

Conceptualizing the Personal Touch: Experiential Knowledge and Gendered Strategies in Community Supervision Work

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
1–28
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0891241618777304
journals.sagepub.com/home/jce



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Abstract

Tasked with a fractured institutional mandate of ensuring public safety while facilitating the rehabilitation of their criminalized clients, community supervision workers exercise a considerable amount of discretion in how to achieve these goals. Yet much remains unknown about these workers' strategies for doing so, which are informed by experiential knowledge and social identities—what I call the “personal touch.” Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with California state parole agents and county probation officers as part of a larger ethnographic inquiry of prisoner reentry, I apply a feminist lens to analyze how workers leverage personal aspects of themselves that they value to manage the impossibilities of their work. My findings show how workers employ a personal touch to connect with clients in meaningful ways, but also how these approaches are built on normative assumptions about gender.

Keywords

parole and probation, gender, discretion, working alliance

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Introduction

Community supervision workers are tasked with a “deliberately fractured” (Werth 2011b, 342) institutional mandate of ensuring public safety while facilitating the rehabilitation of their clients. The push toward performance management in recent decades—also known as the “new penology” framework (Feeley and Simon 1992)—has been defined by efforts to identify, categorize, and manage criminalized people at the lowest possible expense rather than to punish or rehabilitate them (see also Robinson 2002). This has led to an extensive network of technologies for efficiently managing “criminogenic risks and needs,” most notably the advent of actuarial assessments to classify criminalized people in terms of their statistical risk levels (Feeley and Simon 1992; Lynch 1998). Thus, risk, as the central way in which supervision workers “know” about the criminalized people they manage, has been a focal point of scholarship (Feeley and Simon 1992; Hannah-Moffat 2005; Kemshall 1998; Lynch 1998, 2000; Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat 2009; Robinson 2002; Werth 2016).

However, a small but growing vein of scholarship asserts that although the notion of risk dominates community supervision policy, in practice, parole agents and probation officers do not necessarily place these “scientific” definitions of risk front and center in their supervision approach. Although the “evidence-based” usefulness of risk assessment tools is regularly touted among administrators, front-line supervision workers have been slower to buy into the merits of such tools for their everyday work. Rather, workers frequently rely on their intuition (Lynch 1998), “gut feeling” (Werth 2011a), and client affect (Werth 2016) in assessing risk. This is not to say that workers completely disregard the use of such tools, but rather that they do not employ them systematically in making decisions about how to supervise their clients (Viglione, Rudes, and Taxman 2015).

In other words, through the discretion bestowed upon them, supervision workers subvert the numbers-driven, performance management culture—what Corbett (2008) calls the “cult of instrumentation” (306-307)—that has accompanied the proliferation of risk management technologies. Yet gaps remain in our knowledge of how this happens. Indeed, in his call for increased examination of human agency within present-day correctional settings, Cheliotis (2006) notes that “a more holistic analysis of penal currents would comprise an examination of whether, and the degree to which, professionals actually resist subordination to illegitimate systemic techniques and goals, and, if so, the forms such acts of resistance may take” (318).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with parole agents and probation officers in one California county in the aftermath of the state’s recent carceral realignment

legislation, this article proposes one avenue through which supervision workers may seek to counteract the dehumanizing aspects of managerialism: the “personal touch.” I define this concept as being composed of elements of a worker’s personal history and background that function alongside their professional experience and training to shape the worker’s approach to supervising criminalized people. My analysis is rooted in feminist challenges to epistemology, objectivity, and agency that have advocated for “reclaiming the personal” (Yu 2011) as both concept and action, recognizing the false divide between public and private life. By incorporating insights from feminist scholarship that complicate this public–private divide, this analysis suggests the need for a closer look at workers’ life histories and identities as an important means of understanding how workers manage the impossibilities of their work.

In employing this feminist analytical lens, I build on recent scholarship in the fields of punishment (e.g., R. Miller 2014; Werth 2013, 2016; Wyse 2013) and welfare (Watkins-Hayes 2009) to ask: how, in recognizing the deficits and ambiguities of their institutional mandate, do workers leverage aspects of themselves that they value in order to accomplish their work? In other words, this paper explores how the personal touch is both an individualized approach to supervision and a coping mechanism adopted by workers to manage the demanding nature of their jobs, particularly in times of organizational upheaval such as has been seen amid substantial changes to California’s criminal justice system.

Negotiating the Public–Private Divide in Front-Line Work

Critical scholars have shown how the proliferation of performance management technologies has contributed to the “responsibilization” of criminalized people (Garland 1996; Moore and Hirai 2014). This has occurred amid a period of “carceral devolution” (R. Miller 2014), symptomatic of the broader turn toward neoliberalism (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). People on supervision are expected to do the actual work of rehabilitating themselves, as supervision agencies typically lack the infrastructure to offer substantive assistance; workers likewise tend to prioritize activities geared toward ensuring public safety (Lemert 1993; Lynch 2000) even as agency administrators publicly articulate a renewed focus on rehabilitation (Rudes 2012).

Cheliotis (2006) argues that the responsibilization dynamic is even more complex, as criminal justice workers experience alienation from themselves and their clients (see also Lipsky [1980] 2010). One way in which the state seeks to ensure worker conformity to institutional goals, Cheliotis observes, is through a hierarchical division of labor that not only limits workers’ responsibilities to a

narrow set of tasks but also serves to prevent workers from being able to see the full view of the institution's goals and strategies. If knowledge is limited in such a way, workers will be unable to challenge goals and the means to achieving them. This fits with a broader vein of organizational theory that describes how distinguishing between workers' roles and their persons or selves only became a concern relatively recently, as organizations in industrialized societies sought to formalize the performance of tasks (Ashforth 2001). As roles become institutionalized, they can be learned and carried out by workers who are interchangeable. In this way, organizational structures necessarily constrain individual expression, as workers occupy roles as extensions of an organization, rather than as individuals.

Yet as Ashforth contends, the "colonization of the private" means that "entering a role for the first time involves more than learning the role; it involves *colonizing* the role in the service of the person—negotiating a personal space in how one understands and enacts the role" (2001, 3). In this way, managerial logic cannot account for how highly workers value the intuitive and experiential knowledge accrued through their years on the job, and the ways workers employ this knowledge to not only resist certain institutional mandates, but also to carry out institutional goals in specific, individualized ways. Indeed, ethnographic research reveals that supervision workers actively subvert managerial logic by relying heavily on individualized assessments of dangerousness and potential for change in their evaluation of clients (Werth 2016; see also Lynch 1998; Werth 2013).

Another dynamic is at play as well: the ways in which neoliberal institutions make demands of workers' personal or private selves. Much has been written about the public–private divide, particularly as it relates to women's oppression. Indeed, as Pateman (1983) notes, "the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" (155). The original feminist argument is that women have been systematically oppressed by a patriarchal notion of "separate spheres": women manage private life as mothers and caretakers, while men function as breadwinners in the public realm and maintain dominion over both worlds (see Kerber 1988). This argument has evolved as women have entered the workforce en masse, while not only continuing to bear responsibility for domestic duties, but also incurring gendered forms of extra labor in their paid work (DeVault 1999; Griffith 1998; Hochschild 1979; Smith 1987).

This analysis has since been extended to address a vast range of invisible forms of physical and emotional work that disparately fall not only on women but also on poor people, people of color, and criminalized people (DeVault 1991, 2006; Harlow 2003; Kang 2003; Mirchandani 2003; Schwalbe et al.

2000; Welsh and Rajah 2014; Welsh 2017; Wingfield 2010). In the criminal justice system, for example, prison life has been theorized as comprising public spaces in which emotion management and self-control—“wearing a mask” or “fronting”—are essential for survival, while in private or “marginal” spaces such as visitation rooms, a broader but still selective range of emotions is permissible (Crewe et al. 2014). Prison staff, while enforcing these rules, are also themselves controlled by them (Crawley 2004). This extends outside prisons as well: female parole agents have been shown to adapt to the male-dominated environment of parole by reinforcing sexualized female stereotypes and by doing more work than necessary to combat perceptions of inferiority (Ireland and Berg 2006, 2008).

In these ways, critical scholars have sought to blur the lines between private and public life in an effort to bolster recognition of marginalized peoples’ ways of relating to the social world. Cheliotis (2006) advocates for the inclusion of front-line workers in these analyses when he refers to the staff of criminal justice institutions as “oppressed oppressors” (318), beholden to institutions that view them as expendable—and interchangeable—laborers, tasked with carrying out an arguably impossible mandate of protecting public safety while facilitating rehabilitation. The following section offers a conceptual framework for understanding how supervision workers cope with these circumstances through the use of a personal touch.

Elements of the Personal Touch

The quality of the community supervision relationship matters (Skeem et al. 2007), though there is limited research on the mechanisms through which this quality arises. In the field of psychotherapy, the “therapeutic alliance” is considered to be the “quintessential integrative variable” for reducing symptoms, bolstering adherence to treatment, and enabling behavioral change (Wolfe and Goldfried 1988, 449). The “working alliance” (Bordin 1979) applies similar concepts to work with clients outside of conventionally therapeutic settings. While the precise mechanisms through which this alliance might effect change have not been identified (Ross, Polaschek, and Ward 2008), fostering interpersonal closeness may simply improve clients’ well-being.

Unlike in a therapist–client relationship, supervision workers must adopt a “dual role” in which they work to ensure both rehabilitation—a “caring” role—and public safety—an “enforcement” or “control” role (Skeem et al. 2007; Trotter 2015). Research on this conflict suggests that the clients of “firm, fair, and caring” workers have lower rates of rearrest (Kennealy et al. 2012; see also Klockars 1972; Morash et al. 2015). In my fieldwork with formerly incarcerated women as part of the larger study presented here, I

found that women appreciated when their supervision workers communicated that they cared about their success and well-being, even when those workers could not substantively help them to, for example, identify housing assistance or enroll in rehabilitative services that accommodated the demands of the family reunification process (Welsh 2017).

One component of the working alliance that remains underexplored is the role of worker self-disclosure. In his review of social work techniques for working with “involuntary” clients, Trotter (2015) suggests that self-disclosure can involve sharing “non-intimate details about a worker’s life, such as whether the worker is married or has children” (176). Such disclosure may be especially appropriate in settings in which clients are asked to share very personal information (Shulman 1991). There is some evidence that self-disclosure may be valuable, in that it can humanize workers and thereby help clients to feel less vulnerable (Farber 2006). However, Gibson (2012) notes that it is difficult to disentangle self-disclosure from other worker–client relationships factors, and that self-disclosure may be most effective when the working alliance is already strong. Notably, Trotter (2004) found that child welfare social workers who engaged in self-disclosure had better client outcomes, though the clients did not identify this self-disclosure as important. Some scholars view self-disclosure as part of “pro-social modeling,” and thus disclosure regarding difficulties the worker has experienced and overcome may be particularly effective (Derlaga and Berg 1987; Trotter 2015).

Even fewer studies have considered how self-disclosure and experiential knowledge might play a role in the working alliance outside the conventional therapeutic context. In her ethnography of front-line welfare workers, Watkins-Hayes (2009) finds that workers’ personal biographies—particularly their own experiences with poverty and with what she calls “racialized professionalism”—are important factors in how they interact with clients. While she points out that personal histories, because they are highly individualized, cannot explain everything that workers do, Watkins-Hayes suggests that experiences of marginalization “often give workers a set of resources for their discretionary toolkits that can be marshaled with clients that co-workers from nonimpoverished backgrounds are less likely to wield” (89). It has recently been observed that community supervision workers also often have had similar life experiences as their clients (Werth 2016). Wyse (2013) notes that parole and probation officers differentially draw on elements of their personal experiences in supervising their male and female clients, and suggests that future research should unpack this dynamic. While the findings presented here highlight instances in which workers’ racial and socioeconomic positionalities shaped their narratives of how they work with clients, the central focus of the analysis is gendered dynamics.

Methods and Setting

In-depth interviews with 19 state parole agents and county probation officers form the basis for the analysis presented here. I conducted these interviews as part of a larger ethnographic study of postincarceration work in one large, densely populated California county. The study involved hundreds of hours of participant observation and more than sixty in-depth interviews with formerly incarcerated women, welfare eligibility workers and case managers, state parole agents, and county probation officers. The study was approved by the author's university's Institutional Review Board, all participants went through an informed consent process, and all names mentioned in discussing the data are pseudonyms.

In developing the overall study, I drew on the concepts and principles of institutional ethnography (IE), a feminist sociological mode of inquiry that examines work processes and how they are coordinated. IE research begins by exploring what people actually do, employing what Smith (1987) calls a "generous" definition of work. In the larger project, I began from the standpoint of women recently released from prison as they undertook the work of rebuilding their lives after incarceration. This work frequently involved establishing and navigating relationships with community supervision workers, among many others. I then moved "outward" to the institutions with which women had frequent interactions—parole and probation, public assistance, and child welfare, most prominently. In doing so, I was able to examine how the broader system of postincarceration work is socially organized (Welsh 2015; Welsh 2017).

Data collection took place in one large, densely populated California county from 2012 to 2014. The study began six months after the implementation of California's Public Safety Realignment Act, a sweeping change to the state's criminal justice system that was initiated in anticipation of a Supreme Court ruling that California state prisons were in violation of the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment due to chronic overcrowding and lack of access to health care (Simon 2014). As a result, the effects of this legislation on the everyday work of parole agents and probation officers was a central theme in my interviews with these workers. Conventionally, probation is a punishment in and of itself; a person on probation will not necessarily have been incarcerated at any point in their life. A person may only be on parole if they have served time in prison. However, Realignment changed this. Prior to Realignment, people convicted of what are now referred to as "non-non-non" or "N3" offenses (non-violent, non-serious, and non-high-risk sex offenses) would serve time in state prison and then spend at least three years on state parole supervision. These cases are

now handled by counties, with time served in local jail and/or on Post-Release Community Supervision (PRCS), a “new” form of supervision administered by county probation departments (Petersilia 2013). While these changes have had a substantial effect on county probation agencies, which were suddenly thrust into the spotlight when they were tasked with managing a new population, the effects on parole have been more diffuse (Werth 2016).

Two-thirds of the women in the larger study were on conventional state parole supervision, while the rest, in keeping with the new law, were on PRCS and supervised by a probation officer. Notably, I found that women’s experiences of these two forms of supervision were largely similar in terms of the lack of emphasis on supporting rehabilitation, despite organizational pronouncements to the contrary. It was also through my fieldwork with the women that I was first alerted to the range of supervision styles adopted by parole agents and probation officers and the ways in which these relational approaches are gendered. I was unable to systematically observe supervision workers’ interactions with the women in my study, and thus I do not incorporate observational data here. However, women’s accounts of their relationships with their parole agents or probation officers informed the questions I asked of these workers during interviews (Welsh 2017).

I conducted in-depth interviews with 19 community supervision workers, nine of whom were State parole agents and supervisors and ten of whom were County probation officers, supervisors, and administrators. Once I received permission to conduct interviews with workers at each institution, an internal email blast was sent out containing details about the study and asking for volunteers. I was able to target these recruitment efforts to agents and officers working in the same area of the county where the women in my study lived, in an effort to capture anything particular about postincarceration work in that geographic area. Many workers, I subsequently discovered, had grown up in the neighborhoods where they now worked.

Some organizational differences are worth noting to contextualize the sample of workers and to preface the findings. While demographically consistent with prior research (e.g., Grattet, Petersilia, and Lin 2008), due to layoffs that accompanied Realignment-related restructuring, my sample of parole agents is heavily skewed toward veteran agents: only one agent I spoke with had been with parole for less than three years, and overall the sample averaged over nine years of parole experience. Further, three-quarters of the agents I spoke with had long careers as Correctional Officers (COs) in California state prisons prior to coming to parole—a reflection of a unique aspect of California’s penal system in which the main path to becoming a parole agent is through the prison system. This is in contrast to most other states, where these career paths are separate.

Parole agents also clearly felt more alienated from the mission of their organization than did probation officers: in interviews, several agents speculated that they are a “dying breed,” a direct reference to not only the recent layoffs but also to the larger shift away from incarceration (and thus from parole as the postprison form of supervision) for people convicted of less serious offenses. The parole agents I spoke with were quick to correct me if I referred to them as “officers,” though they were less clear about the reasons for the distinction. It may have something to do with concern about their job roles potentially being eliminated. It may also be due to the fact that in California, all parole agents are sworn peace officers, and thus are required to carry a firearm; not all probation officers are armed, though post-Realignment, several counties have undertaken efforts to arm more of their staff (Villacorte 2013). The probation officer sample was on the whole younger and less experienced—60 percent had been with adult probation for two years or less at the time I met them. This is a reflection of county probation departments needing to hire hundreds of new officers to staff the new PRCS program. Many of the new hires had previously worked in either juvenile probation or detention, and thus were new to working with adults.

The institutions of parole and probation also differ notably in the gender demographics of both workers and clients, and this is reflected in my samples: two-thirds of the parole agents I spoke with were male, while more than two-thirds of probation officers were female. As a rough approximation, national statistics indicate that only 28.2 percent of “bailiffs, correctional officers, and jailers” are female, while 57.4 percent of “probation officers and correctional treatment specialists” are female (US Bureau of Labor 2016). Female parolees are also a relative rarity: women account for about 12 percent of the parole population, but about 25 percent of the probation population (Kaeble and Bonczar 2017). Across both institutions, most workers I spoke with were non-white, with most identifying as either black or Hispanic/Latino. This is notable, as nationally, two-thirds of prison and community supervision staff are white (US Bureau of Labor 2016), and may be a reflection of the diversity of the area in which the research was conducted. Lastly, the correct terminology for recipients of human services—and especially those considered to be “involuntary” because of criminalization or other factors—is widely contested. For consistency with the language workers used, I use the term “client” when discussing the subjects of community supervision in general and probation in particular, and “parolee” when discussing parole specifically.

Interviews ranged in length from forty-five minutes to two hours, with most being just over an hour long. I asked workers to reflect on how they came to be in their current positions, engage in their daily work tasks, and approach supervising the women on their caseloads, as well as what impact

they perceived Realignment was having on their work. Focusing the interviews on “work” as a familiar and intuitive concept offered a space in which workers could reflect on their daily job tasks in a way they rarely had time to do on their own (Mykhalovskiy and McCoy 2002; McCoy 2006). Similar to DeVault’s (1999) loosely structured style of eliciting stories in her study of the career narratives of dieticians, I sought to allow my participants the space to construct narratives about the meaning of their work. Like DeVault, I was at times surprised at the range of emotions and personal details included in the stories that participants told me about their career paths and particularly trying or rewarding encounters with clients.

I employed Doucet and Mauthner’s (2008) Listening Guide approach to analysis, which, as Walby (2012) notes, offers a means of understanding how individuals are situated within organizational contexts. In the Listening Guide, interview transcripts and notes are read multiple times using different analytical lenses. For example, one lens “attends to the particular subject or narrator . . . and how this person speaks about her/himself and the parameters of their social world” (405), while a second reading examines how the narrator is constituted relationally—a key focus of the analysis presented here.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. When not transcribed by me, I checked each transcript against the audio recording for accuracy prior to analysis. After an initial close read of each interview transcript, I conducted subsequent readings and analysis in Excel by creating a worksheet and coding in large “chunks,” with each participant’s narratives in one column and my reactions and interpretations to them in the next column (Meyer and Avery 2009). This allowed for a continuously reflexive engagement with the data, whereby I could also use the “sort” feature in Excel to compare all similarly coded narratives for consistency and accuracy. It was through this iterative process that I was able to make connections between workers’ narratives of their supervision techniques, the discourses within and the constraints under which they operate, and their use of experiential and relational knowledge.

Findings

What follows are illustrative examples of how the personal touch is employed by supervision workers, not only as a means of resistance to managerial logics but also as a mechanism for coping with the demanding nature of the work. At times, workers actively subverted the discourses of “risk/public safety” and “need/rehabilitation,” while reproducing them at others. The personal touch, as I conceptualize it here, is both an *internal* process of drawing on personal experiences and identities to make sense of one’s role within the institution, as well as a *relational* process of leveraging such knowledge in supervising clients.

“Coming from the Same Place”: How Personal Experience Shapes Supervision Style

Workers consistently noted the conflicting demands of their jobs. As State parole agent Nelson put it, “The revolving door was small, it was spinning fast, but now it’s bigger, it’s spinning even faster . . . Like cattle, going in, going out. Everybody just passing the buck even quicker.” Even among probation officers, who are working in relatively well-resourced conditions post-Realignment, there was recognition that there was a lot more that they could be doing, especially to promote rehabilitation. As Jackson, a black female probation officer, put it,

I like my job. I like dealing with our clients. But the frustration comes from I’m not really helping . . . so I’m helping you the only way I can really help you. It’s with me and my thoughts and my mind that hopefully you take whatever I kinda sense will get to them to start thinking and stop being mad at the system for not assisting you because that’s not what it’s really designed to do. It’s not to help you. It’s to keep you. And when you realize that then you realize, “why you so frustrated?”

Jackson simultaneously values her role because she enjoys helping people, but also recognizes that she is limited in the extent to which she can provide help. Even more strikingly, she sees the system—in which she is a willing participant—as a trap and a source of further oppression. Jackson often tells her clients, “they wanna keep you caught up in needing us and needing the benefits.” She hopes that once her clients recognize this, they will “start thinking and stop being mad at the system”—in other words, be motivated to make changes in their lives. In this way, Jackson’s narrative reflects the expected responsabilizing discourse of community supervision. Yet it is notable that Jackson responds to this discourse by drawing on aspects of herself that she values—as she says, “it’s with me and my thoughts and my mind” that she can empower clients to seek change on their own, because the system is not designed to provide assistance.

Workers frequently acknowledged that there is a thin line between “us” and “them,” and remained constantly aware of this reality. One reason the line is so thin is the difficult circumstances that workers themselves often described growing up in. Workers believed that these formative experiences helped them to understand the powerful draw of criminal behavior for young people. When I asked parole agent Carrillo, a Latina who grew up in a neighborhood “with gangs and stuff,” what drew her to her present career, she described how she fell on hard times after going through a divorce and raising her son alone, with “no help from nobody.” A family member urged her to apply to be a Corrections Officer (CO) for the California state prison system (the California Department

of Corrections and Rehabilitation, or CDCR). This family member told Carrillo about the stability and good benefits that a career in corrections could provide. She proceeded to work as a CO for sixteen years before transferring to parole seven years prior to our interview. Carrillo attributed her ability to transcend the violence of her childhood surroundings, as well as overcoming her later financial struggles, to her father's use of discipline:

I grew up where there were shootings and killings and I seen dead bodies and I seen all that stuff. But thankfully my father was in the military and just had me by the neck. "You ain't going that way." We had five girls in my family so he yanked every single one of us and . . . very much disciplined us like . . . you didn't act right, you got spanked. But that was just the way it is and you know what? I'm grateful for it. We had five girls in my family so he yanked every single one of us and had us like little boys . . .

Carrillo expresses a belief that growing up in a neighborhood where violence was prevalent helps her out in the field, visiting parolees at their homes and places of employment. Because Carrillo's father raised her and her sisters "like little boys," it gives her an advantage in supervising her mostly male caseload. As she put it, "a man doesn't wanna listen to a woman talk to him and tell him what to do. It's all about the insecurities. They need to be tough."

Carrillo's disciplined upbringing shapes how she supervises her parolees, describing her approach as, "I'm strictly by the book. I'm like, 'hey, new sheriff in town.' You better throw that mentality out." Because Carrillo is attuned to her male parolees' need to be "tough" and to resist being supervised by a woman, she draws on her upbringing as well as her previous immersion in prison culture to adopt a similar, "hardened masculinity" posture (Crewe et al. 2014, 58) in her supervision style.

Agent Harrison, a black male, attributed his career in corrections to his brother, who had recently passed away after a long struggle with substance abuse, as well as to things he "saw in the community" while growing up in a poor, high-crime neighborhood near where he now works. However, Harrison described a markedly different approach to supervision from Carrillo's. Part of the difference may be attributable to his own experiences with law enforcement. While apologizing for digressing from what he thought might be the point of our interview, Harrison recounted to me three separate, recent incidents in which, while in the field visiting his parolees, he was confronted by police officers who drew their firearm on him under the belief that he was a gang member (and escalated by the fact that Harrison's own firearm was visible under his clothing). Parole agents often dress in street clothes when doing field visits, and in Harrison's case, being a black agent and working in predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods where gang violence is

common meant encounters with police officers suspicious of his presence with some regularity. This led Harrison to adjust when he made field visits so as not to do them in the dark, because as he put it, “all the [negative] encounters that I’ve had mostly, haha, it was all them [police]. It was never the parolee or the family. It’s one of them.” Perhaps due in part to his own experiences of being on the receiving end of law enforcement suspicion, Harrison described his careful approach to building trust both with his parolees and their family members during home visits:

Go to the home, talk to ’em, see what he’s been up to. Talk to the girlfriend, wife, look around the house for any violations. See what other things they have going on, what’s new. Are they upset, what mood they’re in, what future plans they have. We talk about staying out of prison, of course, staying out of jail, staying out of trouble. “What triggers make you upset?” I don’t do that every time because then it’s like “wow, man you just—you not trying to get to know me!” So they wanna do the small talk about the game and all that, what movies . . . they wanna know something a little personal. Tell ’em. I mean it’s not, you know, *really* personal, but personal. And you can tell ’em and they’re ok with it. Then they let their shields down and like, “ok, he’s alright. He’s not trying to hurt me.”

In this narrative, Harrison moves fluidly between the public safety aspects of home visits (e.g., checking for violations, talking to parolees’ significant others) and the techniques he uses to build rapport so that he can more effectively assess elements like a client’s mood and plans for the future. Notably, Harrison recognizes that his parolees desire a personal connection cultivated through self-disclosure—“they wanna know something a little personal” before he asks them sensitive questions about their emotional triggers. This personal connection might be established through gendered relational norms, such as talking about “the game” with a male parolee.

Several workers described in great detail the “speech” they give to new clients during their first meeting, where the groundwork for the relationship is established. Nelson, an Asian male agent, described how he incorporates elements of self-disclosure into this speech:

I said, “in life you have to create doors for yourself.” And so I tell these guys, “you wanna create doors right now.” And I give ’em the little example of myself. I said, “I was the bad seed in my family—I’m the black sheep.” But I think I turned out ok. I went from getting in and out of high school because I was one of those actually smart guys that didn’t need to study. . . . So I used to surf all the time. Next thing you know, I’m getting booted out from my house at 16, 17 years old and all this other mess. . . . From then, I went into the military. I was in Desert Storm. I was a gunner and all this stuff. And then I came out, Army College Fund, the GI Bill, I went to college. Earned an RN degree. . . .

I didn't know I was gonna go into the military. I didn't know I was gonna become a nurse of all things. I didn't know I was gonna be working in all these different fields in nursing. I didn't know I was gonna work in prison as a nurse/custody officer. . . . So I tell 'em, how do you eat an elephant? I told 'em one bite at a time. One step at a time, man. Don't overwhelm yourself. I said you can lean on me. I should be one of the best friends, so-to-speak on a professional level, that you know. Straight up. I said, if anybody—your old homeboys or anybody—they're giving you a hard time or anything like that, like "roll out with us," let 'em know, "no my parole officer's on me. He's riding me. He got eyes on me." You can lean on me like that. 'Cause quite honestly I think a lot of these guys are tired of all of that stuff. But that's all they know. . . . So I let these guys know, you don't have to be that way. It's your choice. It's in your hands.

Nelson's speech seems designed to reduce the perceived social distance between him and his parolees by drawing on common ground: he knows what it's like to be the "black sheep," to feel like you don't fit in and everyone expects you to fail. The implication is that if Nelson was able to succeed after difficulties in adolescence, so can his parolees. In doing so, Nelson ignores the obvious social distance between himself—a relatively well-compensated state employee—and his parolees, who may not only be permanently marked with criminal records, but who also often occupy other demographic positions strongly associated with marginalization. In urging his parolees to "create doors for yourself," Nelson communicates a belief that it is not structural inequalities that limit parolees' opportunities to build better lives for themselves, but rather, it's about "choices." This is consistent with recent research on COs, many of whom are from communities and familial circumstances that are quite similar to those of the inmates they manage. Likewise, supervision workers can function as "the transmission points of broader ideologies that conceal fundamental inequalities" (Kramer, Rajah, and Sung 2013, 538; see also: Crawley 2004; Crewe 2011; Lerman and Page 2012; Liebling 2000).

Later in our interview, Nelson observed that much of supervision work, particularly around the construction of risk, is now automated—as he put it, "the computer's making that decision." Rather, Nelson views his role as building a "professional relationship" based in trust. Nelson intuitively recognizes the value of self-disclosing his own struggles, which he believes sensitizes him to parolees' difficult circumstances and thus allows him to "look in that grey area and make decisions." Nelson views discretionary decision making rooted in an understanding of his parolees' struggles as a defining element of what he brings to his work.

A final way in which some workers referenced shared experiences—and the selective disclosure of these experiences—as being important in building relationships with clients was that of having worked in carceral settings, and of enduring the lasting effects of being in such institutional settings day in and day

out. As noted above, a defining feature of California parole is that the path to becoming a parole agent is typically by way of working as a CO in a state correctional facility (Grattet, Petersilia, and Lin 2008; Werth 2013). By virtue of their previous careers as COs and other prison staff, agents described drawing on these experiences in how they conceptualized their supervision approach. Agent Marin, a Latino male who had worked as a CO for 22 years before coming to parole two years prior to the time of our interview, viewed this as an integral part of his speech to new parolees, which he recounted to me:

Ok. Put this badge and all this other stuff away. I don't know what you heard in the institutions but with me it's not that way and you're just gonna have to trust me. In the institution there's a saying, "all you have is your word." If my word's no good, you're not good in prison. So that would be my speech. I go, "do you remember being in the joint? How we based our credibility was on our word." Even though I was a correctional officer and you were an inmate or a convict—'cause there's a difference there—you gonna have to trust me. And I don't have to trust you but I am gonna trust you.

In this way, agents referenced the "common ground" of having been in prison that they shared with their parolees in an effort to establish both credibility and a set of shared values—"all you have is your word." Agents did so while acknowledging the obvious difference between a prison staff member and an inmate, but also while expressing a belief that this divide can be transcended through the power of an intense shared experience. One agent, for example, disclosed to me that he continued to struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder after being involved in a violent riot while he worked as a CO in a men's prison; other agents referenced violent incidents they witnessed or directly experienced as turning points in their careers, serving as the impetus to transfer to a somewhat safer and less tumultuous position with parole. Agents used phrases such as "that's the way I carried myself" during their time as COs to describe a type of emotional posturing that is consistent with literature on the complex "emotional geography" of prisons (Crewe et al. 2014; see also: Crawley 2004; Liebling 2000). In doing so, agents' narratives underscored a belief that only people who have spent time in carceral settings can truly relate to this experience. As Agent Nelson put it, "when you're [working] in prison, you're doing time too."

Assets and Liabilities: How the Personal Touch Is Gendered

Gender as a social construct can be understood as being continuously defined in relationships based on the normative expectations of masculinity and femininity within a given context (West and Zimmerman 1987). Critical scholars have argued extensively that criminal justice institutions reproduce essentialized understandings of gender that are harmful to criminalized people, and to women

in particular (Hannah-Moffat 2005; Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat 2009). Indeed, the most consistent and notable way through which the workers interviewed for this project described applying a personal touch in their approach to supervision was through gendered tactics of understanding and interacting with clients. My analysis highlights ways in which workers draw on gendered aspects of themselves that they value. However, I also find evidence of the reproduction of gender stereotypes in ways that may harm the prospects of both men and women who have been criminalized.

There was consensus among workers—both male and female—that the key difference between their male and female clients is in emotional affect. Yet workers expressed a wide range of views as to the meanings they assigned to differences in emotionality, reflecting deeply gendered contradictions in how workers understand the criminalized people they supervise. Some workers viewed women as more compliant and thus easier to manage than men. These workers attributed women's increased compliance to being more "in touch" with their emotions, allowing for workers to genuinely connect with them. Parole agent Marin, for example, perceived women as being more "self-aware" of their issues; men, in contrast, are "harder" and more guarded with their emotions:

For the most part, women will open up. They're a little bit more emotional and they wanna do the right thing. . . . The thing about the women—they don't have a chip on their shoulder like the men. They know right from wrong. The guys will think they know it all. They can't do nothing wrong. "I mean hey, I'll never get caught. It'll never happen to me." Where the women—they'll think twice. And go, "well, Marin, if I go to that program I know I'll get better, but if I stay home I'm just gonna continue to use drugs." They see it. The guys will be like "pshhh. I'll be alright. I'm cool. I'm cool." They'll try to play it macho, and it doesn't work.

Yet while women are at times viewed as more capable of making the "right" decisions, women are also perceived as having objectively more needs than men. However, because these needs are not directly related to their criminal offending, workers often cannot help to address them. As Officer Napier describes it, all he can do is be understanding of women's difficult circumstances:

Women are a lot more needy than men. They just have needs. . . . Single mother, I understand the problem. They have to take their child to school. They don't have a job. They have to find means to feed them. They complain to you, that while in prison they don't have custody of their children. So those things are not part of, you know, trying to correct wrong [behavior]. . . . I understand that and I don't blame them for that.

Napier's narrative underscores how community supervision is oriented toward assessing and managing risk of criminal re-offending, and any associated

“criminogenic” needs (Hannah-Moffat 2005), rather than clients’ self-defined needs and hopes for rebuilding their lives postincarceration—which, for women especially, may involve reunifying with and caring for children (Brown and Bloom 2009). These gendered understandings in turn have bearing on how workers evaluate the “riskiness” of their male and female clients and hence the amount of time devoted to each case. As Marin’s narrative reflects, women are often considered to be at lower risk of reoffending, and thus their cases often get “bankloaded” (Lemert 1993; see also Baines and Alder 1996; Erez 1989, 1992): workers tend to focus less on female clients, prioritizing higher-risk, more dangerous men.

What could arguably be perceived as the more sympathetic traits of female clients—self-awareness, and needs often related to women’s expected roles as mothers and caretakers—was interpreted by some workers as attempts to “manipulate” them. Officer Sanchez, for example, a Latina probation officer, described how she is attuned to ways in which her female clients try to construct themselves as victims so as to not be held accountable. Consistent with prior research on workers’ perceptions of criminalized females (Gaarder, Rodriguez, and Zatz 2004), rather than viewing this manipulation as a coping strategy adopted by women to get the help they need, Sanchez perceives this approach as evasive, a shirking of personal responsibility: “With women I have to be hyper-alert to where I’m getting the signs that they’re pulling my leg and they wanna be victims. So the women play the victim card a lot. ‘I couldn’t get to my appointment ’cause I didn’t have my car and I had my kids and . . .’” Sanchez calls this “spider-webbing”: spinning a tale of excuses meant to distract the worker from the client’s noncompliant behavior. Men, on the other hand, “just tend to say, ‘I couldn’t make it. I forgot. I didn’t have the money.’ You know, one quick excuse.”

Women are also considered to be risky in other ways, particularly as a threat to male workers’ careers through potential allegations of sexual impropriety. Unprompted, several male workers described concerns about female clients alleging sexual harassment. Parole agent Cain, a white male, described this cautionary tale:

I’ve never had a female parolee that gave me that instinct telling me, you know what, she seems like she might be the type. But I have always worried about it. One of the guys that I worked with at my last office had a female parolee, very pretty girl. And she had some serious psych issues. Well, she actually started kinda stalking him. Telling him that that he was gonna end up being her husband and he told our supervisor, “you gotta transfer this case. Give this case to a female agent only. Because this is what she’s doing.” They ended up bringing her up on parole violation charges for what she was doing to the agent. He was scared to death . . . he had a wife and kids, and he goes, “what if people start thinking that I was doing something?” That was a train wreck waiting to happen.

Concern about accusations of sexual impropriety led these male workers to articulate a more distanced approach to supervising women. As Ramos, a Latino agent, put it, with his female clients “I just try to keep it friendly and professional . . . and probably less friendly. More professional, only because I don’t want them to get the wrong idea and think ‘he’s flirting with me’ or something like that, or ‘he likes me.’” Importantly, this concern about women’s riskiness may produce a double-edged effect: on one hand, reduced scrutiny of female clients may mean the discovery of fewer violations; on the other hand, less attention may also mean that female clients receive less information about opportunities for services, as was the case for some of the women in my study. Notably, no female workers expressed analogous concerns, perhaps because harassment is so commonplace as to not be noteworthy (Ireland and Berg 2006).

In addition to viewing their clients through a gendered lens, workers described “falling back into gender” (T. Miller 2011) in varying ways to accomplish their work, by leveraging gendered tactics and identities to cope with challenging situations. Importantly, these approaches, though articulated in gendered ways, transcended gender lines in terms of the workers who adopted them. While more prevalent among male workers concerned about sexual allegations, some workers of both genders described implicitly more “masculine” approaches, typified by toughness and professionalism, such as Agent Carrillo’s “by the book” approach and Officer Sanchez’s vigilance about being “spider-webbed” by her female clients.

Meanwhile, other workers—both male and female—aligned with a softer, implicitly more feminine approach. These workers articulated an approach that involves “extra” emotional and actual work, and for female workers, mothering was described as a useful tactic for managing “difficult” clients. Officer Craig, a black female veteran probation officer, uses what she calls her “motherese voice” to manage her interactions with William, her “difficult” client with schizophrenia whom even the county mental health provider did not want to serve. Motherese is “just the mothering voice in you when your baby’s [crying]. You go out there [lowers voice] ‘are you ok? What do you need?’ It works really well. ‘Cause if they talk loud and you talk loud it just escalates.” Craig agreed to take William onto her caseload after he had exhausted the goodwill of several of the newer officers, who refused to work with him because of his abundant use of racial epithets and other profanity.

The expected, institutionally sanctioned description of how Craig works with difficult clients like William would include evidence-based practices like Motivational Interviewing to help her clients set goals and identify resistance to change (W. Miller and Rollnick 2013). Supervision workers in the United States are now often trained in these practices, which have traditionally been more commonplace in fields like social work and

counseling as means of enabling workers to encourage clients' desire to change (see Wyse 2013). Instead, however, Craig described using her intuitive skills as a mother, which she views as effective not only for reducing clients' hostility, but also for establishing mutual respect and trust. While Craig's motherese is certainly not incompatible with Motivational Interviewing techniques, which include "expressing empathy," "rolling with resistance," and "supporting self-efficacy" to establish a collaborative relationship (W. Miller and Rollnick 2013), it is notable that she cites experiential knowledge and skills accrued from her personal life rather than her professional training.

Gorman, a black female parole agent supervisor, articulated a similar approach in which she provides her parolees with clear instructions for how to do a range of rehabilitative activities, from accessing subsidized housing to going on job interviews:

You have to hold their hands. I was known when I was a PA1 as being a parole agent that holds the parolees' hands. And now with my agents they call me the mother hen. My boss told me that [because] I used to hold the parolees' hands when I was a 1. And when they would go to a different agent they would say "I'm not gonna spoon feed you like Mrs. Gorman do. . . ." So my agents would be like, the parolees be like "I want you back!" . . . Everybody's got their own style . . . [some agents] are more like "I'm not gonna play." They look at their criminal history and "I'm not gonna play with you." But they been hearing that for forever. Try a different approach.

Gorman's narrative implies that "hand holding" and other techniques of providing substantive rehabilitative support is a more feminine way of doing things, like being a "mother hen." In our interview, she described examples of this approach, which included giving a parolee a ride to work if he missed the bus and was at risk of losing his job, and simply not "taking for granted" that a parolee fresh out of prison knows how to navigate a bus route to get to a job interview. Gorman's description of this approach and its stark contrast to what other agents do also lends insight into how these other agents view their roles. "I'm not gonna spoon feed you" implies a belief not only that rehabilitation is solely the responsibility of the client, but that there is something inherently weak or even emasculating about offering assistance such as bus route directions to parolees' mostly-male clientele. Particularly for those parolees who have an extensive criminal history, agents taking a "tougher" approach implicitly assume that parolees will return to criminal behavior, so all interactions are shaped around this assumption. As Gorman points out, parolees expect to be treated this way—"they've been hearing that forever." In part, then, Gorman attributes her success to adopting tactics that are new, and perhaps even a welcome surprise, to her clients.

Notably, although she describes it in mothering terms, Gorman's approach was not employed solely by female workers. Agent Marin, for example, described his work with parolees and their families as "teamwork," telling his parolees, "If you go to jail, that means I failed . . . We'll go to jail as a team." Marin's "team," based in the trust he seeks to build by noting shared prison experiences, is similar to the relationship-building approaches earlier described by male agents Harrison and Nelson as rooted in their personal experiences.

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis presented here has drawn on organizational theories of front-line work in public institutions as well as feminist theorizing about how people negotiate the false divide between public and private life to manage the challenges of their work. I have argued that the integration of these theories offers a lens through which we can understand an important, and to date understudied, component of how relationships are forged in community supervision contexts: what I call the personal touch, or how parole agents and probation officers incorporate aspects of their private selves into their work with criminalized clients. In doing so, I have shown how these workers make space within their institutionally defined roles for their own set of personal experiences and attributes. Importantly, I demonstrate that workers' narratives of what they actually do in supervising their clients illuminates how the standardized discourse of "risk" (and actuarial assessments thereof) erases much of what happens in the supervision relationship. These findings highlight ways in which workers combat the dehumanizing aspects of managerialism noted by Cheliotis (2006), as they continue to operate in the rhetoric rather than the reality of rehabilitation nearly two decades after Lynch's (2000) observation of this dynamic.

As these data reveal, workers use the personal touch to connect with clients in meaningful ways. There is some evidence that clients value this (Welsh 2017), that it can be a key aspect of "pro-social modeling" (Trotter 2015), and further, that a communicative, supportive relationship between parole agents and probation officers and their clients can lead to better outcomes, especially for women (Morash et al. 2015, 2018). Lastly, to the extent that community supervision workers are increasingly a reflection of their clients—diverse by race, socioeconomic status, and gender, as the sample of workers I spoke with were—an added benefit of the personal touch may be a reduction in the perpetuation of white, middle-class, male values and norms in the supervision of criminalized people.

However, my analysis also points to ways in which the personal touch is built on gender stereotypes, which are at least partially produced through

discourses about gendered offending. The workers I spoke with at times viewed women as lower-risk, easier to supervise, and thus potentially less in need of support, while at other times women were viewed as manipulative or as a threat to (male) workers' reputations through allegations of sexual impropriety; male clients were viewed as tougher and emotionally closed off, but also simpler to manage. The net result of all of these perceptions is that they do a disservice to criminalized men and women alike: as Wyse (2013) has shown, supervision workers making gendered assumptions may steer their clients toward certain types of rehabilitative efforts, at the expense of others that may be equally needed. In this way, discourses about what men and women "need" in the supervision context can have the cumulative effect of offloading responsibility for rehabilitation on criminalized people in ways that perpetuate gender-based oppression (McCorkel 2013; McKim 2008; Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat 2009). This can also do substantial harm to clients who don't otherwise fit worker expectations in some way (e.g., see Kerrison 2018 on heteronormative assumptions in community supervision).

The narratives presented here underscore how workers are implicitly expected, through the ambiguities and impossibilities of their institutional mandate, to bring their "full" (personal as well as professional) selves to their work—with the potential for both positive and negative consequences for their clients. These effects may be further heightened in times of intense institutional change, as has been seen in California in recent decades, in which rehabilitation has been reclaimed as a central value and goal of the criminal justice system, but without the resources to achieve it (Welsh 2017; Lynch 2000). As T. Miller (2011) notes in her study of how first-time fathers resort to gender-normative behaviors, "in spite of the best of intentions, returning to performance of selves which are recognizable, familiar, and so also gendered can be a path of least resistance" (1106) in new and challenging circumstances.

Yet although workers at times articulated the personal touch as explicitly being about gender (Craig's "motherese," Gorman's "mother hen"), these approaches may actually be less about gender and more about finding ways to subvert a system oriented toward monitoring risk: by calling it "mothering," some (female) workers were able to adopt approaches oriented more toward rehabilitation, toward helping clients identify and address their own needs, in a way that could be accepted or at least tolerated within the constraints of their institutions. It is notable too that male workers adopting similar, "softer" approaches (e.g., Marin's "teamwork") did not gender their language around such tactics. In making this observation, it is important to note Paul Rock's (2005) reminder of the trap of "chronocentrism" (Morson 1996) in criminology: the tendency to privilege more recent research at the expense of older but still relevant scholarship. In the analysis presented here,

taking a long historical view is crucial, as the assessment and management of risk was not always the primary focus of community supervision. As other scholars have observed, community supervision agencies seem to be in the midst of an ongoing identity crisis, in which they are continuously reinventing a plausible and coherent account of their distinct roles in the criminal justice system, mirroring contemporary social priorities so as to not be rendered obsolete (Simon 1993; see also Lemert 1993; Werth 2011b, 2013). Yet while institutions engage in this shape-shifting, workers on the ground may be much slower to follow along—or to do so in institutionally prescribed ways. Thus, present-day workers' narratives of risk and how they maneuver within and around it may, at least in part, be a manifestation of the professional wisdoms developed and passed along from the time before community supervision was dominated by risk. Indeed, Simon's (1993) history of parole traces earlier eras of supervision (from the Great Depression to the 1970s) in which workers utilized a "clinical" model that overtly believed in and prioritized rehabilitation. In these contexts, the use of interpersonal skills and shared experiences were very much at the foreground of the supervision approach (see, e.g., Klockars 1972; Shireman 1963).

Lastly, to the extent that, as Lipsky ([1980] 2010) contends, front-line workers' discretionary actions, in aggregate, constitute policy making, my findings speak to the overall need for more scholarship on the relational approaches and coping mechanisms of people who work in the criminal justice system. While the focus of the analysis here was on gender, the workers I spoke with drew on a wide range of social identities and lived experiences. Future research should dig deeper into the ways in which racial and ethnic identity, socioeconomic background, and prior work experience (such as workers who make the transition from CO to parole agent), among other positionalities, might also play a role in how workers exercise a personal touch. The findings presented here are limited by the interview-based nature of the dataset; additional observational research is needed to assess how workers actually employ the personal touch in interactions with clients. Watkins-Hayes' (2009) study of how welfare workers' positionalities affect how they exercise discretion offers a template for such research. Discretion involves much more than a worker bending the rules for a client; it also includes how workers "communicate with clients stylistically, the issues they choose to address during their interactions, and how they school clients in the expectations of the organization and the outside world" (Watkins-Hayes 2009, 187). More research on worker modes of communication is needed, especially on self-disclosure and the parameters in which it is both appropriate and useful for forging the working alliance in nonclinical contexts such as community supervision.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was supported by Award No. 2013-IJ-CX-0052, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

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