

# A Self-Fulfilling Cycle of Coercive Surveillance: Workers' Invisibility Practices and Managerial Justification

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**Abstract.** In the past few decades, the growth of surveillance has become a fixture of organizational life. Past scholarship has largely explained this growth as the result of traditional managerial demands for added control over workers, coupled with newly available cheap technology (such as closed-circuit televisions and body-worn cameras). We draw on the workplace resistance literature to complement these views by suggesting that workers can also drive such growth. More specifically, we show that workers under surveillance can feel constantly observed and seen, but they can also feel largely unnoticed as individuals by management. This paradoxical experience leads them to interpret the surveillance as coercive and to engage in invisibility practices to attempt to go unseen and remain unnoticed. Management, in turn, interprets these attempts as justification for more surveillance, which encourages workers to engage in even more invisibility practices, thus creating a self-fulfilling cycle of coercive surveillance. Our study therefore offers one of the first endogenous explanations for the growth of surveillance while also isolating unique forms of resistance attached to such surveillance.

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**Keywords:** surveillance • invisibility • camera • workplace resistance • transportation security administration

## Introduction

In the past few decades, surveillance has permeated numerous social arenas, including inner cities and school systems (e.g., Goffman 2009, 2015; Monahan and Torre 2010). But it is in the workplace that the growth of surveillance has perhaps been most striking (Sewell 1998, Marx 1999, Staples 2000, Sewell and Barker 2006, Lyon 2007, Ball 2010). Today, the number of workers exposed to surveillance seems to have risen exponentially. Whether it is commercial truck drivers, waste collectors, home-care workers, or nannies, a growing segment of the workforce operates under surveillance (Brown and Korczyński 2010, Brown 2011, Nagle 2013, Levy 2015, Snyder 2016). Recent calls for police officers to adopt body-worn video devices or “body cams” are only the latest illustration of this trend (Harris 2010, Ariel et al. 2015).

Managerial attempts to control the workforce are nothing new. Surveillance (in the form of a foreman’s gaze) has been a staple of managerial ideology ever since Frederick Taylor’s (1911) writings on scientific management, yet the increased reliance on technologies—such as wide-angle cameras and remote monitoring systems—has rendered surveillance ever more salient in recent years. Despite some evidence of the adverse effects of surveillance on employees’ motivation, job satisfaction, and even productivity (Lepper

et al. 1975, Grant and Higgins 1989, Enzle et al. 1993, Bernstein 2012), managers have continued to adopt technology-enabled surveillance widely throughout contemporary work settings. Similar to inspectors at the center of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon who can judge “without anything being concealed” how an entire establishment functions (Foucault 1977, p. 204), managers aided by technology can increasingly assess workers’ entire performance. Such developments have led the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* to remark, “In many workplaces employee performance is now scrutinized at a level of detail that would delight the early advocates of scientific management” (Ball et al. 2012, p. 4). In short, the primary methods of controlling the workforce have gone from simple managerial supervision to an often technology-enabled “SuperVision” (Gilliom and Monahan 2012).

But what explains the growth of workplace surveillance? Past scholarship has mostly explained this growth by forces exogenous to an organization’s workforce (e.g., Staples 1997, Garland 2001, Molotch and McClain 2003, Kupchik 2010, Marx 2016). The reasons cited include the traditional managerial desire for increased control and the new availability of cheaper technology. In other words, the surveillance system (including its growth) has been treated as the result of dynamics mostly located *outside* of workers’ purview. Missing from these explanations, however, are the

watched individuals' own interpretations of and roles in the surveillance system, and how these shape the system's evolution. As Foucault (1977) makes clear, the watched ones are also part of the surveillance system; thus, workers' interpretations and behavior within the surveillance system—what we label “endogenous” forces—might affect the way surveillance operates, including, possibly, its growth.

This article posits that studying workers' interpretations of and resistance to surveillance helps us better understand the growth of surveillance. We develop an endogenous explanation for such growth by studying the experiences and resistance strategies of security screening personnel at a large urban airport. These individuals, employed by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA), reported working under heavy and increasingly technology-enabled surveillance. Relying on interview data, we unpack the (1) managerial rationale for creating a surveillance apparatus, (2) employees' complex experiences of this apparatus, (3) employees' associated resistance strategies, and (4) management's reaction to these strategies and how these strategies affect the surveillance system itself. Overall, our analysis suggests a cycle of surveillance that we label “self-fulfilling” because it reveals endogenous dynamics that produce, and are produced by, increased surveillance.

Empirically, we first show that surveillance was introduced with the hope of strengthening managerial control over employee theft. Second, we document an experience of surveillance in which workers reported being at once highly visible and yet simultaneously invisible at work. While workers reported a sense of *visibility of behavior* (i.e., they felt that they were *seen* or physically observed by management), they also reported being largely *unnoticed* as distinct individuals by managers—what we label a sense of *invisibility of self*.<sup>1</sup> Third, we argue that these paradoxical experiences of being seen and going unnoticed under surveillance led workers to interpret the surveillance as coercive and to engage in invisibility practices to try to go unseen and remain unnoticed by management. Finally, we explain how these practices justified management's efforts to increase surveillance even further. Through these steps, we develop an endogenous explanation for the rise of coercive surveillance and identify unique ways in which workers resist it.

### Explaining the Growth of Workplace Surveillance

With the spread of industrialization and the growth in scale of many workplaces over the last century, controlling the workforce has been a recurring managerial concern in organizations. Since the advent of scientific management, a perceived need to monitor employees' efforts has gained increased salience across industries (Braverman 1974, p. 267; Burawoy 1979, pp. 7–10; Edwards 1979; Perrow 1986). Many scholars

have traced the contemporary rise in workplace surveillance to the same long-documented managerial desire for control, coupled with the new availability of cheaper technology (Attewell 1987; Lyon 1994, 2007; Sewell 1998; Stanton 2000; Staples 2000; Haggerty and Ericson 2006; Kroener and Neyland 2012; Marx 2016; Bernstein 2017).

To go beyond these exogenous explanations, one first ought to account for workers' interpretations of surveillance. Scholars have noted that workplace surveillance is often interpreted primarily as either caring or coercive (Lyon 2001, Sewell and Barker 2006). Surveillance is interpreted as caring when people believe that the observers have beneficent motivations (such as developing and protecting the observed). By contrast, surveillance is viewed as coercive when people believe that the observers have contentious motivations (such as punishing the observed). The interpretations of the observed individuals are therefore what ultimately make surveillance caring or coercive.

There are abundant examples of contemporary settings where workers primarily interpret managerial surveillance as coercive rather than caring (e.g., Allen et al. 2007). In many call centers, after their initial training, few workers receive developmental feedback from the extensive remote monitoring of their calls (Batt et al. 2009, Russell 2009, Patel 2010, Sewell et al. 2012); instead, they are called out when they go off script and thus view the monitoring as coercive. Similarly, in police departments, the focus of surveillance efforts is often viewed as catching misbehaving officers, not developing officers. Body-worn cameras, for instance, are typically interpreted to mean that police officers “must take seriously the possibility that irrefutable images of their actions” may “contradict their own version of what happened” Harris (2010, p. 329). Indeed, scholars have argued that intense coercive surveillance may be becoming the norm in contemporary workplaces (Attewell 1987; Staples 1997, 2000; Sewell 1998; Marx 1999; Stanton 2000; Ball 2010).

Workers' interpretations of surveillance matter because they can shape how workers react to and behave in the face of surveillance. Past literature informs us, more generally, that workers' experiences of their work context can influence their reactions to managerial directives. For instance, studies have shown that in the presence of perceived interpersonal conflict with supervisors and with the support of unions, workers are likely to strike against management (Roscigno and Hodson 2004a). By contrast, when operating in settings where interpersonal conflicts and unions are perceived to be absent, workers might resist managerial directives in subtler ways. Disneyland employees, for example, resisted the managerial injunction never to offend customers by “mistakenly” overtightening misbehaving amusement-park riders' seatbelts (Van Maanen 1990).

To fully grasp the dynamics of surveillance, then, scholars ought to account for watched individuals' interpretations and actions in the face of surveillance. Surveillance systems cannot only be depicted as being imposed by managers upon workers (e.g., Sewell 1998, Brown and Korczynski 2010, Bernstein 2012) or driven by outside technical developments (e.g., Lyon 1994, Ball 2010, Stanko and Beckman 2015, Marx 2016), but need to be conceptualized as the results of both managers' and workers' interactions. In fact, workers are also crucial agents who shape and constitute the surveillance dynamics in which they work. What Foucault (1977) labels the watched individuals' "state of conscious and permanent visibility" (p. 200, emphasis added) is as inherent to a surveillance apparatus as the observer's gaze. Dynamics endogenous to the workforce should therefore not be ignored when analyzing surveillance systems.

### Workplace Resistance Under Coercive Surveillance

Viewing surveillance as the combined interactions of watchers and watched, rather than as imposed or exogenously driven, requires paying close attention to workers' resistance strategies. Resistance strategies are understood as "any individual or small-group act[s] intended to mitigate claims by management on workers or to advance workers' claims against management" Hodson (1995, p. 80) and include activities such as sabotage, work avoidance, absenteeism, and theft (Roscigno and Hodson 2004a). Ranging from the informal "banana time" pauses taken during working hours (Roy 1959) and the preference for "Stayin' Alive" songs on workshop radios (Korczynski 2014) to the "making-out" games played on factory lines (Burawoy 1979), forms of resistance vary widely across settings.

While past scholarship on resistance has explored numerous settings—from factories to amusement parks—the literature has largely omitted examining workers' interpretations of new, highly coercive surveillance contexts (for exceptions, see Fleming and Sturdy 2009, Sallaz 2009). The timing of publication of most workplace resistance studies—namely, before the intensification of coercive surveillance—explains in large part this lacuna (e.g., Ditton 1979, Edwards 1979, Mars 1982, Jermier et al. 1994, Fleming and Spicer 2003, Vallas 2003). The most comprehensive tracking and documentation of workplace resistance forms can be found in the Workplace Ethnography Project led by Roscigno and Hodson (2004b), which examined 204 ethnographic cases published in monographs between 1944 and 2002. Most of the data gathering for these cases was, however, conducted before the recent intensification of coercive surveillance.

We posit that in contexts where surveillance is perceived as particularly coercive, we might observe—in addition to traditional resistance strategies—novel

ones with potential consequences for surveillance growth. Past scholarship has often depicted resistance as covert (Morrill et al. 2003) and somewhat mundane (Scott 1985, Prasad and Prasad 2000), but with the power of modern surveillance technology at their disposal, managers have an expanded capacity to see and take note of what workers are doing, including resisting. Under these circumstances, workplace resistance might prove to be very different today than it was in the past. And because resistance can shape the work context (e.g., Courpasson et al. 2012), these different forms of resistance might also yield unexpected organizational dynamics.

In this study, we argue that workers' resistance to what they interpret as coercive surveillance can serve as motivation for managers to enact further surveillance, leading to workplace surveillance as a self-fulfilling cycle. Conceptualizing workplace surveillance as a self-fulfilling cycle of interactions and interpretations between workers and managers helps us to move beyond exogenous explanations for growth in surveillance and toward explanations involving dynamics endogenous to the organization's workforce. In the rest of this article, we detail our research context and methodology, analyze the elements that constitute the cycle of coercive surveillance, explain how this cycle can be self-fulfilling, and discuss the broader implications of our findings.

### Research Setting and Methods Large Urban Airport's Transportation Security Administration Unit

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, passenger-plane hijackings used in the coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the U.S. Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (S.1447, 107th Congress, 2001–2002), establishing the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) as a federal agency. The act assigned the TSA responsibility for all passenger and baggage screening and, more broadly, for maintaining the safety and security of the traveling public in the United States. Before the advent of the TSA, screening was the responsibility of commercial airline carriers. Upon establishment of the TSA, however, screening at U.S. airports became federalized. Over the course of 2002, the TSA grew to encompass more than 60,000 employees; at the start of data collection in 2011, it still employed close to 58,000 people (Hatch 2004, p. 39; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2011, p. 85). TSA policies and programs are organized nationally, but implementation is decentralized to local TSA units (Fosher 2009).

This study's setting is a TSA unit based at a large U.S. urban airport, henceforth called Large Urban Airport (LUA); the unit is typical of other similarly large TSA

units. The study’s focus is the screening workforce—that is, TSA employees who perform passenger and baggage screening. At the time of the study, 1,223 screening employees were employed by LUA’s TSA. Most (71.5%) were entry-level *transportation security officers* (TSOs), who are the mainstay of the screening workforce and the primary focus of our study. The screening workforce also included *lead transportation security officers* (LTSOs or “leads”), who direct the TSOs, and *supervisory transportation security officers* (STSOs, “supervisors,” or “sups”), who oversee both TSOs and LTSOs. We consider and refer to leads and supervisors as “managers” because they were collectively responsible for overseeing, controlling, and watching TSOs. The remainder of the workforce consisted of *behavioral detection officers* (BDOs), a position for officers trained to identify suspicious behavior within and outside of checkpoints.

TSA’s screening workforce at LUA was mostly full time (68%) and predominantly male (68.6%), with an average age of 39.2 years and an average tenure of 4.6 years. (See Table 1 for more details on workforce demographics.) TSA offered working conditions intended to be an improvement over those previously offered by private security contractors (Pinnock 2007, p. 302). Starting pay for TSOs in 2011 was approximately \$12 per hour, and benefits included health insurance and a retirement plan. At the time of the study, the workforce had been unionized for only a few months, and TSOs had generally had few direct contacts with union representatives.<sup>2</sup>

In general, screening employees worked one of three shifts: morning (approximately 4 A.M. to noon), afternoon (noon to 8 P.M.), or overnight (8 P.M. to 4 A.M.). Most

full-time employees were given two days off per week, and part-time employees typically worked three full days per week or shorter shifts scattered over five days. All screening employees (except BDOs) were assigned to six-month stints at a given baggage-check room or security checkpoint, such as the Delta checkpoint. At the end of each six-month period, screening employees “bid” on new assignments based on their seniority.<sup>3</sup> Most employees, and especially those with little seniority, tended to be assigned a new location at the start of each new bidding period, but more senior employees could typically remain at a given location for multiple periods if they wished to. Moreover, because security checkpoints created a high demand for labor, most TSOs worked checkpoints, some worked checkpoints and baggage rooms, while only a few worked exclusively in baggage rooms.

An airport checkpoint or baggage-check room is a physical space that mediates between the public area where ticketing takes place and the “sterile area” where travelers board their flights. As the term *sterile* suggests, only individuals already screened for prohibited items (objects determined by TSA to be potentially dangerous to travelers’ safety) can enter and circulate in that space. At each checkpoint, passengers can advance and be screened for prohibited items via multiple lanes. At each lane, TSOs occupy multiple positions such as checking travel documents and operating the body scanner. Similar to a checkpoint, the baggage-check room’s objective is to identify and remove prohibited items from travelers’ checked baggage. The room is often located underground or away from the checkpoint. Its smaller team of TSOs fill fewer fixed positions, typically viewing on-screen images of baggage or manually checking bags.

TSOs are assigned to positions by the lead in charge of the lane or baggage-check room. Leads are expected to rotate TSOs through their task positions. A lead is responsible for the overall operation of one or two lanes or a baggage room, and his or her managerial tasks include coordinating TSOs’ work, monitoring operational performance, and scheduling breaks. Among their other responsibilities, leads also ensure the proper maintenance of equipment and fill out attendance sheets, coordinate with and report to supervisors, and fill in for absent supervisors. By contrast, supervisors observe lanes or baggage rooms to deal with “exceptions”; they are responsible for multiple lanes, and together, they are ultimately collectively responsible for the entire checkpoint. Supervisors communicate mainly with leads.

### Data Collection and Analysis

To understand TSOs’ work experiences under surveillance, we conducted and analyzed a total of 89 interviews with a range of TSA respondents. Interviews

**Table 1.** Demographics of TSA LUA’s Screening Workforce

	Population ( <i>N</i> = 1,223)	Interview sample ( <i>n</i> = 89)
Male (percentage)	839 (68.6)	52 (58.4)
Female (percentage)	384 (31.4)	37 (41.6)
Average age in years (standard deviation)	39.2 (13.7)	43.2 (14.7)
Average years of service at TSA (standard deviation)	4.6 (3.1)	5.0 (3.0)
Full-time employees (percentage)	828 (68)	70 (79)
Part-time employees (percentage)	395 (32)	19 (21)
Position at TSA		
Transportation security officer (percentage)	874 (71.5)	55 (61.8)
Lead transportation security officer (percentage)	144 (11.8)	21 (23.6)
Supervisor transportation security officer (percentage)	123 (10.0)	6 (6.7)
Behavioral detection officers (percentage)	82 (6.7)	7 (7.9)

are particularly well suited to capture individuals' subjective interpretations of given contexts (Weiss 1994). We interviewed mostly TSOs ( $n = 55$ ) but also other members of the screening workforce—namely, leads ( $n = 21$ ), supervisors ( $n = 6$ ), and BDOs ( $n = 7$ ), most of whom were former TSOs. We also spoke with several TSA leaders to clarify aspects of the job that interviewees referenced but understood only partially (e.g., staffing procedures). All interviewees were told at the outset not to share with us any data that might constitute what TSA calls “sensitive security information” or any information whose public release would be detrimental to transportation security. Despite this limitation, the interviews and targeted questions to TSA leaders provided a fairly comprehensive view of TSOs' work.

The interview sample was constructed by sending electronic invitations to a randomized set of LUA's TSA screening workforce—mainly TSOs, leads, and supervisors. This request followed an informational email message sent to the entire workforce by LUA's federal security director announcing the study's launch. Two electronic reminders were sent at two-week intervals after the initial invitation. To increase awareness of the study and maximize the response rate, we posted informational flyers in all TSA break rooms (where many TSOs donned their uniforms before their shifts) and made several visits to training sessions for the screening workforce to introduce ourselves and answer questions. Interviewees were also compensated for their time. The response rate was about 40%, and the demographic profile of our sample seemed fairly consistent with LUA's TSA screening population of employees (see Table 1). We suspect several TSOs did not reply to our interview requests because of the difficulty for them to plan their schedules sufficiently in advance. The general informational email and flyer included our contact information, and a few volunteers who contacted us were also interviewed ( $n = 5$ ).

The study's two coauthors and a research associate conducted approximately equal numbers of interviews. Collectively, the interviewers represented a diverse set of individuals in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender. Interviews were conducted at airport hotel lobbies, in cafés, in restaurants, and in respondents' homes. Each interview lasted about an hour and was digitally recorded and transcribed with the respondent's consent. In the case of respondents who did not consent to being recorded ( $n = 3$ ), detailed notes were taken during and right after the interviews. The interviews followed an open-ended protocol that included such topics as career history, an account of a typical workday, and hopes and challenges associated with the job. We also encouraged interviewees to tell us what they thought we should know to understand their work. (See Online Appendix 1 for sample interview

questions.) As the themes of invisibility practices at work gained saliency in our analysis, we started adding a few pointed questions at the end of our interview protocol on this topic.

We began our analysis by examining how interviewees described their experience at work. In keeping with grounded-theory guidelines (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Miles and Huberman 1994), we made constant efforts to compare interviewees' experiences and descriptions within and across interviews. Each interviewer separately read a set of transcripts that included some of his or her own interviews and some collected by the other interviewers. We then collectively discussed the themes that arose in our sets and gradually tracked recurrent themes, such as constantly being seen. As themes emerged, we returned to previously analyzed interview data to reexamine them in light of newly identified and revised themes.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, we noted the interviewees' profiles alongside their descriptions of their experiences. From these analyses, we induced the paradoxical experience of TSOs feeling that their behaviors were both highly observed yet, simultaneously, that their selves went unappreciated and unnoticed.

Iterating back and forth between our analysis and the literature (Charmaz 1983, Locke 2001), we realized two further points: first, that the analysis pointed to an experiential disjuncture between workers (TSOs) and managers (leads and supervisors) around surveillance, and second, that the paradoxical experiences of TSOs could be linked to shifts in managerial surveillance at TSA. For the first point, we considered worker interviews and manager interviews as groupings to help construct the narrative of the findings, particularly noting that workers' experiences of surveillance were disconnected from managers' justifications for surveillance. For the second point of realizing that workers' experiences and practices of surveillance might be connected to shifts in TSA surveillance, we sought to supplement our interview data. To better understand these dynamics, we identified (mainly governmental) archives relevant to the development of surveillance. By triangulating data sources, we elaborated a narrative around how workers' resistance under surveillance can enable a self-fulfilling cycle of coercive surveillance. Once we reached saturation in terms of emerging themes, we reviewed the entire data set. The few disagreements between coauthors were resolved through discussion.

## Findings

### Surveillance as a Means of Heightened Control

Almost a decade after its inception, recurring accusation of employee theft was one of the most critical workforce issues that TSA faced. Travelers made a substantial number of claims that officers had stolen

from their belongings. Analysis suggests that of the 12,473 passenger claims reported nationwide to TSA in 2009, “7,327 were claims for passengers’ property loss from checked-in baggage and at checkpoint[s]” (Marteache Solans 2013, p. 98). According to internal TSA data, the number of “adjudicated misconduct cases” (namely, cases that were investigated) involving “unauthorized taking/theft” was actually quite low: only 28 cases on average per year over the period of 2010–2012 (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2013, p. 11). But any level of employee theft was problematic, and regular media reports across the country (including ones on the location we studied) heightened the perception of rampant employee theft at TSA.

Two main reasons can explain this discrepancy between passengers’ perception of widespread employee theft and the internal data suggesting limited theft. First, local TSA units might prefer to have employees caught stealing quietly resign, rather than document an occurrence of theft at their airport or an “adjudicated” case of misconduct. As one TSO explained, “They’ll [management] strongly encourage the person just to quit, so they don’t have to report it” (2020).<sup>5</sup> Second, and perhaps more critical to the discrepancy, passengers might blame TSA even when individuals from other organizations (such as airline bag handlers) were the ones involved in the theft. As another TSO clarified,

And this [theft] was going on at our beginning because they knew they could blame it on TSA. A lot of the airlines have a lot of theft going on. To this day, they have a lot of theft. . . . We used to check the luggage, we used to put a TSA tag on it that it was checked. We stopped doing that because we figured out if the bag handler sees that we already opened up that bag, because there’s a TSA tag on it, guess what? Let’s open it up and take what TSA looked at. . . . But they’re still doing it now. The theft is still on now. (1003)

Regardless of the extent of employee theft or the degree of TSA employees’ involvement in it, TSOs were well aware that theft happened, because they had either heard about it or observed someone stealing from travelers. As one TSO remarked, “We have seen everything here, from people swearing at passengers to people stealing, you know, you name it” (2016). A second TSO’s comment illustrates these views: “With officers—there’s quite a strong level of theft. . . . I never believed it: Because I said, ‘First of all, you know, they do the background checks. . . . Secondly, there’s nothing in those bags. . . . that I would want to go to federal prison over.’ But they have had time and time again, cases of theft” (2020). Even when not witnessing first-hand employee theft, TSOs were frequently exposed via the news to occurrences of such theft at airports across the country. A third TSO brought this up when

commenting on his colleagues: “We have these bunch of guys that are stealing things.” When pressed to articulate how he knew about such theft, he answered, “It’s all over the news. . . . you can go on websites that tell you all the things—all the TSOs who have been arrested since its inception” (3021).

In an effort to identify the few potential “bad apples” and “protect” other employees from unjust accusations, LUA TSA’s management gradually introduced heightened surveillance at checkpoints. The idea was “to review video so you can help point out what’s going on in the situation” and “go to tapes, . . . check it out, make sure it’s legitimate” (2029). As a TSO explained, “The camera helps, like, you know, if somebody forgot their money or property, like a computer and they say somebody took it. . . . So always they go to the cameras and check that” (2033). LUA’s management emphasized that most ex post viewing of camera feeds would be used to exonerate TSOs from travelers’ accusations, and a TSA manager at another airport emphasized that “checkpoint CCTV [closed circuit television] video is often invaluable in helping to resolve allegations of wrongdoing” (Bierle 2013, p. 49). What most concerned TSOs, however, was the addition of cameras pointed at different angles on them.

The installation of additional CCTV systems at LUA was part of a larger multimillion dollar national TSA effort to use surveillance cameras to counter the public’s perception of employee theft. Similar to what we found in our field site, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2013, p. 20) noted, “TSA officials at airports often have to rely upon video footage to substantiate whether misconduct has occurred, such as alleged theft of a passenger’s property.” Another report explained that customer service representatives charged with handling travelers’ complaints could review “video footage of the incident to help identify additional details of the incident, such as the identity of the screener(s) who may have been involved in the incident and what had actually happened during the incident” (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2012, p. 13). Furthermore, the 2006 TSA guidelines for the physical design of checkpoints stipulate that cameras can “deter burglary” (Transportation Security Administration 2006, p. 104).

### Workers’ Perceptions of Being Constantly Seen

As a result of this surge in technology-enabled surveillance, almost all interviewed TSOs asserted without prompting that their work at checkpoints was highly visible to management. TSOs’ sense of visibility was evidenced by their perceptions of a comprehensive managerial surveillance apparatus that included (i) security cameras, (ii) regular on-the-job testing, and (iii) travelers who could report officers’ behaviors to management. Although LUA’s management claimed

to only observe TSOs' behavior in real time in cases of identified security concerns, and mainly used the CCTV system to analyze "critical" events after the fact, most TSOs felt as though they were constantly being watched, which contributed to their interpretation of the surveillance system as highly coercive.

First, interviewees' heightened awareness of the presence of security cameras throughout checkpoints and baggage rooms contributed to the sense of coercive surveillance. The impression of being constantly watched and seen by the "ops" (operations) department and by management recurred throughout the TSOs' interviews. TSOs knew that the staff of the operations department, located in a central building, was equipped to view all surveillance feeds. Managers suggested that such monitoring enabled higher-ups to step in and help officers if necessary (e.g., to help calm an agitated passenger or counter travelers' accusations) and to make adjustments to streamline the screening process (by reassigning officers from less busy checkpoints to busier ones), but most TSOs experienced such monitoring simply as a means of coercive control. The following TSO's reaction was shared by many of his peers:

Oh, it's a ton of surveillance cameras. As a matter of fact, within the last three or four months, they have installed so many different cameras. I'm talking in one area you can have six or seven different cameras—all different angles. They want to see what you're doing sitting at this chair, they want to see what you're doing when you get on this computer, they want to see what you're doing when you're operating this machine. . . . You know what? It's weird because, as an employee, you kind of feel like we should be watching passengers, passenger behavior, passenger activity. But instead they watch employees. (2008)

TSOs prevalently interpreted cameras as being used for "spying," a word that exuded negative connotations. One TSO summarized this by noting, "I don't know if you've heard about the spying? They [management] wired up all the cameras live. So now they have a new toy where they've started spying on everybody" (2031). Another TSO confirmed this impression: "They [management] can just spy on you 24/7" (3021). A third TSO characteristically explained that the recent addition of new checkpoint cameras was intended primarily to keep tabs on the officers' behavior. This TSO acknowledged that cameras help fulfill TSA's mission of protecting travelers, but added, "I think what people are saying about the cameras is that they use the term 'Big Brother's watching you,' OK? You know. So, say if someone's slacking off at the job, they [are] . . . just waiting for someone to mess up, or see someone leaning when they maybe shouldn't be leaning" (3027). "Everyone [at work] has rules," explained a fourth TSO, but "there are some people here [at LUA TSA] who will

watch you like a hawk" (3010). The cameras, a fifth TSO summed up, were all about "trying to eyeball everybody" and enabling managers to say, "bad apple, bad apple, bad apple" (3004).

Any behavior that did not follow standard operating procedures, or "SOPs," could be picked up on-screen and corrected on the spot via remote communication with the on-site hierarchy. TSOs felt that managers monitored them excessively closely for their behavior and appearance. As an illustration, one TSO noted that management focuses on "what is this person doing? Why are their hands in their pockets while they are on duty?" (1024). Other TSOs recounted similarly corrective episodes. One said, "They're live cameras. And three times last week, management called and said 'the girl on the metal detector, her hair is two inches below her collar'" (3006). Another TSO recalled a manager complaining remotely that a female TSO's dress breached uniform rules because "her earring's more than a quarter of an inch" (3001). Both TSOs were incensed about what they saw as the excessive regulation of workers' appearance. Many TSOs also felt that managers were closely critical of the work performed at checkpoints via cameras. As another TSO explained, the only work positions in which "you can talk and not get into trouble" (3014) were those positions explicitly requiring officers to talk with passengers to check documents or make announcements to them. In other checkpoint positions, prolonged exchanges with travelers could register as potential security problems.

Second, besides the use of cameras, many TSOs mentioned on-the-job testing practices that reinforced their sense of being continually observed. On-the-job testing practices involved TSOs being regularly screened for prohibited items prior to the start of their shifts. This screening was conducted by fellow TSOs who were assigned this job on a rotating basis. As one TSO explained, "They make us take off all our stuff and walk through—you know, act as a regular passenger" (3014). Also, TSOs mentioned how local training officers, federal-level TSA staff members, and other government representatives conducted covert and overt testing of screening to ensure compliance with federal laws and regulations. For instance, fake x-ray images of prohibited items were randomly flashed on x-ray operators' screens to test their detection abilities. Too many missed images would lead to a TSO's "decertification," followed by obligatory retraining and "recertification" before returning to the x-ray position. (Repeated failures to gain recertification could lead to dismissal.)

Third, on top of having to deal with cameras and on-the-job testing, TSOs reported feeling scrutinized and observed by travelers—creating an added layer of surveillance. Travelers functioned as a conduit by which managers gained surveillance onto workers because travelers also monitor and evaluate workers

by potentially bringing complaints against particular TSOs to TSA management. For example, TSOs often encountered passengers irate about the prospect of going through body-scanning machines or about being selected for inspection. Such interactions could easily go awry and “escalate up the chain of command.” And in nearly all checkpoint positions, TSOs were in travelers’ line of sight. As illustrations, TSOs in the “travel document checker” position (examining passengers’ ticket information and identification documents) and in the “backfield” position (standing at the back of the checkpoint nearest to the sterile area, and responding as needed to tasks such as bag checks) were constantly interacting with travelers.

The perception of constant visibility was further reinforced by travelers’ use of smartphones and other devices to capture photos and video of TSOs’ behavior. TSOs often commented on the possibility of being “shot” and seen by management, or related instances in which this had happened to colleagues. One TSO described how he was filmed by a traveler using her iPhone: “You know, it’s uncomfortable. You’re trying to do your job. I don’t come to your place of work, videotape you all day long, you know?” (1013). Another TSO elaborated on the experience of being recorded by passengers: “People are always filming us with their cell phones—like taking pictures, like, ‘Oh, smile, let me tag you on Facebook.’ And it’s like, ‘No, I don’t want to be tagged on Facebook.’ You know? But everything is, like, they can look right on your badge, and they get your name, and then they can do it” (2011). Instantly, she added, one could become “a local celebrity,” infamous for some breach of a member of the public’s sensibilities. In effect, the traveling public functioned as an added layer of surveillance in service of the managerial apparatus, and TSOs saw this added layer of surveillance as also coercive.

Overall, TSOs encountered a surveillance apparatus in which they felt constantly visible to and coercively observed by management, whether directly through the use of cameras or on-the-job testing practices or indirectly through travelers’ constant gaze and use of smartphones. Yet as the next section shows, being seen did not always equate with being noticed. In fact, somewhat paradoxically, most TSOs spoke of often feeling “invisible” to management (until deviating from procedures) while simultaneously feeling constantly and coercively observed.

### Workers’ Interpretations of Going Unnoticed

While TSOs interpreted that they were seen (i.e., that their behavior was visible to managers) through a system of cameras, testing, and observation, they also reported feeling mostly unnoticed and uncared for (i.e., their unique and valued selves remaining mostly invisible to management) when performing their duties

properly. Here, workers’ interpretations of their interactions with others—whether or not these interactions are directly related to surveillance—matter since these interpretations set the context for workers’ overall interpretation of surveillance as coercive. Thus, next, we describe TSOs’ interpretations of these interactions.

First, many TSOs reported a sense of invisibility of self when interacting with managers. For example, one TSO expressed such perceived invisibility by saying that TSOs quickly “disappear into the woodwork” (3019). Commenting on the general feeling amongst fellow TSOs, another interviewee remarked that management simply did not notice them, elaborating that “these leads and supervisors don’t see that. . . . They don’t see individuals” (2003). Yet another TSO captured this general feeling more starkly: “They [management] do not see that we’re a person!” (3009). TSOs came to this conclusion in part through their interpretations of management’s behavior. For example, a TSO said, “So he [the manager] is, like, talking to us, and he’s, like, not making any eye contact with me. . . . So, like, in that sense, a lot of people are invisible, I believe. Because a lot of people don’t get noticed until. . . they’re, like, the mayor of the airport” (3025). Another TSO reported that TSOs felt invisible since “no one is really looking at your face,” and “individually you kind of all blend together” (3028).

Although slightly attenuated by length of tenure on the job, a sense of invisibility to management prevailed among a majority of TSOs across a variety of entry dates. The size and high turnover rate of LUA’s TSA workforce only partially explained this finding: over the last 10 years, an average of 190 employees (close to 15% of LUA TSA’s 1,300-strong workforce) left their job each year, a turnover rate that could discourage management from paying much attention to short-tenure employees. However, even many seasoned TSOs reported not being noticed as individuals. One TSO who served for four years noted that certain managers “may not even look in my direction or acknowledge you”; instead “they walk right by you” (1017). Another officer, working as a BDO, concurred: “I’ve been here for about five and a half years, and one of the people in charge, every time I’m introduced to the person, he’ll shake my hand and go [peering at the employee’s badge]. . . . ‘Hello, [name of the employee].’ He has no idea who I am” (1007). He recounted an occasion when he and a work partner (both in civilian clothes because of their BDO duties) were not recognized on camera despite having worked at TSA for over five years:

We were in front of the airline checkpoint not too long ago, my partner and I, and our operation center called us and wanted to know where we were. “In front of the checkpoint where we’re supposed to be!” “OK.” And the gentleman from operations who called



us, it's not—he's not the type of guy that would randomly call us to ask us where we were. We knew there had to be a reason. . . . So we called him later and said, "Why did you want to know where we were?" Because somebody . . . didn't see a BDO team in front of the checkpoint. We were there. He just doesn't know who we are. So he had no idea *who* we were. (1007)

Second, this sense of invisibility of self was also present in TSOs' interaction with travelers. As noted above, because travelers functioned as part of the surveillance system on TSOs, interactions with passengers were also consequential for the overall interpretation of the coerciveness of the surveillance system. As in other airport security-screening settings, TSOs mostly avoided prolonged interactions with passengers (Pütz 2012), but even in these brief encounters, many TSOs reported that travelers did not "hear" or "see" them. Emblematic of such experiences, one TSO noted, "For the most part, it's basically like talking to a wall. . . . Because it's like, you look at people, [and] you say, 'Make sure to take your belt off. . . . I look him [a passenger] in the face, he looked right at me [with no reaction]" (2012). Another TSO added, "There is like a switch for passengers . . . they just ignore you" (3009). The following quote by a third TSO captures well this impression of barely being noticed by travelers:

Let's say you're [a passenger] flying and you see me [TSO] for 30 seconds, or two minutes, or whatever it is. And my interaction with you is for that little amount of time, but after you leave, there's hundreds more in the back. . . . And sometimes it kind of gets to you [the TSO] because it's like you're talking . . . and nobody listens. . . . I don't know if they [travelers] tune out. . . . It's like, I don't know, there's some kind of a metamorphosis that happens when they come to the airport. (2004)

That is not to say that management did not ever notice TSOs as individuals. Management did notice some officers because travelers brought them to their attention (via praise on comment cards) or because TSOs sought out detail duties (i.e., special assignments) located in buildings where upper management worked. The TSOs on detail duties connected individually with upper management, even just informally in the hallways, and thus gave them some visibility as distinct individuals. Management could also be made aware of select TSOs by regularly seeing them "put their names in" for internal job openings (even if TSOs knew they would not get the job). One former TSO who had been promoted to the supervisory rank explained why this mattered: "This [is] kind of a joke, but [I say], 'Put in for everything, because eventually they [managers] are going to get sick of seeing you and they're going to give you a new job.' But that's not what it is. It's [that] they get to *know* you" (1018). Yet his comment is atypical—the more typical situation for TSOs at checkpoints, on the other hand, is one where management did *not* know the TSOs as distinct individuals.

### Workers' Invisibility Practices

While going unnoticed has thus far been described as being part of TSOs' own interpretations of their work context, TSOs themselves also played an active role in what we label "invisibility practices" at work. Given their understanding of surveillance as coercive, many TSOs tried to actively go unseen and remain unnoticed because they feared the negative repercussions of what they viewed as a punitive surveillance system.

Being "called to attention" for possible disciplinary action by management was, for TSOs, the most salient outcome of being surveilled. Those seen misbehaving could face sanctions. TSOs mentioned getting "written up" and receiving either a "letter of guidance and direction" (a first-level sanction, or warning) or a "letter of reprimand" (a second-level sanction, or formal admonishment) for violating standard operating procedures. Such violations could include being caught on camera "reading a newspaper" or "using a personal device" even during downtime on the job (2008). The disciplinary write-up process could result in temporary "restrictions" preventing a TSO from applying for certain promotions or receiving bonuses. (Restrictions were lifted after approximately a year.) Although only 5% of TSA's workforce received letters of reprimand or a higher sanction each year, TSOs considered it risky to "mess around" (2020) because management was "looking for excuses to slap you on the hand" (2019). By contrast, there were very few rewards for doing good work.<sup>6</sup> Only one TSO mentioned cameras when trying to positively impress management. She usually started her shift early and noted, "The cameras watch me every morning coming in early . . . eventually I will get rewarded" (2025). The vast majority of TSOs sought, however, to occasionally go unseen and remain unnoticed.

Within this punitive context, TSOs felt they were afforded two main ways to become less visible: by evading management's and passengers' gaze and by attempting not to "stick out" when under their gaze. First, *invisibility-of-behavior practices* primarily entailed attempts not to be seen by escaping or evading management's line of sight. Many TSOs achieved such disappearing acts by "extending" their scheduled breaks, but they also disappeared by using other less obvious strategies. At checkpoints, for example, some TSOs filling the back dynamic officer position took advantage of hiatuses in calls for bag checks or pat downs to disappear. As one TSO explained, individuals filling this position "can wander around, or disappear if they feel like it" and "go to the restroom a lot" (3015). Such absences were rarely lengthy, yet TSOs could still fleetingly disappear. In addition, some TSOs sought out the opportunity to be "sent out" from their home checkpoint (the one they reported to at the start of a shift) to also disappear (3013). A TSO explained that,

upon being sent out, he could then “just wander the airport . . . you know, go hide someplace. Come back, sign in” (2024). This same strategy applied when a TSO was assigned to the “Lost and Found” room located on the other side of the airport. As another officer commented, it could take “a half an hour [to reach]” the location when it “actually only takes 10 minutes,” and “you learn to work under the umbrella, you know what I mean?” (1021). Collectively, these strategies allowed TSOs to attain a form of temporary invisibility of behavior.

In addition to these disappearing acts, TSOs also tried to remain out of sight from the travelling public who could indirectly focus management’s attention on specific officers. This practice proved more challenging than escaping management’s direct gaze since travelers were everywhere in the airport. The main way TSOs tried to escape management indirect gaze was by quickly changing out of their blue uniforms into civilian clothes at the end of their shift, and even covering their uniforms during breaks. As TSOs commented, their uniforms made them stick out like “[blue] Smurfs”; so by hiding their uniforms, they could effectively hide from passengers who could then not see them as TSA officers. “When you wear that TSA uniform, people are looking at you. . . . As soon as I leave, I run into the break room and I rip my shirt off as soon as I get out,” remarked one TSO (3014). Another colleague concurred and shared his practice to remain out of sight: covering his uniform. “That’s why I wear a jacket when I go on the subway,” he said (2009). Thus, attempts to physically hide from travelers were fairly common.

Second, when TSOs could not hide their behavior from the layered surveillance system, the best they felt they could do was to refrain from “sticking out.” These *invisibility-of-self practices* primarily involved attempts to remain unnoticed by managers via keeping a low profile and remaining inconspicuous in plain sight. As one typical TSO explained, “You might get noticed for the wrong reasons, so I would rather just do my job and go home, rather than be noticed a lot and . . . then maybe later get in trouble for something” (3028). Her strategy, similar to that of many other TSOs, was to lay low or “float under the radar.” She clarified,

When I’m working in the checkpoint . . . I don’t know if I necessarily ever want to feel noticed. . . . Sometimes it’s hard to be noticed as a good worker. . . . There’s people who do their job better than others, and sometimes you don’t get noticed for that. . . . [so] most of the time it doesn’t really matter about being noticed, because sometimes it’s just better to float under the radar and not have people know who you are. (3028)

Many other TSOs tried to avoid standing out by leaving their “private selves” at home and by keeping their “private life” out of work (2010). Whether at

work or outside of work, these individuals refrained from socializing with other TSOs or superiors with the intention of keeping their “selves” separate from their work and “not to be known” by management. Another typical TSO tried to keep “a line” or “a distance” between his “job” and his “real life” (1018). Yet another officer spoke of “not putting [herself] out there” so her boss would not recall her; instead, she pretended not to pay attention to overheard conversations among her supervisors in order “to be left alone” and remain “not known” (1025). Unlike more “caring” surveillance contexts (Sewell and Barker 2006) where workers might actively seek to be noticed, here, in a context they viewed as coercive, workers felt compelled to shield themselves from punitive actions by downplaying their selfhood.

As with their interactions with managers, TSOs also actively engaged in invisibility practices with travelers. A type of invisibility-of-self practice that TSOs enacted was by actively downplaying their emotions in front of passengers to have passengers pay less attention to them. Instances like this occurred in particular during pat downs. While one might expect travelers to perceive pat downs as fairly intrusive, TSOs themselves also saw these moments as an unsettling reversal of their usual invisibility to management. In such situations, TSOs felt that travelers “infringed” on them and put them at risk of identification. One TSO noted that during such situations some travelers “will yell at you . . . they will tell *you* how much you suck” (1014). A few travelers even asked for TSOs’ badge numbers, threatening to file a complaint. Despite the “very few” travelers reporting TSOs to management, the sheer volume of travelers meant that such instances were actual possibilities and could lead to “rough days” (2010). Thus, contentious moments with passengers left many TSOs with a sense of being possibly individually uncovered.

The most common way for TSOs to respond to these potential disclosures was to suppress their anger and to *not* react outwardly, with the hope of returning to being unnoticed. For instance, a TSO recounted a time when she did this during a bag check. She got frustrated as a passenger “rolled his eyes” through the process of the bag check and was verbally resistant by saying “I don’t know” to all of her questions. While admitting that she would have liked to have said, “I’m going to spit in your bag,” she instead said, “Have a great day. I just, like, turn[ed] away and, like, whew, took a deep breath and like brushed it off” (1009). Another TSO typically explained how he also learned to deal similarly with travelers during such critical moments: “I am actually even more reserved [with travelers] now, just because of the calmness that you have to display when you’re in this checkpoint situation” (3004). This practice of

appearing calm was echoed by another TSO who summarized what a colleague once taught him upon joining TSA: basically, “just let go” and don’t let “travelers enter into your head” (1017). A third TSO noted the “emotional absence” (1026) that he needed to convey when interacting with travelers. All TSOs mentioning these practices added that few TSOs initially excelled at being “absent” and that they needed to learn the part of going unnoticed.

Finally, another kind of practice that helped TSOs emotionally disconnect and not be noticed by travelers was by treating passengers like nonpersons themselves. This is ironic because TSOs had felt like they were not cared for and essentially were mostly treated as objects by management, and in this practice, TSOs imposed on travelers a similar dehumanization to more easily portray the emotional absence they felt they needed to remain unnoticed. TSOs sometimes described thinking of passengers as “cattle moving through” (3008) or “delivering numbers” (2011). After all, at some large checkpoints, more than 1,000 travelers passed through per hour. One officer said that, in the face of a stressful interaction, he thought of passengers as being brainless, saying, “We say what happens is when they get out, out front, out of the taxi or their car or whatever, that’s where their brain stays” (2012). These practices allowed TSOs to attempt to disconnect in order to remain unnoticed and enact an invisibility of self. In summary, TSOs selectively performed practices of invisibility (both of behavior and of self) to go unseen and remain unnoticed since they interpreted the surveillance as coercive.

### Managerial Justification for Added Surveillance

Sometimes, TSA’s management picked up on its employees’ invisibility practices and, instead of understanding them as potential outcomes of increased coercive surveillance, interpreted them as *added reasons* for increased surveillance. The detection by management of TSOs’ unique form of resistance under surveillance justified the need for more surveillance. This detection occurred in two main ways.

First, management occasionally detected and took offense at TSO’s invisibility-of-behavior practices, particularly employees “missing” by extending their break periods. As a lead explained, “You know, they’ll get sent on break, tell them, you know, ‘take 15-minutes’ break,’ and they’ll be back in 20. Tell them to take 30-minute lunch; they’ll be back in 40” (1006). The majority of supervisors complained about such practices. For example, one noted, “Well, it’s very difficult; if you have manned positions and you’re missing two people, how do you do that function?” (3026). Also, the TSOs’ absences could easily get the supervisors into trouble—thus calling for an even “harsher” managerial reaction. The most common managerial answer to such

disappearance was to enforce even more surveillance. As a supervisor noted,

So they’ll [TSOs] take an unscheduled break or whatever, and you know, that’s your responsibility to watch over this because all of a sudden you’re missing people, and a lot of times things change very quickly at the checkpoints. . . . [I might need] to send three people out to JetBlue. . . . You go to pick your three and people are missing. Where the hell are they? . . . But I try and keep an eye on that. You know. (2013)

Second, even when trying to “keep an eye” on disappearing TSOs, several supervisors realized that it was difficult to keep track of employees as distinct individuals, even though officers were in plain sight. Some managers detected the invisibility-of-self strategies that TSOs were enacting. To deal with these strategies, managers attempted to increase their monitoring and noticing. A supervisor detailed such a challenge and shared his trick for trying to notice people a bit more: “It’s a blank to me, you know? So I’ll go out and [see] everybody’s nametag, look at their nametag, and say their name a couple of times to them, you know, until it kind of sticks in there” (2013). Another supervisor similarly conveyed attempting to pay attention to “quieter [people]” and people who “just do [their] TSO duties and that’s it” or who “just come to work every day, sign in, sign out, and that’s it, and go home” (3029).

In the context of “disappearing” and “unknown” officers, managers could easily justify closer monitoring of workers. This increased surveillance ranged from observing more attentively officers in certain positions (e.g., backfield operators) to installing more CCTV cameras. Although detailed historical spending data on CCTV equipment by local TSA units (including LUA) are not public, some aggregated federal figures suggest a significant growth around the time of our data collection in what TSA calls the Advanced Surveillance Program. This program is described in the TSA budget justification as utilizing “the existing infrastructure owned and operated by the local airport authority for remote monitoring, threat detection and assessment in a partnership agreement to provide enhanced situational awareness to local TSA” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010, p. AS-26). From 2011 to 2012, the program had reached 26% of its “full operational capacity” (i.e., 26% of operational surveillance needs were being met by funding). With the addition of 25% capacity over each of the following three years, the Advanced Surveillance Program reached full operational capacity by 2014 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2013). Hence, by 2014, TSA management could fully observe (mainly via CCTV) employees’ behavior at checkpoints and beyond. The addition of more cameras was couched in a broader TSA narrative on reducing

“insider threats” that included turning “outside cameras and other monitoring resources inward” toward employees (Wallace and Loffi 2014, p. 322).

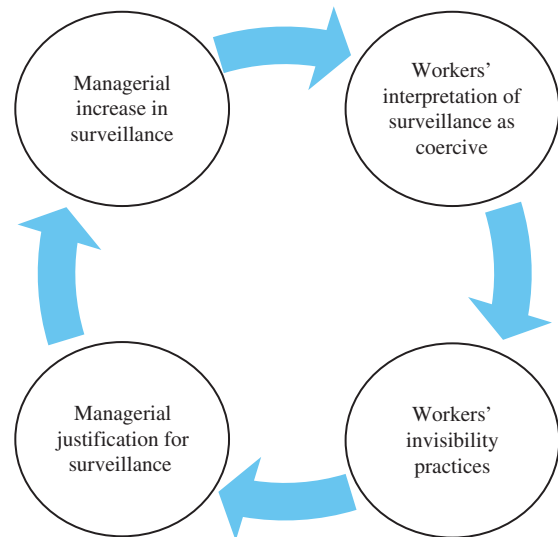
The managerial demand for added control was also evidenced in the TSA’s revised recommended guidelines for the physical design of airport checkpoints. While the 2006 guidelines only called for “correct placement of one or more cameras in the PSSC [passenger security screening checkpoint]” to increase security and deter theft (Transportation Security Administration 2006, p. 104), the revised 2011 guidelines called for “a sufficient number of cameras” to “cover each lane, all secondary screening areas, and co-located exit lanes,” or basically the entire checkpoint (Transportation Security Administration 2011, p. 98). Put another way, the extensive use of CCTV cameras had become one of the many “best practices” advocated by TSA’s management (Kosatka 2011, p. 34). Many of our interviewees remarked on the addition of these new cameras, with LUA’s management justifying them as a way to “reinforce security.” Even beyond cameras, a closer monitoring of employees’ behaviors also occurred through other means of surveillance. The example quoted below, involving a lead’s increasing surveillance of a TSO who was perceived to often go missing, is illustrative of this close monitoring:

A lead followed somebody [a TSO] to get their lunch, then the person went to the bathroom. He followed that person to the bathroom, thought they were taking too much time on their break—which I think is inappropriate, to follow someone into the bathroom, but that’s like another story. [He] went back and told a supervisor that he thinks that he should take disciplinary action on the TSO for, you know, going to the thing, going to the bathroom, and coming back. And the person got a G&D [guidance and direction]... for taking like a 20-minute break [instead of 15]. (3010)

## Discussion

In summary, our analysis shows that surveillance was initially promoted as a way to control the workforce and to deter employee theft. Most workers operating under such a system of surveillance felt constantly observed, but at the same time, they also believed that they went largely unnoticed until deviating from procedures. Indeed, while they thought their behavior to be highly visible, they felt that their selves remained largely invisible to management. This sense of invisibility of self was akin to what Erving Goffman (1963, p. 18) describes as being in a “non-person” role, or that of an individual “not present at all as someone of whom ritual notice is to be taken.” When management noticed workers, it tended to be in negative ways, and so workers actively deployed efforts to go unseen and remain unnoticed. These resulting dynamics encouraged management to intensify surveillance

**Figure 1.** (Color online) A Self-Fulfilling Cycle of Coercive Surveillance



measures to make more “visible” their workers’ ever-fleeting behaviors and selves—thus leading to even more surveillance, or what we label the self-fulfilling cycle of coercive surveillance.

From these findings, we suggest a more general model of how coercive surveillance can prove self-reinforcing, as illustrated in Figure 1. First, managers enact a surveillance effort to increase managerial control. Second, workers can interpret the surveillance effort as coercive—rather than caring—based on their experience of the surveillance system and how managers treat them. Third, workers’ interpretations of the surveillance effort as coercive can encourage them to attempt to resist the surveillance system by enacting invisibility practices. Fourth, managers can detect workers’ resistance and interpret the resistance as justification for further surveillance efforts. Then, another turn on the cycle of surveillance can follow, as workers experience additional managerial surveillance efforts, again interpreting them as coercive, seeking to resist, and inadvertently providing further justification for even more surveillance. Overall, this cycle of workplace surveillance can be self-fulfilling through such endogenous dynamics of interpretation and action.

While we present this cycle as an unraveling sequence of distinct elements that relate to one another unidirectionally, we do so primarily for reasons of analytic clarity. We recognize that the elements in the cycle might occur simultaneously and might influence each other reciprocally. For instance, workers’ invisibility practice of attempting to keep their personal lives private from managers might have fueled their interpretation that surveillance was coercive in addition to being fueled by that interpretation; thus, our figure does not capture all interactions in the cycle. Furthermore, we suggest that our theorized cycle of surveillance is

simply a starting point. Future studies might further flesh out elements of our model or reveal additional processes in the self-fulfilling cycle. Our above analysis aims to generate new theoretical insights by challenging past explanations for the phenomenon observed, rather than to offer an exhaustive mapping of all possible dynamics present in our field setting.

### Contribution to Literature on Surveillance

Our study's findings first carry important implications for the literatures on surveillance. Workplace surveillance has captured managerial attention for more than a century now, and scholars have noted the recent growth of technology-enabled surveillance across industries and countries (Staples 1997, 2000; Sewell 1998; Marx 1999; Stanton 2000; Sewell and Barker 2006; Ball 2010; Pierce et al. 2015). Thanks to CCTVs, body-worn cameras, motion detectors, and other technologies, workers' (mis)behaviors can increasingly be seen by management and hence corrected. But what explains this growth? Up until now, scholars have argued that this growth has been driven largely by exogenous factors, with specific reference to managerial demands for control, coupled with the new availability and affordability of technology. Our analysis, however, reveals a complementary explanation for the development of surveillance.

We argue that surveillance, when interpreted as coercive and when motivating invisibility practices, can endogenously feed a managerial justification for added surveillance. Like self-fulfilling prophecies or predictions that come true because individuals act as if they are likely to be true (Merton 1968), surveillance can spread because managers act as if such surveillance is needed. Yet the prophecy might not merely be symbolically self-fulfilling. Surveillance might also be fueled in part by workers' actual resistance strategies and managers' reaction to such resistance strategies. This view challenges prior depictions of the rise of surveillance as being only exogenously driven.

While Foucault (1977) already noted the observed individuals' critical roles in *participating* in their own surveillance, we show that workers' *resistance* (not only their participation) to such surveillance also *strengthens* surveillance. As Foucault (1977) argued, "He who is subject to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power... he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (p. 203). Foucault's (1977) theory assumes that subjects participate in their own surveillance by internalizing the observer's gaze and adjusting their behavior as though they were endlessly watched (even when not actually observed). The subjects we studied also adjusted their behavior in the face of surveillance, but rather than acquiesce to it, they attempted to resist it. Their resistance ultimately served, however, to further

increase surveillance. Subjects in our study thereby indirectly participated in the intensification of their own surveillance. Paradoxically, then, we show that even though workers' can exercise agency through resistance, deviating from the Foucaultian assumption of acquiescence, their agency can still reinforce and perpetuate the surveillance system. Future research could build on these findings by uncovering other ways workers might themselves perpetuate surveillance.

In addition, while the invisibility dynamics described above might apply to many other work settings, certain types of settings might prove more suited than others to their occurrence. Specifically, high-reliability organizations entrusted with performing routine activities characterized by extremely dangerous consequences in the cases of failure might be more likely than other organizations to harbor such dynamics. In organizations that aim for failure-free performance (Roberts 1990, Weick and Roberts 1993, Frederickson and LaPorte 2002), anybody's missteps (including those of insiders) can have catastrophic outcomes. Under such circumstances, invisibility practices might serve as defense mechanisms (Menzies 1960) against the stress of possibly being responsible for such a catastrophic failure. Future research might compare and contrast contexts (e.g., high versus low reliability contexts, such as policing versus call-center work) to further explore contextual influences on the self-fulfilling cycle of coercive surveillance.

### Contribution to the Resistance Literature

Our study's findings also carry important implications for the workplace resistance literature. First, our study sheds empirical light on forms of resistance in the context of a prevalent, important, and growing workplace context of intense, technology-enabled surveillance. Many studies of workplace resistance took place in an era before the introduction of numerous technologies aiding managerial surveillance (e.g., Burawoy 1979, Paules 1991, Jermier et al. 1994, Roscigno and Hodson 2004a) or otherwise did not focus on the interplay between surveillance and workers' resistance to it (e.g., Scott 1985, Prasad and Prasad 2000). By examining workplace surveillance in the contemporary workplace context in which managers benefit from highly extensive means of surveillance, our study meets this lacuna.

Second, our study brings to light the potential negative outcomes (from workers' perspectives) that could result from workers' resistance—namely, an outcome that contradicts what workers were trying to achieve by enacting their invisibility strategies. Most recent literature on workplace resistance emphasizes resistance's potential boons for workers, such as gaining a sense of dignity (Hodson 2001), experiencing "micro-emancipation" (Alvesson and Willmott 1992), limiting

control efforts (Prasad and Prasad 2000), and enacting organizational change (Meyerson and Scully 1995, LaNuez and Jermier 1994). But, because our study points to the possibility for an outcome of increased surveillance to stem from workers' resistance, we illuminate the darker side of resistance by pointing to the potential self-fulfilling cycles of surveillance. Such a focus on the downside of resistance echoes Burawoy's (1979) conclusions that resisting by playing games on factory lines ultimately equates to "consenting" (p. 234) to the managerial rule since "making out" (p. 63) helps sustain the management's production targets.

Third, our analysis points to particular forms of resistance—here, invisibility-of-behavior and invisibility-of-self practices—that seem likely to emerge from workers' interpretations of a coercive system of surveillance. We suspect that workers' attempts to enact invisibility-of-self practices—going unnoticed—might be one of the more contemporary forms of workers' resistance under surveillance. In the face of growing surveillance, the scope of employees' "backstage" (Goffman 1959, pp. 106–140)—a region where employees can step out of character and need no longer perform for a managerial or client audience—is likely to be significantly diminished. The shrinkage of the backstage means that employees are less able to go unseen and to hide their behaviors. Workers might therefore attempt to enact resistance differently, in the form of invisibility-of-self resistance. While past scholarship has examined similar invisibility-of-self practices that members of specific occupational groups perform as part of their job—such as covert police officers attempting to have "no striking or distinguishing features" (Loftus and Gould 2012, p. 282) and to "blend" into their environment without deploying any "decoy strategy" Marx (1988, p. 116)—our study shows that other workers might perform such practices as well in an attempt to resist managerial control efforts.

Mobilizing invisibility of self at work might also be a contemporary way that workers attempt to find dignity at work. Such attempts to become inconspicuous, to not stand out, and to not be noticed as an individual at all can prove quite empowering. When studying young marginalized men of color in the United States, Oeur (2016) labels their attempts to "remain unknown" in high school and beyond a form of "dignity" because of what visibility typically entails for them. As another commentator on surveillance explains, "The invisible is what is here without being an object" (Brighenti 2007, p. 328). Put otherwise, remaining unknown can sometimes be a dignified resistance stance to adopt when a nonperson role or an object is the default role offered to participants.

More generally, we posit that a wide scope of contemporary workplaces might harbor similar invisibility-of-self (and invisibility-of-behavior) practices as the

ones described above. Today, many workplaces involve surveillance systems that workers interpret as at least partially coercive, and so we suspect that the invisibility practices we observed might exist beyond the context of airport security screening. For instance, part-time faculty members at community colleges, who often report being seen but not noticed (Krier and Staples 1993), might engage in invisibility practices as resistance. Similarly, police officers equipped with body-worn cameras might also develop invisibility practices. Anecdotal evidence suggests how this may already be happening: the police officers, for example, who shot Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina, forgot or claim to have forgotten to turn their cameras on in time to record the incident (Funk 2016, p. 48). Furthermore, a recent multisite global study of police officers' use of body-worn cameras notes and tries to control for "the continued debate around police officers' discretion" or their ability to turn their cameras off during select interactions (Ariel et al. 2016, p. 456), hinting to the potential prevalence of such invisibility behaviors across police precincts in several countries. Other work settings might prove equally prone to the rise of invisibility practices.

Overall, our study's findings suggest the possibility for an endogenous growth of coercive surveillance as an unintended consequence of a relatively novel form of workers' resistance. Only by taking these complex resistance dynamics into account can we grasp fully what drives the contemporary spread of workplace surveillance. What airport security screeners can teach us has therefore to do with far more than simply screening travelers and baggage. They can teach us what the experience of coercive surveillance might look like for other workers and why such surveillance is likely to continue spreading.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The notion of self is understood here as “all those qualities, attributes, values, feelings, and moral sentiments that a person assumes to be his or her own” (Belgrave and Charmaz 2007, p. 4165). This distinctive self-concept is a product of a reflexive activity: the result of humans' ability to reflect back on themselves and to view themselves as distinct objects (see Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Gecas 1982, pp. 2-4).

<sup>2</sup>The AFL-CIO American Federation of Government Employees started representing TSA employees in June 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Bidding was governed by seniority within subgroups defined by gender, rank, and full- or part-time status. For instance, all full-time female TSOs bid together; the most senior member of that subgroup got first choice among various available combinations of shift hours, days off, and checkpoints (known as “lines”). The second-most senior person then did the same, and so on.

<sup>4</sup>Another publication emerged from this same set of interviews (Chan and Anteby 2016), but the current article constitutes a distinct usage of these data for two reasons. First, it became apparent that the different inductive analyses were pointing to distinct sets of processes that explained different phenomena within the field site, which called for distinct write-ups. Second, like in many other inductive research projects that “start where you are” (Lofland et al. 2006, p. 9), the focus of this paper was in part guided by a coauthor's resonance with emerging field themes. In this case, the TSOs' discussions of invisibility echoed with the coauthor's past experience of invisibility in a very different setting.

<sup>5</sup>The format for citing interview sources is as follows: The first two digits of the interviewee's identifier (e.g., 10xx or 30xx) identify the member of the research team who conducted the interview. The last two digits (e.g., xx08 or xx26) indicate the interview's temporal position in the sequence of interviews.

<sup>6</sup>TSA managers had little discretionary say in TSOs' promotion and rewards. As an example, the cash bonuses available to TSOs involved little managerial discretion: TSOs with high scores on their annual examinations and TSO checkpoint teams in which no member missed a single test x-ray image (within a certain time period) could all earn bonuses. But the organizational triggers for such bonuses were mostly predetermined. Similarly, the promotion process from TSO to lead entailed a detailed online application filled out by TSOs that did not require input from their current lead or supervisor.

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