

Compassion in the Clink: When and How Human Services Workers Overcome Barriers to Care

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Abstract. A key assumption in past literature has been that human services workers become emotionally distant from their charges (such as clients or patients). Such distancing is said to protect workers from the emotionally draining aspects of the job but creates challenges to feeling and behaving compassionately. Because little is known about when and how compassion occurs under these circumstances, we conducted a multiphased qualitative study of 119 correctional officers in the United States using interviews and observations. Officers' accounts and our observations of their interactions with inmates included cruel, disciplinary, unemotional, and compassionate treatment. Such treatment varied by the situations that officers faced, and compassion was surprisingly common when inmates were misbehaving—challenging current understanding of the occurrence of compassion at work. Examining officers' accounts more closely, we uncovered a novel way that we theorize human services workers can be compassionate, even under such difficult circumstances. We find that officers describe engaging in practices in which they (a) relate to others by leveling group-based differences between themselves and their charges and (b) engage in self-protection by shielding themselves from the negative emotions triggered by their charges. We posit that the combined use of such practices offsets different emotional tensions in the work, rather than only providing emotional distance, and in doing so, can foster compassionate treatment under some of the most trying situations and organizational barriers to compassion.

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A fundamental challenge for human services organizations and workers—whose work is characterized by extensive interaction with others (such as clients or patients)—is how to be compassionate toward those they tend to as part of their job (Maslach 1982, Pines and Aronson 1988). Indeed, compassion at work—defined as a process of noticing, feeling, and responding to another's pain (Kanov et al. 2004)—can be difficult for human services workers given the often overwhelming emotional challenges they face in their work. These challenges include the emotional exhaustion that comes from repeatedly witnessing others' suffering (Cherniss 1980); feeling burned out, cynical, and inefficacious about making a difference despite one's efforts (Maslach 1982); conflict and negative interactions with clients or patients (DeSteno 2015); and the need to complete interpersonally harmful tasks (e.g., refusing to grant a person's wishes, or using discipline) (Molinsky and Margolis 2005). At the same time, effective relationships between human services workers and their charges are critical for the

success of human services organizations because these relationships allow for healing, comfort, and direction (Kahn 1993, Lilius 2012). Yet dealing with these emotional challenges can ultimately corrupt “the noble impulse to help others” (cf. Ashforth and Lee 1997, p. 703; Maslach et al 2001). Put otherwise, the very nature of human services work often seems to prevent its own success.

Because of the difficulties associated with human services work, researchers have assumed that some sort of emotional distancing occurs, which is a detachment from affectively intense work. This can occur either as a deliberate effort to protect the self from feelings of despair, over-involvement, and fatigue while trying to complete work tasks effectively (Menzies 1960, Lief and Fox 1963, Margolis and Molinsky 2008), or as an involuntary response to the emotional demands of the work over time, such as through burnout or compassion fatigue. One way for these workers to deliberately distance themselves from their charges, for example, is through

depersonalization (e.g., calling patients “cases”) (Leiter and Maslach 2001, p. 416). However, depersonalization can go too far, resulting in dehumanization (Kteily et al. 2015). Additionally, distancing itself is emotionally taxing, potentially leading to burnout and derogatory and demeaning behavior (Lee and Ashforth 1993, Leiter and Maslach 2001). Consequently, human services workers’ emotional distancing can result in a loss of the emotional responsiveness needed to care for charges. Nevertheless, we know that human services workers can be compassionate despite these barriers. The question therefore is when and how might human services workers still prove compassionate, despite these barriers in their work?

Research on compassion in organizations points to compassionate organizational cultures, structures, roles, and routines as factors that foster compassion at work (e.g., Kahn 1963, Miller 2002, Dutton et al. 2006, Barsade and O’Neill 2014). Additionally, this literature posits that compassion is more likely in situations that are “compassion relevant”—that is, when others are noticed as suffering or in need (Kanov et al. 2004, see also Atkins and Parker 2012). Yet each of these factors are likely to be present in many human services (such as social work and nursing), where workers nonetheless frequently fail to adequately care for their charges. Moreover, psychological models of compassion (see review in Goetz et al. 2010) suggest that, whereas compassion is likely when encountering others’ suffering or needs, it is strongly diminished when people’s capacity for emotion regulation is undermined, such as when they are emotionally taxed or distressed, are experiencing burnout, feel unable to help, or view others negatively (Kahn 1963, Maslach 1982, Lazarus and Folkman 1984, Lazarus 1991, Cameron and Payne 2011). These circumstances are rampant in human services work and likely limit the workers’ ability to be compassionate toward their charges. We have little understanding about what workers do to overcome these challenges and be compassionate toward charges, or the circumstances explaining when workers might do so.

Given the barriers to compassion that human services workers encounter, as well as the high levels of distancing among them, we were surprised to find evidence of compassion in a population facing these challenges and more: correctional officers. These officers are primarily responsible for the custody, security, supervision, protection, and caretaking of inmates (Maslach 2001, Ricciardelli et al. 2018) and interact with inmates extensively as part of their job (Cornelius 2001). Correctional work is therefore part of the human services field (Eriksen 1977, Schmolling et al. 1997), defined as “a field that helps individuals cope with problems of a social welfare, psychological, behavioral, or legal nature” (Mehr 1986, p. 20). Thus,

although not thought of as a prototypical human services profession (such as nursing or social work), corrections is categorized as human services work (see Maslach 1982, 2001; Ricciardelli et al. 2018)—a context where we might expect distancing from charges and uncompassionate treatment based on both scholarship (e.g., Tracy 2004a) and past events (such as the Abu Ghraib abuses). At the same time, correctional officers presumably face the same—and even more—barriers to compassion as social workers, mental health counselors, and the like. In their interdisciplinary review, Dutton et al. (2014) suggest that compassion at work is more likely when there is similarity, closeness, and low power distance between the focal actor and others—conditions unlikely in the prison environment given the vast power differences and ingroup/outgroup distinctions between officers and inmates (Klofas 1984), as well as the security concerns that discourage relational closeness between officers and inmates (Farkas 1999). Yet, in initial interviews, we heard correctional officers describe deeply compassionate feelings and behavior directed toward even the hardest criminals and in extremely challenging situations.

Past work suggests that correctional officers are unlikely to be nested within compassionate organizational cultures, roles, or norms (Miller 2002, Tracy 2004b, Lopez 2006, Page 2011), meaning that other factors are likely shaping when and how officers are able to be compassionate. Since extant research cannot explain such compassion, we focused our inquiry on developing novel, empirically grounded theory explaining when and how human services workers are compassionate toward their charges, despite the many barriers in their work. Prison (colloquially referred to as “the clink”) is an extreme context (cf. Patton 1980, Eisenhardt 1989) that places our interest in sharp relief, allowing us to develop deeper insights on compassion at work because incidents of compassion are more visible in this context.

Challenges to Compassion in Human Services Work and Emotional Distancing

We define emotional distancing as a general psychological process of detaching from affectively intense workplace experiences. Past research and theory have documented that human services work can negatively impact workers’ compassion through emotional distancing in two primary ways. First, scholarship documents several ways that human services employees involuntarily react to their work over time (such as burnout and compassion fatigue) that result in emotional distance from their charges. Second, scholarship also documents that workers sometimes deliberately use emotional distancing tactics to try to

cope with the emotional demands of their work and to more effectively complete work tasks, which can also reduce compassion for their charges. We briefly review each of these mechanisms.

Emotional Distancing as an Involuntary Response to Work

Emotional distancing in human services workers can be understood first as an involuntary response to the emotional demands of the work, a process that occurs over time and gradually results in an inability to be compassionate. Literature describes at least three ways that this can occur. First, the emotional nature of the work itself can be deeply draining and distressing, resulting in emotional withdrawal and desensitization. The theory of compassion fatigue explains that workers witnessing the pain, death, or violent assaults of those they tend to can result in their own emotional distress (Figley 1995). This view is consistent with studies finding that compassion for others increases one's own psychological pain (Singer et al. 2004, Loggia et al. 2008). Indeed, for social and healthcare workers, whose clients seek help precisely for physical and mental health maladies, secondhand trauma is especially prevalent (Thompson et al. 2014). Workers dealing with such repeated trauma are often unable to be compassionate because they become traumatized themselves, and emotionally withdraw or become desensitized to others' suffering. Compassion fatigue has also been documented in law enforcement (see Violanti and Gehrke 2004).

Second, as a result of the many emotionally demanding elements of their work, human services workers often end up feeling emotionally exhausted, cynical, and inefficacious about making a difference (Maslach 1982), a phenomenon known as burnout. Burnout can manifest as detachment from the job and an emotional numbness to others' suffering, as people are depleted of the necessary psychological resources needed to be compassionate (Lee and Ashforth 1993, Ashforth and Lee 1997, Maslach et al. 2001). Research on burnout was developed by studying caregiving and service professionals because it is such a common occurrence for these workers (Maslach 1982, Maslach et al. 2001). Similarly, by exposing human services workers to large volumes of others' suffering and need for help, a phenomenon known as compassion collapse (Cameron and Payne 2011) may occur, where individuals become overwhelmed from the vast amount of suffering that is impossible to rectify, and both withdraw from and dehumanize others as a way to protect themselves from anticipated emotional exhaustion (Cameron et al. 2016).

Third, scholarship documents that emotional distance is common and compassion less likely when human services workers experience negative interactions

with their charges, including interpersonal conflict and the evocation of unpleasant emotions such as fear, distress, contempt, or anger (Hoffman 1981, Roseman et al. 1990, Rudolph et al. 2004, Fiske et al. 2006). Since human services workers are often mistreated and regularly encounter hostile clients or patients (Maslach 1982, Hershcovis 2011), they experience these negative situations and emotions regularly, resulting in emotional distance and reduced compassion. Some of these negative interactions stem from power differences and intergroup conflict between workers and their charges, which can also reduce compassion (Van Kleef et al. 2008, Dutton et al. 2014). Given these challenges inherent in the work itself, it is unsurprising that a common prediction for human services workers is that they will involuntarily become emotionally distant from their charges.

Deliberate Emotional Distancing as a Tactic

Past studies also suggest human services workers sometimes deliberately distance themselves emotionally to cope with the emotionally taxing aspects of their work while trying to perform it. This has been described as occurring in two primary ways: through *empathy suppression*, a form of emotion regulation that intentionally blunts or suppresses empathic response (Cherniss 1980, Gross 1998, Newton 2013), and through *depersonalization* (Maslach 1982).

Empathy suppression is commonly used by physicians to try to be more objective in their work and to cope with the emotional distress that comes from working with others' trauma (Gleichgerricht and Decety 2013, Newton 2013). Both of these distancing tactics are also believed to limit emotional contagion of distress and hostility from charges to employees (Maslach 1982, Doucet 2004), thereby helping to reduce secondhand trauma and the drain from unpleasant emotional experiences (Figley 1995, Doucet 2004). Such tactics allow for respite amidst emotionally exhausting work (Kahn 1993, Lilius 2012) and can help create the emotional neutrality necessary to be able to complete an interpersonally harmful task (Molinsky and Margolis 2005). This distancing is also believed to help employees generate a greater sense of self-worth when under threat from jobs that are stigmatized, such as in interactions with the mentally ill, or tasks that require harming another (Ashforth et al. 2007, Margolis and Molinsky 2008).

Whereas employees often intend to use distancing tactics to manage their emotions and complete their work, such tactics are also likely to decrease compassion. The blunting of an empathic response operates at the second stage of compassion (Kanov et al. 2004), where workers likely still notice the suffering of others but force themselves to not feel the emotional component of a compassionate response (such as by

thinking about something else or avoiding contact with the person) (Newton 2013). In other words, those suppressing their emotions attempt to block the emotional impulse to help others (Lief and Fox 1963, Mehrabian et al. 1988, Newton 2013). This suppression is believed to protect service workers (and, in particular, medical professionals) from possible overexposure to others' trauma and the perceived inability to fully resolve it, which could otherwise result in emotional exhaustion (Cherniss 1980, Maslach et al. 2001). Empathy suppression, however, can easily result in a cold indifference or disregard of others' needs (Newton 2013).

The second way that human services workers can deliberately distance themselves from their charges is through depersonalization, which involves trying to cope with emotionally intense work by not thinking about the human elements of charges (such as social workers' referring to their clients as numbers or cases, rather than as people or families (Leiter and Maslach 2001)). By cognitively removing the human component of charges, employees are likely to see charges as something more akin to a task, rather than a human who needs aid. Therefore, workers are theoretically better able to objectively complete their tasks without interference from intense emotional reactions, and to feel less emotional drain in doing so. Like empathy suppression, however, this depersonalization often goes too far (Maslach 1982) and risks dehumanization and callous behavior (Maslach et al. 2001). Although depersonalization is typically intended as a way to negotiate the emotional drain of work and to allow for an easier completion of tasks (Molinsky and Margolis 2005), it can quickly turn into derogation or dehumanization that prompts hostile emotions, attitudes, and expectations about others (Maslach 1982, Kteily et al. 2015).

In summary, past research on the emotional challenges of human services work has pointed to few alternatives to distancing, and cannot explain when or how workers effectively navigate the emotionally complex dynamics inherent in their work to be compassionate toward charges.

Compassion in Organizations

We situate our research within scholarship on compassion in organizations. Whereas scholars have traditionally paid limited attention to compassion at work (Frost 2003, Frost et al. 2006), this topic has recently experienced a renewal. This revival has largely been theoretical in nature, proposing how organizational processes can support compassion at work (see Rynes et al. 2012, George 2013). Researchers have posited, for example, that founders' compassionate emotions can infuse an organization's mission (Miller et al. 2012), and that minority members' influence and efforts can help organizations develop norms of

compassion (Grant and Patil 2012). Research has also proposed organization-level processes to increase organizational capacity for compassion (Kanov et al. 2004, Dutton et al. 2006, Gittell and Douglass 2012, Madden et al. 2012). In addition, others have theoretically advanced the idea that features of the work context, such as the nature of the work tasks (Molinsky and Margolis 2005) and specific relationships (Lilius 2012), might also be relevant to the development of compassion at work.

Although the cited scholarship has been essential in drawing attention to the importance and legitimacy of studying compassion at work, as well as in developing its theoretical foundations, we know little about when and how individuals can be compassionate despite organizational contexts that thwart it. Empirical scholarship on compassion at work is scarce (For exceptions, see Lilius et al. 2008, McClelland and Vogus 2014), though researchers have, for instance, noted that differing types of work cultures, roles, and socially coordinated patterns of response can foster employee compassion toward others (Kahn 1993, Miller 2002, Dutton et al. 2006, Barsade and O'Neill 2014). Moreover, the role of charges in influencing the provision of compassion has been spotlighted (Heaphy 2017) and the competence with which employees deliver compassionate treatment has been posited as variable (Dutton et al. 2006, Margolis and Molinsky 2008). Finally, scholars note that the compassion process is triggered by situations of "compassion relevance"—circumstances where individuals are suffering or in need, which make their pain observable to others (Kanov et al. 2004, Atkins and Parker 2012). And yet, although pain and suffering of others may not always be observable, there is little insight into how such pain and needs become noticed for the compassion process to emerge.

Although a small number of papers have sought to understand some of these more adaptive and individual-level processes through which workers are compassionate at work (Atkins and Parker 2012, Lawrence and Maitlis 2012, Lilius 2012), this scholarship also remains theoretical. For instance, consistent with the appraisal theory of emotion (e.g., Lazarus 1991), researchers have theorized that workers' evaluations of others, as well as their use of practices such as mindfulness, might be important in shaping compassion at work (Atkins and Parker 2012). Others have argued that workers' ways of speaking about themselves and their relationships might shape their caring behavior at work (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012). We build on this scholarship, using qualitative data on correctional officers in the United States, to uncover when and how human services workers can overcome barriers to be compassionate toward their charges. Given that the very purpose of human

services work is for employees to help their charges, and given the paradoxical challenges to compassion inherent in this type of work, answering this question is of paramount importance.

Setting, Data, and Methods

Research Setting

Correctional facilities are an ideal setting to study compassion in human services organizations because of the major obstacles to care that exist in these settings, making them an extreme case for this inquiry, which can both help theoretical development as well as make phenomena more visible (Patton 1980, Eisenhardt 1989). Similar to past work on prisons in the United States, the prisons we researched contained “organizational norms [that] discouraged becoming personally attached to inmates” (Tracy 2004a, p. 131). Officers described how looking overly supportive of inmates could put them at risk for social punishment from their peers (e.g., not being protected in the case of a riot). Due to the pressure for solidarity among officers (Tracy 2004b), those who appeared to favor inmates too strongly could be seen as traitorous. Moreover, if officers were seen as overly caring for inmates, they felt that others would think that they might behave unprofessionally. For example, officers that are perceived as being overly compassionate toward inmates might be viewed as being easily persuaded to bring contraband (e.g., cell phones, tobacco, or drugs) into the facility, which would make it less safe and place all officers at risk.

Given that past work on compassion at work has examined organization-level factors that produce it, it was especially important that our context effectively removed these dimensions as explanations for the compassion we observed in our data. The vast majority of past and present studies on prisons have not depicted them as harboring compassionate cultures between officers and inmates (Sykes 1958, Jurik 1985, O’Hearn 2009, Calavita and Jenness 2013, Kreager et al. 2017).¹ Thus, by understanding how correctional officers can be compassionate despite these many obstacles, our study can sharply illuminate the ways in which other human services workers in less extreme situations might also be able to do so.

Data

We explored our research question with two related qualitative datasets from correctional officers in the United States. Phase 1 involved a sample of 40 officers from three facilities in one state and relied on semi-structured interviews to gather data on officers’ descriptions of their work. In Phase 2, we used on-site observations and interviews with 79 officers at a separate facility within the same state system to gain insight into officers’ behavior. These two datasets allowed us to obtain in-depth insight into officers’

accounts and understandings of correctional work, and to observe officers’ actual treatment of inmates.

Phase 1: Officer Interviews. Our first source of data for this inquiry consisted of transcribed, semistructured, face-to-face interviews with 40 officers in 2006. The first author gained access to prisons and correctional officers through a special agreement with the director of research for the state’s Department of Corrections. Of the 14 correctional facilities in the state system, three sites were selected for the interviews in order to maximize researcher safety and efficiency (e.g., minimizing time and travel to research sites). Although limited in location, a sample of officers were selected to be representative of the characteristics of the population of officers across the state; that is, to cover a wide range of age, race, gender, shift, tenure, and work attitudes, which were measured in a state-wide survey three years earlier.² Also included in the sample were four officers who had one month to two years of experience and had not answered prior surveys; such officers were sampled for convenience. The first author interviewed officers who worked with both male and female inmates at all levels of prison security (excluding highest security “supermax” prisons).³ Demographics of the interview sample appear in Table 1.

During days and times when interviews were being held on-site, selected officers were asked to voluntarily participate in an hour-long interview about their job attitudes and experiences in exchange for compensation (\$40). No officers refused to participate,

Table 1. Sample Demographics in Phase 1 ($N = 40$)

Characteristic	Percent
Gender	
Male	60
Female	40
Race	
Unknown	27.5
White	50
Black	20
Other	2.5
Age	
Unknown	15
18–25	2.5
26–35	20
36–45	50
46–60	12.5
Tenure (years)	
0–5	40
6–10	27.5
11–15	15
16–20	15
21–25	2.5
Education	
Unknown	10
High school/GED	80
College	10

perhaps because this compensation is greater than their hourly wage. Officers were interviewed one at a time in a private location at each facility, and completed a demographics form afterward. Officers were guaranteed anonymity of their responses. All interviews except for one (where the participant requested that the interviewer take notes for a small portion of the interview) were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions concerning officers' experiences with inmates and attitudes toward their jobs, allowing participants to focus on issues and themes that they found important (see the appendix for Phase 1 interview questions).

Based on these interview data, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the themes regarding officers' treatment of inmates. The goals were to make discoveries and generate new theoretical insights, while developing rich descriptions of officers' experiences with inmates. The coauthors formed an insider/outsider collaboration, where the first author provided expertise in the context and the second author provided a more detached outsider perspective (Bartunek and Louis 1996). The first author undertook an initial, iterative analysis, comprehensively coding all relevant portions of the interviews into themes and taking extensive notes about what individuals had in common in their described thoughts and behaviors. In parallel, the second author read all interviews and coded a subset of them. The coauthors periodically discussed emerging themes and example quotes in the data; disagreements were resolved by discussing specific interpretations of quotes until an agreement was reached. This process stopped once thematic saturation was attained, resulting in numerous first-level codes. A research assistant, who was blind to the project's goal and data collection efforts, was then given code descriptions and undertook an independent analysis of data, resulting in only two new, minor first-level codes. Following this, we focused our analysis on the most common yet novel themes that were relevant to insights on the occurrence of compassion for inmates. Next, we grouped relevant first-level codes into higher-level categories, then into aggregate themes (Van Maanen 1979), traveling between extant literature and our data to generate original insight. For example, the first-level codes of "not wanting to know inmates' crimes" and "deliberately ignoring or forgetting inmates' crimes" were grouped together in the code "ignoring inmates' crimes," which was then aggregated into the broader theme of "emotional shielding" (along with other codes). These themes derived from this data comprised the practices described in our findings, as well as different ways that officers treated inmates (including both compassionate and uncompassionate treatment).

Phase 2: Officer Observations and Interviews. To complement the initial interviews, we accessed a fourth field site—a separate institution within the same U.S. state system in 2011—to conduct additional interviews and observe officer–inmate interactions. Having observations of officers' actual interactions with inmates was important to help triangulate and contextualize the phenomenon of compassion in prison (Miles and Huberman 1994), and was also useful in interpreting and understanding the interview data. This sample also provided us with a larger set of officers to both observe and speak with than in Phase 1. In Phase 2, officers' compassion toward inmates was also a deliberate focus of the inquiry. However, to gain access, the first author joined a larger team of researchers who examined and observed correctional officers' work with inmates more broadly, and conducted on-site interviews and observations with officers. The members of this team used the qualitative data as a foundation for designing survey work with officers about their specific concerns for inmates in prerelease settings. The facility, a medium and minimum mixed-security level, housed 600 male offenders, some of whom were prerelease. Over the course of approximately two weeks, all officers at this facility were interviewed ($n = 141$) and more than half ($n = 79$) were observed by at least one of the researchers, generating extensive enough field notes to be included in the sample. Demographics for this sample are presented in Table 2. Notably, there were some differences in the demographic makeup of this sample versus the Phase 1 interview sample that, we

Table 2. Phase 2 Sample Demographics ($N = 79$)

Characteristic	Percent
Gender	
Male	49
Female	51
Race	
White	13.9
Black	81.9
Other	4.2
Age	
18–25	9
26–35	25.4
36–45	32.8
46–60	32.8
Tenure (years)	
0–5	54.8
6–10	8.1
11–15	16.1
16–20	9.7
21–25	11.3
Education	
High school/GED	60
College	40

believe, were largely due to missing data on racial demographics in the initial study. Surveys conducted of the staff in the state system show similar demographic profiles across these institutions. However, the second site was more rural than the initial interview sites, and was a lower security level, which could have influenced demographic makeup of the staff.

Researchers informally interviewed all available officers separately while observing their typical workday, asking about general themes such as their job duties, approach to working with inmates, and work experiences (see the appendix for interview questions). Officers were observed at all posts (e.g., security screening and control room, yard, tiers, dining room, etc.), during all shifts (i.e., daytime, evening, and overnight), and while conducting as many different duties or tasks as possible (e.g., during meals, counts, searches, shift changes, roll calls, yard time, and mail delivery). Although researchers did not witness any incidents of extreme violence, they did observe brief inmate fights, as well as many threats against officers, inmates, and even one against a researcher. Time spent with each officer ranged from 20 minutes to three hours and yielded a total of approximately 180 field hours.

As in past observational research projects (e.g., Emerson et al. 1995, Emerson 2001), notes were not recorded during the observations and interviews. Instead, after each field visit, researchers went back to a private conference room and wrote down their observations and recollections. They typed their notes daily (within 24 hours of each observation). This strategy was designed to make informants feel more comfortable disclosing their thoughts and experiences and to act normally in front of researchers. All researchers who were part of the team were either faculty or graduate students with extensive knowledge of and experience with criminal justice contexts; thus, they were able to establish camaraderie and trust with officers, who are often distrusting of outsiders.⁴ Officers were given the right to refuse participation, but no officers refused. Officers in Phase 2 were not compensated for their participation.

Following the interview analysis from Phase 1, we analyzed the field notes to revisit our original findings and emerging theoretical categories. We separately read sets of field notes and tracked recurring themes, then discussed these themes and compared them to the interview study codes. The observational data did not provide us with any additional categories; these data contained fewer detailed quotes, and did not include as many extreme situations of compassion and cruelty (potentially due to the shorter time frame and different questions). Both of these differences could be due to method, which included recording

notes afterward and not asking officers to recall specific examples from their past. Finally, due to the shared scope of the observational study that involved a larger research team, these data had less compassion-relevant material for our study than did the focused one-on-one interviews. We therefore present the findings from these two sources together, but our theorizing relies more heavily on the initial interview data that provided better accounts of officers' practices and interpretations. When we present data, we note interview quotes with officer names, and field observations from Phase 2 with "field notes." We also denote where our findings are based primarily on accounts rather than on both interviews and observations.

Both authors traveled between literature on compassion and human services and our coding scheme, examining our data for themes that contributed to new ideas related to compassion at work. We also previously examined our data in light of literature in total institutions and power, but found the theoretical implications for those literatures less promising. We discussed ideas and literatures in light of our coding scheme, engaging in a theory elaboration exercise in which we used past literature as a springboard for laying out potential new lines of research and for directing our data collection in service of discovering a new and hopefully more encompassing theory (Strauss 1987, p. 306). As part of our process, we revisited our data to code for different situations that officers faced as part of their work, as well as to examine possible patterns reflecting individual differences in compassion, which we describe in our findings. More specifically, to explore situational factors, we isolated data that described specific interactions ($n = 197$) between officers and inmates, which did not include more general statements by officers. To examine individual differences, we looked for patterns in instances of officers' treatment of inmates, then looked at officers' treatment of inmates by social groups (i.e., female versus male officers, and officers of different tenure). We report these findings and others next.

Findings

Evidence of Compassion in the Clink

We found that officers' treatment of inmates ranged from not at all compassionate (i.e., cruel) to highly compassionate (highly emotionally responsive and helpful). By treatment, we mean that officers described themselves as feeling and behaving in particular ways toward inmates, or were observed and interpreted by researchers as behaving toward inmates in particular ways. In the following subsections, we provide examples of what we mean by each type of treatment, before exploring situational variance in treatment.

Cruel Treatment. Although we were primarily interested in studying compassion among human services workers, we also documented its absence. The first way we noted its absence was in the form of cruel treatment of inmates, that is, instances of workers inflicting deliberate emotional or physical harm on their charges. Although relatively rare in our data, these instances occurred in both the field observations and officer accounts, where they were typically described as retaliation for an inmate's insult or assault on an officer. For example, one officer described retaliating against inmates who had insulted him by taunting them: "Inmates will say stuff to you like, 'you are fat,' something they will always shout at you all the time [and] . . . I will says [sic], 'Yeah, you are right. I am going to be eating at Red Lobster tonight. Where are you going?'" (Officer Hottovy).⁵ In another example, Officer Sutton described being assaulted with human waste and retaliating by spraying an inmate "with mace though I was not supposed to do that at that particular time, I mean, the guy was locked in behind [bars]"—implying that because the inmate was already secured, there was no legitimate need to use mace.

Cruelty in officers' accounts was often accompanied by descriptions of anger or vengeance toward the inmate. Officer Wakefield typically remarked, "I think we all do, we get upset, angry . . ." and then described threatening an inmate after a verbal disagreement by saying, "I'll come back here and kill you." Table 3 provides further examples of cruelty and other types of treatment of inmates, detailed next.

Disciplinary Treatment. We also documented the absence of compassionate treatment of inmates during disciplinary treatment in both officers' accounts and our observations. Disciplinary treatment included actions that were corrective or penalizing in nature, but that did not cross the line into cruelty in terms of a deliberate infliction of pain, and were not combined with compassionate emotions or behaviors. For example, disciplinary treatment included yelling at inmates; writing tickets for infractions; and administering the loss of privileges, the use of isolation, or, occasionally, the use of what we interpreted as non-excessive force. Officer Spears said that she will "scream at them" when inmates are not listening, and Officer Reyes similarly described an argument with an inmate where "the more he screamed the more I screamed." However, it is worth noting that discipline is part of officers' jobs, is often necessary, and that prison is also very loud, so yelling may sometimes be required.

There were many instances of the use of discipline, most often entailing "writing inmates up" for breaking a rule. Officer Youkilis described writing tickets

to "get [his] point across." Similarly, other officers wrote tickets for finding contraband (e.g., a cell phone or tobacco) (Officer Blum, field notes) and for stealing cleaning supplies (Officer Aceves). Not all officers used tickets, however, as some believed that it was a futile approach, either because they believed their supervisors did not back them up when they wrote tickets (e.g., Officer Latos, field notes), or that inmates did not care enough about it to make a difference (e.g., Officer Young, field notes). Officers also mentioned taking away privileges as a form of punishment. For example, Officer Lester described taking away an inmate's TV and visitation when she witnessed the inmate with contraband.

We also included the use of what we interpreted to be nonexcessive force in officers' disciplinary treatment of inmates. The use of force is sometimes necessary as part of the work and protocol for officers dealing with security or safety concerns. In one example of disciplinary force, an officer mentioned removing a combative inmate from their cell, "wrestling him to the ground, spraying him with mace," and eventually handcuffing him (Officer Tazawa). However, if force was accompanied by emotional concern for the inmate, it was included in the coding for compassionate treatment.

Unemotional Treatment. Officers sometimes treated inmates unemotionally, but without causing deliberate harm or acting in a disciplinary manner. As past scholarship suggests, apathy could prevail among officers because they often have high levels of burn-out and become desensitized (Maslach 1998, Schaufeli and Peeters 2000) and, therefore, might no longer emotionally respond to inmates' needs and suffering (Tracy 2004b). In our study, officers sometimes described themselves as "numb" or "hardened" to the sad and/or shocking incidents they encountered in prison work. Officer Doubront explained, "Oh yes, in the beginning . . . I was just, 'Oh my God, I can't believe I went to work today' and go home and tell people stories . . . but it does not affect me—in no way near as much as it did before." She then added, "I would just be so bothered by different things, I would be nearly in tears and now it is just like, 'That is how it is,' you know?" In another example, Officer Wheeler described his response to inmates' distress as to "control your emotion, control your response." He added that, "It is not shocking anymore. It is shocking when you first see it. . . . After 10, 15, 20, 25 years, it does not shock anymore. It gets normal for this environment."

Sometimes, unemotional treatment of inmates included ignoring their needs or suffering. For instance, researchers observed a few inmates come up to Officer Baxter to ask her questions about opportunities

Table 3. Additional Examples of Officers' Treatment of Inmates

Treatment	Illustrative quotes or field notes
Compassionate	<p>"For the last several months [we] had a couple of inmates who tried to kill themselves. One inmate came very close to killing himself . . . we need to make sure that this inmate is not a piece of paper work to us . . . obviously . . . something is going on with him. Whether he is scared of death, whether he just cannot handle it anymore and a lot of times we do not have the luxury to have a psychologist with us, so we have to function in that role and it is you either choose to do that, or you choose not to do that. I chose to try to help that inmate out as best as I can." (Officer Aviles)</p> <p>It was at this point that the inmate broke down and told Officer Ruiz that he just found out that his daughter had been shot and was dead, so Officer Ruiz asked the inmate to walk to the Chaplin's office with him so that he and the Chaplin could pray and talk it out. (Field notes)</p> <p>One inmate was particularly adamant about getting to Knitting Behind Bars, which Cohen explained was a knitting group run by three old ladies to teach inmates to knit with plastic needles, and they would make caps for premature babies. She said it was by far the most competitive and popular program among inmates. The inmate who wanted to get a pass to go down for it kept insisting that he needed to go so he would get a spot, and she kept replying that there hadn't been a call for it yet, despite it progressing to ten minutes after it was supposed to start. Finally, she radioed down to ask about the session, and the inmate thanked her. It turns out the session had been cancelled because one lady had not cleared the metal detector, so they all had left. Then, an announcement came out over the loudspeaker that it had been cancelled. (Field notes)</p>
Unemotional	<p>"You see it once, you see it twice, you see it three times, you would become immune to it, know what I'm talking about? . . . You become a colder person and because you see it, you see it, you see it, you see it, and it does not phase you anymore." (Officer Wheeler)</p> <p>Officer Hottovy described a time when an inmate was upset and needed to make a phone call, and the officer responded by lying to the inmate: "I lied and I told her I would make a phone call for her. I had to like sugar coat it for her . . . It was like, we had to play like a kid game or mind game." As such, the officer lied to the inmate in order to calm her, trivializing the inmate's dismay and doing what was easiest for the officer, rather than emotionally responding or helping.</p> <p>There was a steady stream of inmates who came to the door for one thing or another. The inmate who Beltran had asked to get his ID came back with it and passed it through the door to Beltran. He asked Beltran why he wanted it and Beltran said, "You want to know why, I'll tell you why, just wait." He then walked away and put it on the desk. The inmate lingered at the door trying to get Beltran's attention again but Beltran ignored him. (Field notes)</p>
Disciplinary	<p>"I take it as a challenge with some guys, actually I was giving out mail and he took off all his clothes and by the time I got to his door to give him his mail, he was standing there, all Butterball naked. So, of course I let him have it. I told him, you have got three seconds to get your clothes on and meet me in that vestibule and . . . I [yelled at him] . . . he knew I was pissed and I got him a ticket." (Officer Lowrie)</p> <p>"[I said] 'This is a direct order to clear the shower now' and if he disobeys the second order . . . they will receive an infraction, so 'clear the shower, and get dressed, report to the control center' because he will be given an infraction . . . Because you aren't allowed to disobey a direct order, it is against the rules. That is grounds for an infraction." (Officer Navarro)</p> <p>"Basically with tickets, I tell you I have really had a whole lot of times that I needed to discipline someone. See lot of these guys in [institution], they like to run their mouth. I can run my mouth back at them. It usually shuts them up, but the worst time I have ever to deal is write somebody off [give them a ticket] and have to put him in lockup for a while." (Officer Ortiz)</p>
Cruel	<p>"For the most part, we are working in this unpredictable [context] and I think the first response [to a combative inmate] . . . I do not think my hand will be going this way for my pepper spray and [my hands] would be going outwards, [I'm] talking [about] towards the inmate first." (Officer Weiland)</p> <p>"And they know that if they ever disrespect me and I call it in, they are in for the worst ass-beating of their entire life and that is from the inmates, if they get them first, or from the officers." (Officer Lester)</p> <p>"One time, we went to a cell to pick a guy out because he refused to do something, and [so] when we opened the door, we had [a] canine there . . . the canine dog [was] attacking the inmate and just taking care of business." (Officer Jenks)</p>

to work. One inmate was pretty persistent because he believed that he was scheduled for a job and needed instructions. However, after he made several attempts to speak with the officer, she simply stood up and walked away without explanation, ignoring his needs (field notes). Similarly, Officer Reddick described responding to an inmate by telling him what he wanted to hear just to "get him off my back," rather than by trying to help him resolve his problem. This type of treatment of inmates, known as "spinning," occurs when officers lie to try to get inmates to be compliant until the end of the shift. This was intended to pacify inmates so that their needs would become the next shift's problem, rather than something the officer needed to act upon.

Unemotional treatment also entailed officers' ignoring or being emotionally unresponsive to inmates' misbehavior; in officers' accounts, this was often discussed as a response to inmates' aggressive language. For example, Officer Matsuzaka said that he ignores being "cursed out." Similarly, Officer Youkilis described being called a "bitch" by an inmate, and deliberately ignoring it because "once they realize I do not give a response, they will just be quiet." He explained that he will "just ignore them . . . mentally tell yourself: 'I will focus on shut mouth . . . why should I let them in?'" Some officers explained that by being unemotional, they could show inmates that they were still in control and could not be easily provoked or influenced. As Officer Aviles explained,

by “not reacting” to inmates’ verbal mistreatment he was “stronger than to be upset by what people say.”

Compassionate Treatment. Although disciplinary and unemotional treatment of inmates might be expected in this context, more surprising to us was the fact that officers sometimes exhibited compassion for inmates. Evidence of compassion included expression of emotion indicating concern for the inmate, such as empathy, sympathy, and pity when faced with inmates’ suffering or needs (Kanov et al. 2004, Goetz et al. 2010). Some officers’ highly compassionate treatment of inmates also included observations and accounts of behaviors aimed at helping or trying to alleviate their suffering and meet their needs. We included all these behaviors as evidence of compassion, though they varied in the extent to which officers expressed feelings of concern or were actually helping—we were interested in whether and how compassion occurred, rather than how extensively compassionate officers were. For example, in a highly compassionate example, Officer Gonzalez, in tears, recalled a story about a shaking, terrified male inmate who had been sexually assaulted. The officer described her responsiveness, explaining how she helped console the inmate and gave him access to a phone call and medical care. In a different instance, another officer described demonstrating compassion for an inmate’s family problems by helping him:

There are times when I walk around and an inmate will come up and tell me and he has issues at home. His mother is sick, she is in a hospital, she is in a nursing home. He needs to make contact, or he read the paper where his brother was killed in a car accident. . . . I take him in my office. I listen to him. I talk to him. I may give him a ten-minute phone call to a loved one in private. I may refer him to a chaplain for counseling or a psychologist. (Officer Jenks)

In another example, Officer Hill told us about an inmate who just discovered that his family had abandoned him. The inmate had received a letter with news about a death in his family, and he was “trying to make a phone call home” to reach someone, but every number he tried was disconnected. The officer describes trying the numbers herself for the inmate, just to be sure: “We tried it several times, [but] the bottom line is he was out of numbers to call. Now, I didn’t say this to him but part of reality may be [that] they don’t want to talk to him.” The officer described asking the inmate’s case manager to prioritize finding a number so the inmate would be able to reach a family member that night.

Importantly, we do not mean to imply that compassion could not coexist with appropriate discipline or security measures. Some officers described helping

inmates but still paying proper attention to discipline or security concerns, such as Officer Jackson. This officer discusses his approach for controlling a combative inmate in distress by saying that he would “restrain him by whatever means possible” but “hopefully we will not have to do anything more than that,” and added that he would then have the inmate evaluated by psychological and medical staff. Similarly, Officer Veritek describes executing a cell extraction to help an inmate who was refusing to comply with orders and who was a physical threat to others by ensuring that “medical personnel [was] on hand.” Officers who helped inmates in such situations usually did not explicitly mention compassionate emotions toward inmates, but nonetheless described experiencing concern for them and paying deliberate attention to helping them with medical and psychological issues, behaviors not always indicated by officers dealing with noncompliant inmates.

Given that both compassion and aggression are associated with individual differences such as gender (e.g., Bettencourt and Miller 1996, Weisberg, DeYoung and Hirsh 2011), we examined our data for such themes. However, we did not find evidence that women were more compassionate than men, nor did we see that men exhibited more cruelty than women. The data also showed that most officers treated inmates in a variety of ways.⁶ As an illustration, even the officer who described the cruelest behavior toward inmates in our data (violence) also described in-depth counseling of an inmate in distress, as well as several instances of helping inmates with their life problems. Another possible reason that we did not see much in terms of individual differences in officers’ treatment of inmates is that there were different situations that officers experienced, and emotion in organizations is often situated (Sutton 1991). We describe three of the most common situations, and officers’ treatment of inmates during them, next.

Situational Factors

Evidence of officers’ treatment of inmates was partly linked to situational factors. Three main situations seemed to frame officers’ treatment of inmates: (i) noticing inmates’ suffering, (ii) noticing inmates’ needs, and (iii) noticing inmates’ misbehavior. Table 4 provides examples of such situations. We plotted officers’ treatment of inmates according to the situations described in the 197 identified interactions, mapping them onto current theoretical understanding of situations that are more compassion relevant (i.e., where others are suffering or in need), and therefore more typically associated with the compassion process than another common situation in our data (i.e., noticing inmates as misbehaving). As Table 5 suggests,

compassion was evident in our data across all three situations—most surprisingly, even when inmates were noticed as misbehaving.

Noticing Inmates’ Suffering. We found that compassion often occurred when officers described noticing or witnessing inmates’ suffering of tragedies. Compassionate treatment of others who are suffering might be expected among the general population (Goetz et al. 2010) and in organizations (Dutton et al. 2006). Therefore, it might partially explain the common compassionate treatment of inmates among officers during these situations. Even though we expected it to be less common here given the many barriers to compassion in the work, we still found that officers’ accounts of inmates’ tragedies could prompt compassionate emotions and actions. Such tragedies included inmates’ suicide attempts, inmates being victims of physical violence, and inmates experiencing family misfortunes while incarcerated. For example, one officer recounted having saved the life

of an inmate during a suicide attempt by cutting them down from a noose:

[The inmate] was sitting in, crying, tears come out of his eyes . . . So, I finally gets [sic] into the cell and the [other inmate] dude runs right out. We on lock up . . . So, we can’t have a knife, I cannot cut him down . . . I have a set of handcuffs and I just kept using the key for the cuff rubbing against it and until I broke the rope that was tied on his neck. It was a big guy, bigger than me. I had his feet and he fell and the only thing I could do to hold his heel, and when he fell, I got the toilet paper out of his mouth. He just cried like a baby on the floor. (Officer Anderson)

Other officers described protecting inmates from attacks and witnessing inmates’ suffering from physical assaults, such as being stabbed in the eye or cut so badly that officers did not think the inmates would survive. In another situation, Officer Allen (field notes), explaining how inmates suffered from violent and heartbreaking injuries, and how he would try to help them in these instances, described seeing an

Table 4. Additional Examples of Situations

Situations	Illustrative quotes or field notes
Noticing suffering	<p>“When an inmate had gotten or he had something happened on him and his face had begun to peel, so he needed to get to the hospital. He needed to get his proper dressings and things of that nature. What had begun to happen . . . I have a genuine concern as I am human, like: ‘Oh my goodness what happened to you? Are you okay? Let me take care of that.’” (Officer Youkilis)</p>
Noticing needs	<p>“He got stabbed in the eye . . . and he came running to us like he wanted help.” (Officer Reyes)</p> <p>“Shoes, you know, in maintenance, sometimes, the shoes wear out and many times they need hats, coats, you know. I try to get them what they need, you know. And when it’s cold outside, I called up the dietary, ‘Hey, we need some hot chocolates,’ you know. ‘We have been out shoveling snow all night. We need some tea.’” (Officer Buchholz)</p> <p>“If there is something that I can help them with, it’s like for example with working out there they will come to me if they see me walking down, or writing letters you know, ‘I need this or that of the other things’ and all, I will try to help them out if I can.” (Officer Okajima)</p> <p>Throughout the interview process, there were constant knocks at the door from inmates wanting passes to medical, property, commissary, etc. Sgt. Blanks was very accommodating and called each inmate “sir” and asked what he could do for them. (Field notes)</p>
Noticing misbehavior	<p>“They are always pushing . . . seeing how far they can push you, what they can get out of you, thinking they will get a kick out of stressing you out . . . Probably the most popular thing is when they say ‘This officer told me that I can do this. And you are telling me no, why is that?’ [But] that officer is already gone, that shift is gone. So, you can’t go to the officer and bring him and say, ‘Did you tell him you could do that?’ So, you kind of have to think while that officer may have said that, when you think about a while. No, that’s a little far-fetched. So now you got to argue with the inmate, because he keeps insisting that the other officer told him so and then he would play with the officer until another officer comes in.” (Officer Reyes)</p> <p>“Sometimes you are on a tier and you have an inmate who is acting up in his cell and what we call ‘selling you death,’ and . . . he’s tearing up his cell or starting fires . . . squatting feces or urine out and just saying all kinds of that which means, ‘Come on in here. I will kick your ass’ or stuff like that. He is doing this for his audience, his tier. Usually, once you say, ‘Look, we are going to come in and get you if you don’t stop doing all this,’ . . . usually when you pop that door, usually 60–70% of the times, they will just throw their arms up and they’re done, and I think we just have to call their bluff sometimes and the other inmates are going see if you are going to take it and walk away or if you are going to react.” (Officer Reddick)</p> <p>“If someone is constantly, ‘Can you do this,’ nagging and nagging, they are up to something. If someone want to constantly get out of the building, what you up to? That is part of manipulation. They are up to something, trying to go somewhere else so what you do is you just keep the area secured.” (Officer Gonzalez).</p>

Table 5. Correctional Officers’ Treatment of Inmates by Situations Within Interactions

Treatment	Compassionate treatment (high to low)				Total
	Compassionate (kindness, helping, emotional responses indicating concern, desire to provide assistance, counseling, help)	Unemotional (apathy, ignoring or spinning inmates, no disciplinary or compassionate treatment)	Disciplinary (punishments/disciplinary treatment of inmates, use of force, without compassionate treatment)	Cruel (intentional infliction of physical or emotional pain)	
Noticing inmates’ suffering (e.g., emotional distress, physical distress, pain)	26 (6L, 1E)	4 (0L, 0E)	2 (1L, 0E)	1 (0L, 0E)	33 (7L, 1E)
Noticing inmates’ needs (e.g., needing passes, haircut, clothing, phone and/or access)	36 (14L, 5E)	8 (0L, 2E)	6 (0L, 0E)	1 (0L, 0E)	51 (14L, 7E)
Noticing inmates’ misbehavior (e.g., breaking rules, ignoring commands, verbal disrespect, attacks)	34 (23L, 5E)	22 (0L, 9E)	43 (3L, 4E)	14 (0L, 0E)	113 (26L, 18E)
Total	96 (43L, 11E)	34 (0L, 11E)	51 (4L, 4E)	16 (0L, 0E)	197 (47L, 26E)

Note. L, leveling differences practices present; E, emotional shielding practices present.

assault where inmates had microwaved a jar of petroleum jelly and threw it in another inmate’s face.

Other moments that generated compassion when officers noticed inmates’ suffering occurred when inmates experienced family problems or misfortunes. Officer Barton (field notes) remarked that one of the largest problems inmates face is the lack of a family to return to, and that “many of their family members have given up on them.” An inmate’s request for advice on a family situation offered some insight into an officer’s compassionate treatment: When Officer Beckett described an inmate’s tragedy, she recounted noticing her suffering: “This girl who is so hard and coarse and right now she is gentle as a lamb and she is crying and it is like ‘What is the matter?’ And you will hear stories like ‘My brother is a murderer . . . and he is home now and he is abusing my children, what do I do?’” In such moments, officers described responding with compassionate emotions and sometimes helping behavior, including efforts to counsel them. Adding to these often-tense family situations, a common event that officers described was inmates’ hearing about a parent’s death. Sometimes officers said that they would exhibit compassionate behavior toward these inmates, trying to help alleviate some of their suffering. As Officer Ortiz recalled, “I remembered their mothers have died. So . . . they just wanted to get if [sic] off their chest, they needed somebody to give them a contact with the chaplain. So they could make arrangements, establish a special visit with a family

for grief counseling.” Importantly, officers were not required to facilitate grieving inmates’ requests to obtain special visits or appointments with the chaplain, nor would they be reprimanded if they failed to do so. Thus, officers would choose to be compassionate toward inmates in these situations, although sometimes they did not choose to do so.

As Table 5 makes clear, only a handful of officers’ accounts described unemotional disciplinary treatment, or cruelty when inmates were noticed as suffering. In these instances, officers mentioned either interpreting the inmates’ suffering as a means of manipulation, or believing that the inmate deserved their suffering because of their mistreatment of the officer. For example, Officer Doubront describes an unemotional treatment of an inmate’s chest pain, construing it as an example of manipulation: “There is so much manipulation in here, those inmates sit back and they study us and they thrive on manipulation . . . even like . . . tell[ing] us that they are having chest pain because they know chest pain is something that we cannot look at and tell if they did really have it—or if they want to go for a walk.”

Noticing Inmates’ Needs. Although not as extreme as the previously described suffering of inmates, compassionate treatment of inmates’ needs was also common in our data and, indeed, could be conceptualized as effectively meeting human services job demands. Again, scholarship shows that among the general population,

noticing others' needs is a strong predictor of compassion (see Goetz et al. 2010), but we expected it to be less common among correctional officers because of the barriers to compassion in their work. Often, officers recounting their compassionate treatment of inmates' needs described recognizing that inmates had routine needs that, although seemingly small, were quite important. In this way, officers often described interpreting inmates' daily needs, such as getting shoes, as the type of need that might require compassion. Officer Wakefield explained:

Inmates will always come to you with questions and problems. If you just blow them off . . . You know, that makes you feel bad. Just to you [as an inmate], this is an important issue. It could be something like, I need a new pair of shoes because my shoes are almost [worn] open and you are like, "I do not give a shit," you know, "Who cares. I am going home at eight o'clock, I do not care." A lot of [officers] say stuff like that. To an inmate, that is an important thing.

In another example, Officer Weiland described helping inmates when they ask for "the smallest things," such as checking on whether something had arrived for them in the mail, or confirming an appointment for them. She added that "they appreciate all that little stuff," because she believed it made inmates feel confident that she would try to address their problems in her shift (versus spinning them).

Noticing inmates' needs did not, however, always include compassionate treatment of inmates. Officers have a great amount of discretion in deciding whether to meet the needs and requests of inmates, such as allowing a phone call to a loved one or providing access to food, clothing, and medical care. In the field, we also observed officers responding differently to inmates' needs. Because many inmates' requests, such as a request for a hall pass, might seem trivial, officers could easily ignore them, or code them as a form of manipulation, rather than as a legitimate need. In another observation period, for example, inmates were asking to visit the barber, and an officer responded apathetically by ignoring the request and cruelly laughing at how terrible the inmates' hair looked. In a separate contrasting incident, another officer was faced with a similar request and handled it compassionately, making quite an effort to help:

He was interrupted by a knock at the door from an inmate so he walked over. . . . It was a request for the barber. Officer Allen told the inmate to wait a moment and he would find the list. He walked back over to the desk and searched through the papers on the table but did not find a list. He said aloud, "There is no list?" then, "Well, then we will make a list." . . . Officer Allen returned to the desk and picked up the phone. He called the barber and asked how many they could

take . . . He picked up the receiver again and dialed a different number. I could hear the intercom in the dorm room click on, and he called two names off the top of the list and told them to come to the door for a pass. (field notes)

By comparison, another account of noticing needs did not include compassionate treatment of the inmate. Officer Albers explained, "They try to get away with everything and anything that they can, like, you know, like property. A lot of them have earrings already. They [sic] only allowed one pair. They will say 'Oh, I lost it.' I tell them if they want a pair, if you do not turn it in, you cannot have another pair." This officer explained that, although there are rules dictating how many pairs of earrings inmates can have, the officer felt apathetic to the inmate's stated need, and a cynicism about whether the inmate actually lost their pair. However, inmates' possessions—including earrings and other ways in which they can express individuality—can be quite important to them. This officer did not recognize the potential importance of this need in this instance, instead focusing on the frustrating feeling that inmates were trying to "get away with everything and anything." He dismissed the voiced need without further investigation. By contrast, sometimes officers reported navigating the tension between meeting inmates' needs while managing the potential for manipulation by trying to verify information given to them rather than outright discounting a voiced need.

Noticing Inmates' Misbehavior. A final situation that seemed to have implications for officers' treatment of inmates was when they noticed inmates' misbehavior. By misbehavior, we mean an instance where an inmate was understood by the officer or by researchers as having violated a rule of the institution (e.g., refusing to comply with an officer's command and engaging in verbal or physical aggressions). Many officers described responding to inmates' misbehavior with an unemotional reaction. This often involved ignoring inmates' verbal aggression toward them, such as when Officer Sutton described an argumentative inmate who was irritating him, from whom he "walked away." Therefore, in noticing inmates' misbehavior, sometimes officers engaged in behaviors to try to hold back their negative emotions, perhaps to avoid more punitive or cruel treatment of inmates. By comparison, officers more often responded to inmates' misbehavior with a disciplinary approach. One common instance of this involved an inmate refusing to obey an order and becoming combative about it, such as when Officer Gonzales ordered an inmate to come out of the shower. He described waiting it out, then giving the inmate an infraction ticket.

Officer Gonzales said that tickets could “psych inmates out” to deter them from repeating the offense.

Notably, the most frequent amount of cruelty toward inmates in our data occurred when officers mentioned inmates misbehaving. As noted earlier, these instances of cruelty were rare in our data, and were typically described as revenge for inmates’ physical or verbal assaults. Officer Anderson described his emotional response to inmates’ assaults as such, implying his own use of violence or at least an impulse toward it:

I have dealt with a lot of guys’ spit on me. I got feces on me, to the point where sometimes you got to look at your skin or your shield and there might be a lot that goes on through your head, but I already know that if I am one-on-one with you and I do not have any people around . . . I wish could just hit this motherfucker in the mouth.

Surprisingly, not all incidents of inmates’ misbehavior included cruel, disciplinary, or unemotional treatment by officers. In fact, many instances of noticing misbehavior included officers responding compassionately, which was not expected based on extant theories of compassion that posit situations of compassion relevance as those in which an individual is suffering or in need. For instance, officers sometimes described reacting to being assaulted by calling for help for the inmate from counseling or medical staff. Instead of interpreting such incidents as inmates acting out, they construed them as indications that the inmate was having a hard time, offering understanding despite the inmates’ misbehavior. Officer Navarro, for example, described being physically assaulted by an inmate, but added that she understood the inmate’s behavior because “they are not allowed anymore to go and meet a buddy, and that is when [the] care kicks in.” She said that she gave the inmate time to “calm down,” recognizing that “he is just upset with everything.” She then said that she offered the inmate a phone call to reach out to his family for comfort.

Rather than punishing inmates or ignoring them, officers describing compassion when noticing inmates’ misbehavior often reported choosing to speak with inmates who were misbehaving, resulting in helping. By speaking with them, officers could investigate the problem that the inmate was reacting to and better address it. Officer Latos, for instance, described pulling an inmate aside to ask him about why he was always acting out (field notes). Latos reported discovering that the inmate was doing so because he was upset that he was not allowed to correspond with his mother housed in another correctional facility. The officer described helping the inmate navigate the red tape to obtain special clearance to correspond with her. In a similar example, Officer Heyward (field notes) recounted how

speaking with an inmate who had been acting out helped him learn that the inmate was functionally blind and was, therefore, unable to follow certain rules (such as remaining in a straight line with other inmates). Yet no one at the prison had been previously aware of this disability. By engaging with misbehaving inmates, rather than punishing or ignoring them, officers described creating opportunities in which they could respond more compassionately.

We next present findings that we theorize help to explain how officers were able to be compassionate for inmates, across situations.

Practices That Enable Compassion

Although officers did not always report responding to inmates with compassion in their accounts, we identified specific practices employed by officers that we theorize better enable them to do so. We posit that these practices shape officers’ treatment of inmates in ways that both move them away from negative emotions that are associated with cruelty and punitive treatment of inmates (e.g., anger and contempt) through *emotional shielding*, and toward compassion by generating feelings of identification and closeness through *leveling differences*. We describe each of these sets of practices in more detail.

Leveling Differences Practices. We found that officers described engaging in three practices that we collectively label “leveling differences.” We theorize that these leveling differences practices help enable compassion among human services workers by fostering connection and identification with charges who are part of an outgroup. The three practices are: humanizing (emphasizing inmates’ and their own humanity), recasting roles (into ones with less interpersonal tensions and where role prescriptions make compassion more common), and finding common ground (perceiving commonalities between themselves and inmates).

Humanizing. In their accounts, officers deliberately spoke about and emphasized inmates’ humanity, which was often accompanied with descriptions of more compassionate treatment of inmates. When asked about his motto for working with inmates, Officer Heyward (field notes) replied, “Treat them like a human being.” Another account from the observational study documented, “Officer Dobbs told me his strategy in working with inmates . . . was treating them like humans and not ‘caged animals.’” The officer added, “They respond so much better when you have a conversation with them, like you and I are doing, instead of yelling and screaming at them.” By emphasizing their humanity, we theorize that officers would not think of, and therefore not treat,

inmates as something less than human; these accounts report little unemotional, disciplinary, and cruel treatment of inmates.

Officers did not always report engaging in humanizing, however. For example, in some instances, they referred to inmates as “dogs” or “nobody”—dehumanizing them in ways that might be expected. Yet, during many compassion episodes described to us, officers tried to treat inmates as humans even in tense circumstances. Officer Pedroia described how he approached violent inmates: “My technique is that [I] try to come out on a man-on-man [sic] basis” (field notes). He added that he “will not try to yell too much” and justified his approach by saying, “This guy will be locked up for 20 to 30 years.” In fact, the officer noted that he did not want to make the inmate “feel bad” in such encounters. By humanizing the inmate and being empathetic to his lengthy incarceration, the officer described engaging with him more compassionately, even when an inmate was behaving violently. Table 6 summarizes these practices and contains additional illustrative examples.

Recasting Roles. A second way we theorize that officers mitigated interpersonal tensions was through practices of recasting themselves into close, family-like roles more commonly associated with compassion than the correctional officer–prisoner roles. For instance, Officer Aviles stated, “I see myself as a teacher. . . . That is what I come to work [as] . . . father figure, brother figure . . . that is what we are to [them].” Another officer remarked proudly, “See that some of the younger females, say like from 17 to 25, most of them call me Mom” (Officer Atchison). In the same spirit, Officer Beckett noted:

Sometimes it is like [I am] a mom and I am 40 years old. It is like you [are] being a mom to some of them. . . . So, they will say something like, “Good morning Ms. Beckett, how are you doing?” . . . And they will say, “Can I have some of those Danish?” and I say, “No, this is for the special force and you cannot have . . . [but] you are so sweet, I love you to pieces; [but] no.”

By adopting a parental perspective, Officer Beckett describes understanding her role in a more familiar and caring role of a parent. More generally, officers often described inmates as children in need of advice, nurturing, and guidance. Thus, officers related their job to parenting, frequently emphasizing that they would still discipline inmates but that this was balanced with concern about their well-being. As Officer Lowrie noted, “It is almost like being a parent in a sense because you have to maintain the discipline, but you also have to look out for their needs.”

Although seeing oneself as the mother figure was a common theme throughout interviews and observations

of female officers, male officers also mentioned recasting their relationships with inmates in familial ways. One male officer remarked, “You know, some of these guys are of the same age of my kids; I am like a father figure to them” (Officer Jackson). Regardless of gender, many officers described recasting their relationships with inmates and that, as a result, they reported taking better care of them.

Finding Common Ground. A third way that officers leveled differences between themselves and inmates was through practices that described finding common ground. As an example, Officer Sutton noted that he identified similarities between his military experience and that of inmates, which we theorize reduced an interpersonal divide and shaped more compassionate treatment: “An inmate will tell me, ‘Look, my mail—that is important.’ I was in [the] military. I was on an aircraft carrier, so I know, mail is important. So, the first thing I do, [once I] make sure that my building is secure and the count is done, I check the mail out right away.” As another illustration, Officer Spears spoke about how having bipolar disorder helped her understand the mental health needs of inmates and how it feels to be placed in restraints, which she says prompted her to be gentle when restraining inmates.

In addition, many officers reported finding common ground with inmates who had also grown up in rough conditions. Several officers indicated that, like many inmates, they too “grew up in the worst part of town” (Officer Ellsbury) and that they were “familiar with the code of the street and the street culture,” adding that familiarity with the inmates’ background allowed officers to “relate better” to inmates (Officer Bard). Officer Jackson explained: “A lot of these guys come in. They had no father figure in their life, you know, some of them do not even have a mother figure. . . . You know, they will run in the streets and get in the gangs . . . I know, years ago, this is what I [was] like.”

Finally, some officers even found common ground with inmates’ criminality. A few officers disclosed that they had been in prison or jail themselves, although such experiences are a bar to employment as a correctional officer.⁷ These officers described how being incarcerated had let them experience the “other side of the track [sic],” and that it gave them perspective on inmates such that they saw them as simply having made mistakes rather than as being personally blameworthy. As Officer Bedard put it, “You know, I could have been incarcerated myself.” Officer Lester clarified that “They [inmates] are basically everyday normal people, you know, the kind you meet out in the mall or wherever. It is basically, you know, it is the same thing. It is just they got caught

Table 6. Practices that Enable Compassion

Practices	Illustrative quotes or field notes
Leveling differences	
Emphasizing inmates' humanity	I do not believe anybody is a throwaway person. (Officer Aviles) We are all human beings. . . . They are human and I am human. (Officer Navarro)
Recasting roles	[I think of them] as if they are my own children. You know, nobody want their kids to go astray, but misfortune that they are here and you know I try to give them the right direction to go. (Officer Atchison) I will relate it to parenting. . . . You know these are children, who just were not given that loving attention at home. (Officer Iglesias) You know, I walk a mile in their shoes for just a minute and I think . . . that [that inmate] could be my daughter, my mother, my wife . . . (Officer Bard)
Finding common ground	But once you get on [get to know inmates, you are] able to relate to them, just how I can say . . . a lot of them have bad starts because you listen to a lot of their stories, and I was [a] foster parent for about 15 years, so I see a lot of troubled children come in to my house with a lot of different problems. (Officer Anderson) I know that only by the grace of God that I am not in an institution, so I can deal with them on their level. I can deal with them on a street level. I have come out of the 'hood, I come out of the projects, the roughest projects in [a] city. I already know how to deal with the inmates, male or female, because I know what they are about. (Officer Bedard) I know a lot of them [are in here for] something that maybe could happen to me, and I could be in here. (Officer Matsuzaka)
Emotional shielding	
Role separation	Well, later that evening [after the riot] I came in . . . we started going around feeding the inmates. Because the whole jail was locked down, that means no inmate moved . . . no one was allowed to come out. We had to take the Taser and feed them cell to cell, and . . . I had one or two inmates telling me, "Officer, you were not here yesterday." I am thinking, "How, in all this mayhem, did they notice I was not here?" One guy said, "If you had been here yesterday, we were just going to kill you." . . . and all that I could do was to look at him and say, "Well, better luck next time." . . . if you let that get to you, you cannot work in here. You just got to put [it] aside. (Officer Wheeler) If he is throwing feces and urine, I would be angry, angry but knowing that I have to do a job and knowing that I have to do it in a professional manner, and I would do it as professional as I can . . . yes, I would be angry, but . . . I know that goes with the job. (Officer Reddick)
Ignoring inmates' crimes	I think . . . it is best not to know why they are in here for the safety of the officers and the inmates. . . . You have child molesters and rapists and so forth. I mean, I am a father of three. It would be tough for me to actually look at that individual and talk to him. (Officer Weiland) So you know I will really try to focus on the person. . . . Because if you focus on what the people is here for, you know me being like a mother, you will be like, "Ooh, get away from" . . . I really had to separate myself and say, "You know this is my job," I cannot focus on, you know, their crime . . . (Officer Atchison)
Limiting expectations	It doesn't seem to be as stressful now, because you come to the realization that this is the way these people are. This is the life they live outside of your law, and I think that makes it a little easier. (Officer Reyes) "You also should be cautious, you also have to be on guard [when an inmate is behaving] because at any given moment, this person can be, snap, you know and revert back to that person they were outside." (Officer Lowrie)

but we did not. I do not know about you, but I drink and drove [sic], you know, I have done it a lot of times . . ." By relating to inmates and even recalling their own experiences with criminality and the penal system, officers described feeling similarity to inmates and understanding them. Finding similarity with others has the potential to result in authentic expressions of closeness, making work tasks more personal, but without emotional tax (Yagil and Medler-Liraz 2013). As a result, we theorize that through finding common ground, officers leveled potential differences between themselves and inmates, which shaped more compassionate treatment.

Emotional Shielding Practices. We also found that officers described engaging in a second set of practices that we collectively call "emotional shielding." Emotional shielding practices involve officers' efforts

to avoid or minimize negative emotional reactions to inmates. As such, emotional shielding is a deliberate form of emotional distancing, but differs substantially from those in the current literature. Specifically, distancing tactics from extant literature involve deliberate actions to be more psychologically detached from (1) the humanity of charges via depersonalization, and (2) from empathy for charges via empathy suppression. In contrast, the distancing tactics in emotional shielding encompassed trying to be more psychologically detached from one's own negative emotions toward charges. These practices included role separation, ignoring inmates' crimes, and limiting expectations. We theorize that by practicing emotional shielding, officers enabled more compassionate treatment and less cruelty toward inmates through reduced negative emotion and conflict.

Role Separation. The first way that officers described shielding themselves from the negative emotions that could be triggered by inmates was by trying not to take threats and attacks against them personally. In doing so, officers could psychologically separate their professional role as human services workers from how they felt personally (mis)treated. This shielding practice was especially prevalent in our data when it came to accounts of inmates' disrespect, insults, and threats directed toward officers. As Officer Matsuzaka remarked, "I have tried not to look at things as a personal assault on me." He further described how he protected himself through separation: "I have tried to look at everything like, step back and say they are not attacking me but I am the authority figure. I am the one they see on a daily basis, day in, day out. So, most of their anger is going to be directed at me." He interpreted inmates' assaults on him as an attack on the relevant authority figure, rather than as a personal attack. Officer Iglesias also explained that he can "take the personal issue out of" an inmate situation because "you have to go back and talk to this inmate to actually help him out with the problem." He clarified that by taking an inmate's disrespect of him less personally, he could approach the inmate with a clean slate, not hanging onto negative feelings toward him: "I could physically [have to] put my hands on inmate that day . . . then go back the next day and [tell him] 'today is a new day.' It took some time, but it works." By shielding themselves in these ways, we suggest that officers lessened possible contemptuous feelings toward inmates who mistreated them, which could block feelings of compassion toward inmates and trigger conflict and cruelty.

The practice of role separation arose in officers' accounts of both minor misbehaviors (such as inmates' poking fun at the officers or conning them into getting a phone call or a hall pass) and more extreme ones (such as threats and personal insults). For example, Officer Jackson discussed the ability to not take death threats received from inmates seriously, "because realistically, *every* day you walk in here, your life is on the line . . . That is just part of the job." Role separation required effort, because correctional officers' formal power over inmates made it easy for them to lash out against inmates. Some officers described a different reaction, wherein they did not emotionally shield themselves, instead taking inmates' assaults and threats personally and responding with cruelty. Officer Lester, for instance, explained her angry desire to "pound on" an inmate who threw urine on her and bit her. She described the pleasure and "satisfaction" she took in the assault on the inmate after he started fighting the fellow officers she called for assistance. Accounts of such cruel treatment of inmates were not accompanied by

descriptions of officers' separating roles or employing other shielding practices.

Ignoring Inmates' Crimes. Another way that officers described practicing emotional shielding was by deliberately ignoring or trying not to learn about inmates' crimes. By doing so, officers attempted to blind themselves to reasons for being afraid of or resentful toward inmates, limiting these negative emotions. Many officers reported being tempted to look up the criminal background information on inmates (e.g., whether the crime involved violence) to reduce uncertainty about how the inmate might behave. Yet officers also reported resisting this temptation and suppressing their curiosity. This practice, we argue, helped to enable officers to focus on inmates as individuals in need of their help, rather than as criminals they might be fearful of, or angered or disgusted by. The following quote typifies this practice of ignoring inmates' crimes:

You have to have a lot of humility, a lot of things that you have to put aside, your prejudice, you have to put that aside. And this person might be the cruddiest person on earth, but . . . you have to look at the bigger picture, you have to look at, well, this guy, he does not have a coat, or he does not have a job, or he has no skills, so those are the things that we have to look at. We cannot get into [thinking], "Well, he just murdered 16 people." We cannot look at that, even though you might want to. (Officer Lowrie)

Ignoring inmates' crimes also required purposeful effort, because most records are public and, thus, easy to find, and inmates are often in the news. For instance, during an observation, Officer Lee told us that some of the inmates "creep" her out and that "around some of the guys, you just get a sixth sense that you wouldn't want to run into that person on the street" (field notes). She added that sometimes she simply had to "look people up" (presumably using public court records or newspaper articles). However, looking people up appeared to hinder officers' ability to help inmates because it was described as instigating contempt or anger toward them. As an illustration, Officer Anderson described how he used to have a habit of reading up on inmates' crimes, which he recognized had caused him to feel hatred toward an inmate: "A guy who was caught [up] in a [gang] shooting where an innocent child was killed [in the crossfire] just sitting on the steps." He noted that he hated this inmate, "because I used to have a habit of . . . reading . . . why this guy was locked up, you know?" Stated differently, another officer said that once she found out why inmates were here, she "would look at them different, a lot different" (Officer Weiland). In these instances, negative information about the inmate appeared to obstruct compassion by triggering officers'

negative emotions, therefore requiring some type of shielding to be able to treat them with compassion.

Limiting Expectations. A third way that officers emotionally shielded themselves was by circumscribing their expectations for inmates' behavior, reminding themselves that inmates, no matter how harmless or trustworthy they appeared at any particular moment, were still criminals. In doing so, officers described reminding themselves that because inmates had the potential to misbehave, they might disappoint officers, manipulate them, or cause harm. For example, Officer Nix described his strategy when working with inmates as treating each one with respect, but to "always expect the worst." As he explained, "It is important to treat these guys like humans. But at the same time, they are still inmates and are capable of harming themselves or others" (field notes).

We theorize that limiting their expectations for inmates' behavior allowed officers to be more compassionate by shielding them from potential frustration, letdown, and disappointment. As Officer Lester explained, "If you expect it [to go wrong], you are not going to be disappointed, and that is a shame. But you cannot put a hundred percent faith in them." Because officers practicing limiting expectations anticipated misbehavior, they described less emotional risk when helping inmates. By combining his helping of inmates with knowledge of their untrustworthiness, Officer Aviles describes tempering the potential for disappointment by trying not to feel upset when an inmate did misbehave:

I always give the inmate a benefit of the doubt until they prove me wrong. There is a lot to that. You could be up for lot of disappointment, and that happens quite a bit. But if you just keep in your perspective that this is what they do, and this what their role is [sic], and all of them are here because [they are] not trustworthy people [it helps]. And so I go into it understanding that.

Another way that limiting expectations of inmates enables officers' compassion is by giving officers more realistic expectations for themselves in their work. Many officers described realizing that they could not possibly control everything about inmates, and that inmates' manipulation of them was inevitable. Thus, for officers to engage in excess worry about these things was described as futile. We posit that the practice of limiting expectations could also reduce officers' stress and self-blame if an inmate misbehaved. For instance, Officer Jackson explained: "I mean, you are never going to catch everything they do. They have got 24 hours a day. They have all day long to think what they can do. You are only here for eight hours." He then added, "They will want to get

things over on you, you will get them next time. They will do it again, you know. And you try not to let stuff like that worry you." By limiting their expectations for inmates—and the stress associated with being vigilant or controlling—officers also described adjusting expectations for themselves. In this way, we posit that this practice enabled compassion because it helped to temper stress and exhaustion, as well as limit potentially angry, frustrated, or disappointed responses to inmates' misbehavior that could otherwise block compassion.

Discussion

We led an inquiry into compassion in human services organizations by examining when and how workers can be compassionate toward charges, despite the many challenges in doing so. We noticed that in arguably the most extreme conditions and in the absence of compassionate organizational cultures, these workers nonetheless described—and in some instances, demonstrated—compassion. More specifically, compassion occurred in about half of the accounts and observations of interactions in our data, but other types of treatment of charges were described as well (i.e., cruel, disciplinary, and unemotional treatment). Some situational factors were apparent in shaping officers' treatment of inmates, a few of which were consistent with what we know about compassion at work (situations of compassion relevance, where officers noticed others' suffering and needs (Kanov et al. 2004, Yagil and Medler-Liraz 2013)). Yet compassion was not observed and described in only these expected situations. Reports of compassionate treatment of inmates misbehaving proved particularly puzzling considering extant theory that posits that compassion is less likely in situations of interpersonal conflict and blame.

Our theorizing provides some answers to these puzzles. First, we posit that compassion relevance is not a property of a situation that garners attention and noticing per se, but is better conceptualized as how a situation is constructed and interpreted. That is, noticing others' needs and suffering via others' observable pain is not always the start of the compassion chain. As we observed, workers can sometimes understand the misbehavior of charges as a cue to begin the compassion process toward them, something that we posit is enabled by the practices we unpack earlier. Similarly, even when encountering charges' needs and suffering, workers can interpret these situations as manipulation, deterring the compassion process and resulting in discipline or unemotional treatment. Although Atkins and Parker (2012) have theorized that compassion can be shaped by appraisals, which direct attention toward cues, we argue that our findings show how practices can shape what are relevant cues to begin with. Our revision of what comprises

relevant situations helps address a critique of the compassion literature as implying that compassion unfolds with relative ease and inevitability in the presence of suffering (see Kanov et al. 2017). Thus, our study expands the view of compassion relevance in the literature by spotlighting that the noticing of suffering and needs is not something that comes automatically from cues in one's environment, but is actively constructed and enacted.

Second, we begin to understand more about how workers shape the process of compassion relevance through the practices they engage in. We argue that these practices help workers to be more expansive in considering when compassion is relevant by reducing their negative emotions toward charges (which can otherwise prompt cruelty, apathy, or punishment). Additionally, by leveling differences, workers can more easily experience empathy and a desire to help. This broadens workers' understanding of when compassion is relevant, even during situations commonly understood to reduce compassion and increase negative reactions to charges (e.g., interpersonal conflict/others' misbehavior). For instance, it becomes easier to respond with compassion when interpreting an inmates' combative behavior as that of a frustrated family member who needs help rather than as a blameworthy, dangerous criminal. It also becomes easier to react compassionately to an inmate who threatens you when you interpret their behavior less personally, and when you are unaware of their crime, versus knowing that someone has been violent toward children.

We posit that officers were able to overcome such emotional barriers to compassion at work to treat inmates with compassion in part via the practices we documented. In doing so, we argue that officers effectively balanced care for others with the demands of the work by shielding themselves from their negative emotions (rather than distancing from their empathy or compassion), and by actively finding ways to relate to and humanize inmates (rather than dehumanizing them). Such a viewpoint contrasts with prior conceptualization of distancing tactics (e.g., Menzies 1960) because, in our case, distancing proves generative and enabling rather than blocking of compassion. Past scholarship suggests that human services workers actively distance through empathy suppression (Cherniss 1980, Gross 1998, Maslach et al. 2001), and depersonalization (Maslach 1982). By contrast, we posit that emotional shielding may produce rather than suppress compassion by buffering negative emotions (such as vengeance and inefficacy) triggered by charges.

Although we did not observe officers over time to be able to adequately capture the involuntary distancing responses to work that occur gradually, we did see some evidence of burnout and compassion fatigue in our data. We reason that the practices we

uncovered may have the potential to help temper this response to human services work as well, particularly through limiting expectations, which may help workers to buffer feelings of exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism in their work. More specifically, we suspect that components of both leveling differences and emotional shielding may be necessary to sustain compassion in human services work over time. In Table 5, we see that officers describing compassion practiced leveling differences relatively fewer times in the needs and suffering situations; this likely illustrates how motivation for compassion comes more readily in such situations, as current theory would predict. However, as past scholarship also suggests, compassionate treatment of inmates might not be sustainable without maintaining both the motivation (via leveling differences) and emotional resources (via emotional shielding) to be able care for others. Our data indicate that as compassion becomes less readily motivated (such as during inmates' misbehavior), leveling differences and emotional shielding practices prove more common. This suggests that practices to foster identification and affiliation, as well as emotional distancing from negative emotions, may become more important under these more trying circumstances.

It could be that by practicing leveling differences and thus fostering affiliation and identification with charges, human services workers risk becoming too emotionally close to their charges. One of the risks of being too close to charges includes the eventual experience of burnout, compassion fatigue, and empathic distress in response to their inevitable suffering (Menzies 1960, Maslach 1998, Schaufeli and Peeters 2000, Bloom 2017), which can decrease compassion for charges over time. Therefore, the sole practice of leveling differences may prove problematic over time as it shapes stronger emotional connection in an environment where being too close may have serious hazards. Without some level of shielding, officers might also take inmates' misbehavior too personally and thus experience distress or even contempt toward them. Thus, the possible negative side effects of leveling differences might be offset by emotional shielding, making these practices potentially complementary over time.

Similarly, considering only the practice of emotional shielding, one might predict that human services workers could risk become emotionally unresponsive, bordering on not caring about their charges at all. This is a risk highlighted by work on emotion regulation—by suppression of negative emotions, one also risks suppression of the necessary emotional response to others' suffering that actually motivates compassion for them (Gross 2013). Such a state could potentially result in officers becoming too detached

and lead to indifference toward, or even depersonalizing or dehumanizing of, inmates. Again, examining Table 5, we see some evidence of this possibility in the unemotional treatment of inmates, which contained no instances of leveling differences but did include emotional shielding practices. Thus, we argue that leveling differences and emotional shielding practices may need to be bundled together for compassion to be sustained over time.

Our investigation is not without limitations. First, while we triangulated our findings with observations and across different institutions, we relied on officers' accounts of their experiences in prison to build most of our theoretical insights. This leaves open the possibility that social desirability influenced what officers recalled and how they described it to researchers. Second, the type of investigation we conducted is not well suited to be able to fully examine and rule out individual differences, such as traits, that might be influencing officers' ability or likelihood to be compassionate toward inmates. Although we observed variation both within and between officers that made us skeptical that traits were likely explaining the patterns in our data, future research using a different methodology could examine the quantitative relationship between human services workers' traits and their likelihood of using these practices and treating inmates in particular ways. Nonetheless, we argue that entering human services as a "good" person (i.e., having strong traits for compassion) is unlikely to sustain workers' compassion for charges over time given the multiple barriers to compassion that exist in the work.

Workers may need to use practices to sustain compassion to be able to safeguard against the multiple strong pressures that exist in such settings that can destroy it. Whereas human services organizations contain key attributes that can dampen workers' compassion, people in these settings can also actively develop skillsets or capabilities that make their organizations more compassionate. Such a view of compassion opens up the possibility to train oneself for compassion and to teach others how to be more caring even under the heavy constraints in human services organizations. Although our cross-sectional data are not well suited to explore how officers learn these practices (e.g., via on-the-job socialization and training), we did have some descriptions of peers trying to teach them to others, which is an important topic for future research. Also, it could be possible that practices carried out routinely by officers, rather than only within specific interactions, may help them respond compassionately to inmates more generally and enable the "transfer of compassion" theorized by Miller et al. (2012), wherein attending to the needs and suffering of one individual is transferred to also behaving compassionately toward others.⁸

More broadly, by theorizing about obstacles to compassion in human services work, scholars can consider how these barriers may be relevant to other workplaces and, thus, how the practices we uncover may generalize to help other workers engaged in emotionally taxing interactive service work. For instance, call center workers, flight attendants, and hotel staff often deal with service recipients who are different from them and frequently seen as misbehaving. We believe that the practices and situations uncovered here are largely applicable to such settings and can potentially help other workers engage in more sustainable compassion, despite the obstacles that might dominate daily interactions. As an illustration, police officers could use role separation to understand misbehavior as being directed at their role rather than themselves, making any perceived mistreatment more tolerable. Or, perhaps by using emotional shielding, teachers could lessen their anger and disappointment toward students coming late or cheating on exams. Importantly, whereas the form of the specific practices might change across contexts, the overall findings of emotionally shielding oneself from negative emotions elicited by charges, as well as finding ways to relate to and humanize them, are likely found across different work contexts. Future research could examine how treatment of charges and practices might naturally vary in different work contexts, as well as the effectiveness of the various practices both on their own, and together, in shaping and sustaining worker compassion.

Ultimately, answering the question of when and how human services workers show compassion for those they tend to is of immense practical importance. Given the large prison population in the United States (Pettit and Western 2004, Western 2006, 2018), the increased use of border patrol detention centers, and the reputation that prisons have for uncaring staff, examining when and how officers are able to feel and act with compassion toward charges has the potential to affect many lives. Scholars and society in general know little about correctional officers' work (Brodsky 1982, DeCelles et al. 2013) or, in particular, about "the day-to-day emotional highs and lows that mark an occupation that has consistently been ignored, traduced, maligned" (Tracy 2004b, p. 510). Our depiction of officers challenges the public's negative stereotypes of them and their portrayal in the literature, which mostly represents officers as hardened and caustic (Poole and Regoli 1981, Walters 1986, Tracy 2004b, Page 2011, Shannon and Page 2014).⁹ Although the stereotype might hold some truth, our focus on how workers are able to be compassionate also implies how it might be countered. We suggest that organizations seeking greater compassion from their workers may benefit from promoting the practices of leveling

differences and emotional shielding, since trying to hire more caring individuals may not be sufficient given the strong barriers that may eliminate compassion even among the most well-intentioned.

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Appendix. Interview Protocols

Phase 1 Sample Interview Questions

Correctional officers were asked the following questions during the Phase 1 interviews:

1. Could you please briefly describe your duties as a correctional officer, and your daily activities?
2. What are the goals of the prison? What is expected of you?
3. What does the organization value most?
4. What do you enjoy most about your job?
5. What is most rewarding about your job? What do you feel are your greatest accomplishments?
6. What is the most important part of your job?
7. What do you dislike most about your job?
8. What is the greatest challenge of your job (emotionally, socially, physically)? How do you handle or cope with these challenges?
9. What initially attracted you to your job as a correctional officer? What keeps you employed?
10. How did you initially adapt to working in this environment? Was it what you expected?
11. What were your expectations coming into this job? What were your expectations of yourself, and have these changed since you initially arrived?
12. How have you changed over time since you began work as a correctional officer? Have your coping techniques changed? Emotions? Attitudes?
13. What are typical correctional officers' attitudes toward inmates?

Phase 2 Sample Interview Questions

Correctional officers were asked the following questions during the Phase 2 interviews:

1. What are your main responsibilities?
2. How do you spend your time at work?
3. Could you describe your past and present jobs?
4. How satisfied are you with your job?
5. Could you describe any challenges you have at work?
6. What does the organization value?
7. How rewarding is your work?
8. What kinds of inmates are in here?
9. What kinds of interactions do you have with inmates?
10. Could you give me examples of problems you face with inmates?

11. What are the challenges inmates face inside and outside prison?

12. Could you describe your strategy for working with inmates in prison?

Endnotes

¹The only study highlighting a caring culture between correctional officers and inmates deals with a small and unique subset of inmates, namely, pregnant women (Sufirin 2017).

²Survey items and descriptive statistics are available from the authors upon request.

³"Supermax" refers to "super-maximum security," which are the highest security level prisons, holding the most violent and dangerous inmates who are therefore generally isolated for 23 hours a day. As a result, officers interact much less with inmates in these facilities.

⁴Although it might be argued that officers felt social desirability pressure from the presence of observers to participate, and to potentially act more compassionately, this appeared to be unlikely since many instances of noncompassionate thoughts and behavior were noted, and officers broke established protocols in front of the researchers (such as ignoring inmates' possession of contraband). Also, several officers were interviewed in front of inmates and other officers, which could have affected their treatment of inmates or interview responses. In Phase 1, interviews were carried out in complete privacy, which may have mitigated some of these dynamics in those data. Thus, our layered research design helps lessen, though not fully eliminate, social desirability biases among respondents.

⁵All cited officers' and inmates' names in interview quotes and field notes are pseudonyms.

⁶There were some instances when newer, less experienced officers described somewhat less compassion and more disciplinary treatment of inmates, which we believe is at least partially due to the fact that newer officers report being "tested" by inmates. For example, Officer Aviles, a more experienced officer, said that he did not have the sense that inmates "really test me anymore." However, there was also some evidence that officers became more cynical over time, as they became less naïve and "learned the games that inmates play" (Officer Gonzalez). Sometimes, officers reported that inmates intentionally taught them that they should be less trusting of inmates when they were new. For example, Officer Pedroia (field notes) described an incident when he was new to the job, where an inmate lied to him about how many feeding trays he needed in his cell, successfully fooling him, and then showing him that there was only one inmate in the cell, saying, "I'm an inmate, you can't trust me." For these reasons, we might observe different patterns of compassion based on tenure levels of officers.

⁷Conceivably, officers had been in prison/jail in another state that was not included in the background check, or the records were expunged.

⁸It could be that enacting compassion at work is also personally rewarding for individuals; in our data, we saw evidence that officers who demonstrated and gave accounts of compassion felt like they were appreciated by inmates, and described a sense of pride and meaningfulness in their work. It could also be that such officers are more effective in being able to elicit compliance from inmates, particularly if they establish better rapport with them, and in doing so, have an easier and less stressful work experience. Future work should investigate these, and other, potential reasons and effects of compassion at work.

⁹Despite the prevalence of negative perception of correctional work, a closer examination of past research does suggest that officers can sometimes demonstrate care for inmates. For example, concentration camp and prison guards occasionally exhibited care and help toward select inmates (Levi 1988, p. 57; Browning 1992; Delbo 1995, p. 149;

Chalamov 2003, p. 399; Kreager et al. 2017). Similarly, the Stanford Prison Experiment, although it is infamous for showing how a prison context could lead agents to be apathetic to inmates' suffering, found that several of the students who were playing the role of correctional officer demonstrated care for their captives, sometimes even performing favors for them (Haney et al. 1973).

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