job responsibilities. Officers who internalize self-worth, especially through the virtue contingency, we believe, are likely to report higher job satisfaction and resilience. Future research could quantify these findings using tools like the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Li et al., 2020) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), advancing human resourcing and people analytic strategies.

Further, we found evidence that no eye contact—vis-à-vis telephone interviews—may reduce defensiveness and promote "disinhibition," facilitating introspective disclosures about contingent self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Joinson, 2007; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). While our study explored descriptors from existing transcript data, a key limitation is that self-worth contingencies were not central to our data collection nor were they featured on our interview guide. Rather, our discovery of the contingencies emerged through iterative development and various phases of literature review (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019).

Generalizability is another limitation due to the qualitative, exploratory nature of this research, and our focus on a sub-sample of POs constrained by the pandemic's temporal context. Selection bias inherent in our sampling technique is also a consideration. For example, were participants more inclined to discuss workplace consternation similar to how individuals high with neurotic traits may be more apt to respond to recruitment materials? We are unable to remark further on the relevance of negativity bias in our findings. However, future research may design studies controlling for these limitations and we suggest further explication of self-worth contingencies is fertile within public safety contexts.

6. Conclusions

Our study highlights the challenges faced by predominantly female-identifying POs in typically masculinized workplace environments, where self-worth appears to shape gendered dynamics and interpretations of role identity according to social expectations. Contingencies of self-worth proved relevant for further investigation, particularly in developing a more robust understanding of esteem in correctional work and building capacity for therapeutic alliances among service users and providers. Among these contingencies, recognition through self-presentation, social comparison, and image projection formed the salient ideological commitments in our analysis, predominantly linked to extrinsic motivation shaped by workplace characteristics—which we associate with a high incidence of ill-being.

In contrast, the virtue contingency, expressed through gratitude, altruism, and care ethics is a form of intrinsic motivation that may be a predictor of authentic self-esteem and indicative of well-being producing greater levels of job satisfaction. Our qualitative approach offers novel insights but is not without limitations. Further research into the intersections of gender, self-worth, and workplace dynamics in correctional settings is needed, particularly by operationalizing introjected regulation and its impact on symptoms of depression and experiences of burnout and role conflict. These areas could be further explored through quantitative research, which would help clarify how external expectations shape professional identities and emotional health in correctional work.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Micheal P. Taylor: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Rosemary Ricciardelli:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation.

Ethics statement

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Board at Memorial University of Newfoundland (file #20201495) and meets all relevant aspects for the Declaration of Helsinki with respect to human participants.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this article, the lead author, who is developing a more direct writing style to master his craft, used ChatGPT-40 to improve the readability, language, and clarity of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for authorship of this publication.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Rosemary Ricciardelli reports financial support was provided by Union of Safety and Justice Employees. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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