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Correctional Officers' Lived Experiences of Stress When Working in Solitary Confinement Units in U.S. Prisons

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Walden University

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La'Bianca Champion

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Correctional Officers' Lived Experiences of Stress When Working in Solitary

Confinement Units in U.S. Prisons

by

La'Bianca Champion

MS, Walden University, 2015

BS, Columbus State University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to shed light on the lived experiences related to the stressors that a sample of nine correctional officers (COs) encountered while working in solitary confinement (SC) units in U.S. prisons. Cognitive behavioral theory served as the theoretical framework to help to explain different ways that COs can manage their work stressors. These stressors, including lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures while conducting daily duties, lack of independent decision making, and perceived danger, were addressed by the research question. Data were obtained from a semistructured online questionnaire and analyzed using hand coding and NVivo v.11. The results indicated that COs experience stress while working in SC units in U.S. prisons. The COs reported not receiving incentives for working in SC units and supervisors having the ultimate decision authority about the inmates housed in SC. Participants reported various responses for sense of belonging and reward while working in SC. Recommendations for future research include using participants who no longer work in SC units, expand criteria beyond U.S. borders, and conduct research in different prison settings (state vs. federal). Implications for positive social change include reforms in SC units by prison administrators that focus on changing policies that assist COs and evidence-based programming aimed at providing tools to assist COs with daily stressors.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to the correctional officers and public safety professionals with whom I have had the pleasure of working over the last 8 years of my career. I also would like to dedicate this study to my two children, Kathryn and Novah, because they are my reason to keep going.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Walden University and my committee members for helping me through my journey. Thank you for being patient and not giving up on me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Correctional officers (COs) have a public safety role that is often stressful (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). Custodial COs work directly with offenders in settings such as prisons, jails, reentry centers, and detention centers (Harding et al., 2017). The prison environment can be high in stress, placing COs at risk of injury and illness (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). At any given time, COs' sense of security can become a real concern because they know that inmates may assault them, a frequent occurrence in prisons (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2016). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) listed COs as one of the occupations generally having the highest rates of workplace-related injuries in the United States.

Custodial COs who work in solitary confinement (SC) units face several stressors. Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) identified these some of these stressors as negative perceptions of policies and procedures that prohibit COs from making independent decisions while working in SC. COs also have reported experiencing strain resulting from their inability to manage mental health offenders housed in SC (DuBose, 2019). COs have described stressful experiences of working with inmates in SC who curse them out constantly (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016).

Adult offenders who are housed in SC units have little contact with staff and visitors or other inmates ("Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation]," 2016). I conducted this phenomenological study to explore the ways that COs experience stressors while working in SC. In Chapter 1, I provide the background and purpose of the study, problem statement, and research question (RQ) that guided the study. Chapter 1 also

includes a discussion of the definitions of terms; nature of the study; assumptions, scope, and delimitations; and significance of the study before concluding with a summary.

Background

Stress and burnout among custodial COs have led to some health issues and also have been linked to drug and alcohol abuse, poor job performance, and fatalities (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). Stress among COs occurs for many reasons, one of which is related to the demands of the job. Day-to-day job duties increase when there are insufficient numbers of COs to work with increasing numbers of prison inmates (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015).

COs working in SC also experience other stressors: They have less job-related discretion about how to do their jobs, lack decision-making authority that has led to strain on the job, and have low control over the work environment (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) studied the experiences of COs while performing their daily job duties in SC units and that the COs in the study felt that they did not have independent decision-making authority when determining who would be placed in disciplinary segregation (DS). Policies and procedures dictating that inmates in SC had to be locked down all day with little to do were also found as contributing to COs' stress (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). With this point in mind, COs working in SC have experienced these concerns because of the violent offender population that they encounter daily (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). COs also experience challenges working with offenders in SC who are dealing with mental health issues because COs do not know how to intervene with these inmates

(DuBose, 2019). COs deal with tragic events, such as suicide, and are always on alert while working in SC (Ricciardelli, 2019). Crichton and Ricciardelli concluded that negative perceptions of policy and procedures, along with the lack of independent decision-making authority, contributed to the strain experienced by COs working in SC. In agreement, Lambert et al. (2018) noted that the lack of supervisory feedback, the lack of independent decision-making authority, negative perceptions of policies and procedures relevant to segregation, and perceived danger while working in SC have contributed to the stress experienced by COs.

Most of the literature regarding COs has focused on COs' encounters with violent offenders in SC and the challenges of staff shortages (DuBose, 2019). COs have expressed their concerns about not having the proper resources to deal with offenders who are mentally ill placed in SC and feeling that such offenders belong in mental institutions, not jail (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Ricciardelli, 2019). Worley and Worley (2016) studied the impact of poor pay and found that it contributed to COs' violation of prison policies and procedures. Clouse and Wiltenmuth (2014) investigated the ways that incentive programs geared toward improving staff relationships and boosting morale helped COs feel as if they belonged at their place of work. The gap in the research highlighted the need to understand (a) the contribution of work stressors to COs' negative perceptions of policies and procedures, (b) how these policies contribute to COs feeling that they do not have enough decision-making authority while working in SC, and (c) the ways that the experiences of COs while working in SC affect their sense

of belonging and reward. Therefore, I conducted this study to help to close the gap in research on the stressors experienced by COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons.

This study has the potential to result in positive social change by highlighting the stressors experienced by COs working in SC units. Prison administrators could share these data with employee assistance programs (EAPs) to assist COs in SC who use their services. The EAPs could help to change COs' thinking by providing specific services to them focusing on stressors and better ways to manage those stressors. The goal of EAPs would be to make COs aware of positive and negative thinking patterns to determine their effectiveness during stressful situations. Another intervention method would be to provide incentives that boost COs' morale, such as providing lunch for COs on shift or giving them gifts or awards in appreciation of their work. Perceived danger, lack of a sense of belonging, lack of rewards, and negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making can be the basis of developing intervention methods to support positive social change among COs.

Problem Statement

Staff shortages and the placement of high-risk offenders in SC units put COs at risk of having to deal with challenging issues (DuBose, 2019). Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) identified one stressor as negative perceptions of policies and procedures that restrict independent decision-making authority about SC units. Lambert et al. (2018) asserted that COs encountered stress because of the lack of supervisory feedback, perceived danger of working in SC units, and negative perceptions of policies and procedures related to SC. In previous studies, COs have expressed not having the proper

resources to deal with offenders in SC who are mentally ill and feeling that this cohort of offenders would be more suitably housed in mental institutions (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Ricciardelli, 2019). COs working in SC have reported feeling stressed by working with murderers, and rapists, or inmates dealing with psychiatric issues (DuBose, 2019; Ricciardelli, 2019). COs working in SC also have expressed not having the proper resources to deal with offenders with mental health issues or trauma such as suicide (Ricciardelli, 2019).

Clouse and Wiltenmuth (2014) studied the ways that incentive programs meant to improve staff relationships and morale helped COs to feel that they belonged at work; however, they did not focus on COs who were working specifically in SC units. Research has shown that COs working in general areas of prisons are affected by the lack of a sense of belonging and the lack of reward (Lambert et al., 2018), but there has been scant research on these effects on COs working specifically in SC units. This gap in the research highlighted the need to understand the stressors experienced by COs working in SC and the contribution of these stressors to COs' lack of decision making and their negative perceptions of policies and procedures. It was the intent of this qualitative study to address the gap in the literature on COs' lived experiences while working in SC units of U.S. prisons.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the stressors (i.e., lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making, and perceived danger)

experienced by COs working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to analyze the lived experiences of a sample of COs. Qualitative researchers collect data that have a direct impact on the study sample as well as the larger target population (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative approach was the most appropriate research method for this study because the goal was to examine the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon.

Research Question

The study was guided by the following RQ: What are the lived experiences of stressors of custodial COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Researchers use theoretical frameworks to guide their RQs and data collection (Creswell, 2014). I used cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) as the theoretical framework to understand COs' experience of stressors when working in SC. CBT was developed by researchers such as Beck (1999) and Ellis (1992). Beck focused on the ways that thoughts influence feelings and behaviors. When this process is dysfunctional, the dysfunction likely occurs as the result of primal thinking, which leads to distorted thoughts, negative feelings, and inappropriate behaviors that can affect daily life negatively (Beck, 1999).

Primal thinking occurs when individuals perceive that their survival and vital interests are in jeopardy (Beck, 1999). One example would be the primal thinking of a soldier during a military operation related to the potential threat to survival. When this primal thinking becomes dysfunctional, the soldier would be more likely to overgeneralize the extent of risk and respond to events that do not actually present risks

as if they are threats (Beck, 1999). The soldier might shoot at or kill harmless civilians based on the primal thinking error of overgeneralizing risk.

Beck (1999) noted that the ways that individuals think can lead to ways that they feel and subsequent behaviors. In CBT, these thinking patterns are referred to as the adversity, beliefs, and consequences model, meaning that situations can trigger certain thoughts and feelings. Subsequently, individuals' actions are affected by the ways they are thinking and feeling. When thoughts are dysfunctional, maladaptive feelings and behavior often may result; however, when thinking is adaptive, feelings are not negative, and positive actions can result. An example of adaptive thinking may occur when COs learn how to handle offenders (e.g., suicidal offenders) during crisis situations and are able to process the situations appropriately. According to Beck, individuals must be able to process situations quickly so that they can make the most suitable responses.

In this study, I used Beck's (1999) conceptualization of the adversity, beliefs, and consequences model to understand the thinking patterns that may contribute to COs' experiences of stress on the job, such as lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, no independent decision-making authority, negative perceptions of policies and procedures, and burnout. CBT can help COs to adapt by giving them skills to cope with stressful encounters. By making positive or negative responses to stressful encounters, CBT can be applied to reinforce positive responses. Prison administrations, especially in regard to SC units, may be able to use CBT to develop interventions to help COs to better cope with workplace stressors.

Nature of the Study

I conducted this qualitative phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons. Researchers use the phenomenological approach to understand the study participants' lived experiences of the phenomena under investigation (Patton, 2015). A phenomenon is an event, or an experience encountered in life (Creswell, 2014). I sought to gain a more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons of the stressors that they encountered on the job.

I recruited participants from an online social media group of members who had worked with and were currently providing a forum for COs in the United States. The group administrators screen potential members, who must meet specific criteria proving that they are COs, before they can be considered for membership. In this study, the COs working in SC units answered a semistructured online questionnaire.

Data collection and analysis continued until data saturation occurred (i.e., until no new themes emerged; Bowen, 2008). I coded the participants' responses to the semistructured online questionnaire by identifying themes and subthemes. Data were uploaded to NVivo Version 11 to identify and categorize the content. During the research process, I used bracketing to avoid personal biases related to judgments and personal experiences (see Giorgi, 2012).

Definitions

Burnout: A psychological condition that is a response to chronic workplace stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

CO: Law enforcement officers who work in prisons and other detention facilities and are responsible for the supervision of adult and juvenile offenders as well as the safety and security of these facilities (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). COs have a physically and psychologically demanding job that has health and safety risks (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015).

Custodial: A term used in the correctional setting to identify individuals who are responsible for protecting, maintaining, or caring for individuals or other entities (Lambert et al., 2018).

Independent decision making: Not being in control of something or others or not being able to make decisions without relying on others (Lambert et al., 2018). COs working in SC units have negative perceptions of policies and procedures that restrict their independent decision-making authority (Lambert et al., 2018).

Perception: The ability to become aware of or interpret something through observation (Beck, 1999).

Reward: Receiving or being offered something in return for hard work (Lambert et al., 2018). Reward is important to COs who work in SC units, especially in short-staffed prisons, to show that upper management appreciate their hard work.

Sense of belonging: In the work setting, this concept refers to increased social support and perceived care from other employees and mentors (Vanndrager & Koelen, 2013). Social support happens when employees have access to resources to help them to deal with conflict and are able communicate with management. Perceived care is the amount of care that employees may feel that they are getting from the organization; for

organizations to be productive, collaboration must exist at all levels (Vanndrager & Koelen, 2013).

SC: In the correctional setting, inmates housed in SC live alone and have minimal contact with staff and visitors. Violent offenders are housed in SC to minimize their contact with other offenders and staff for the safety of others in the prison (DuBose, 2019). SC units also may be referred to as administrative segregation, security housing unit, lock unit, DS, behavior modification, special management unit, intensive management, maximum control unit, and special housing unit (Metcalf et al., 2013).

Assumptions

Qualitative research holds assumptions and beliefs that must be identified but cannot be proven to be true (Creswell, 2014). The participants in this study contributed to knowledge of the phenomenon by sharing their experiences subjectively. Researchers who follow an epistemological approach assume that their participants' experiences are valid, but the researchers do not claim that the lived experiences happened as described (Creswell, 2014). I assumed that the COs who participated in the study were able to read, understand, and provide written responses to the questions in the structured online questionnaire. I also assumed that they answered the questions honestly. SC units are similar across prisons, so another assumption was that the experiences described by the participants in surveys had the potential to be similar.

Scope and Delimitations

I focused my investigation on a sample of COs who had been or were working in the SC units of U.S. prisons at the time of the study. To be eligible to join the study, the

COs had to have worked in the SC unit of a U.S. prison for at least 1 year. The specific focus was chosen because of the need to study the stressors experienced by COs working in SC units. The collected data comprised the COs' written responses to the semistructured online questionnaire. CBT was used to inform the development of this study, but the theory was not used to explain the results.

Transferability refers to whether the level of experiences presented in the data for a specific group or target population will be similar to another group's experiences (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2019). Thick descriptions are used in qualitative research to break down the data to increase transferability (Pratt & Yeziarski, 2018) by using available technologies that can help to minimize issues that come with location barriers. Thick descriptions increase the transferability of the results (Patton, 2015). I used thick descriptions by providing specific details about the participants, their context, and my research methods and procedures.

Limitations

I collected data by having the participating COs complete an online questionnaire through a link with Google Docs. Participants had limited capability to respond to items not included in the questionnaire. To mitigate this limitation, an item at the end of the questionnaire invited the participants to provide feedback about experiences not asked about. One limitation of qualitative research is that not all the findings can be transferred to other situations or contexts. Transferability occurs when data can be applicable to other situations, contexts, or target populations (Pratt & Yeziarski, 2018). Providing detailed

descriptions of the research procedures, results, and context increased the transferability of the results.

In any study, there is the potential for researcher bias because the data are being analyzed through subjective interpretations (Creswell, 2014). I addressed any potential for bias in this study by using reflexivity (see Patton, 2015). Having constant self-awareness and attentiveness to my own experiences and potential bias helped to mitigate the potential for any biases in this study (see Patton, 2015). I used reflexivity by regularly examining my thoughts about the data and ensuring that I did not rely on my own experiences as a CO to interpret the data. I worked as a CO in a prison, and this experience led to my decision to study the phenomenon. The experiences that I gained working as a CO is how I became knowledgeable about burnout and its effect on COs. I kept a journal and shared it with my dissertation committee chair to ensure that any biases were monitored and managed appropriately.

Significance

Occupational stressors among COs can lead to security and health-related concerns, such as anger and unintentional weight loss, both of which may affect their professional and personal lives (Lambert et al., 2015). COs working in SC units also must deal with challenging populations (e.g., violent offenders, gang members, and offenders with mental health issues) as well as staff shortages (DuBose, 2019). In this examination of the lived experiences of COs regarding their lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, inability to make independent decisions, perceived danger of the job, and negative perceptions of policies and procedures while working in SC units, I focused on

the ways that the decision makers (i.e., prison wardens) can make this area of correctional facilities less stressful for COs.

COs need more resources while working in SC units. Ricciardelli (2019) found that COs had a lack of resources to deal with offenders who were mentally ill. Providing COs with more mental health training and adding more access to mental health counselors may be two ways of reducing the stress experienced by COs working in SC units. The link between COs and agency decision makers are the supervisors. Lambert et al. (2018) identified ways that a lack of access to supervisors and feedback from supervisors affected COs working in SC. Prison wardens need to become more aware of COs' stressors by the supervisors being more available to listen and provide feedback to COs working in SC.

Understanding what leads to COs' negative perceptions of policies and procedures in SC units may help prison administrators to develop tools for COs to use to cope with their stress more readily. As already mentioned, primal thinking threatens individuals' vital interests (Beck, 1999), so to help COs to manage their stress, wardens need to focus on supporting COs' use of adaptive skills, one of which is negotiation. Supervisors could help COs who have negative perceptions of policies and procedures by making themselves available to respond to COs' grievances and explain the reasons for the policies. This process might clarify COs' understanding of policies and procedures. In addition, understanding CBT will help COs working in SC units to adopt better coping strategies to deal with their negative perceptions.

Positive social change may occur if prison administrators use CBT principles to train COs to deal more appropriately with situations that might arise in SC units. This training will help COs who do not deal well with stressful situations to gain improved adaptive skills while working in SC. The participants' responses to the online questionnaire will help community organizations to understand the ways that COs experience SC with current policies and procedures in place. The data can be used by EAPs to foster a positive relationship between COs and supervisors to address the concerns of COs working in SC units, which could help to improve the professional and personal lives of COs. I used CBT to develop the online questionnaire. Prison trainers can use the results of this study to help COs to develop CBT-related skills to address patterns of distorted thoughts that can contribute to unnecessary emotional stress.

Summary

In this chapter, I focused on the need to explore the experiences related to the stressors of COs working in SC units. Occupational stressors have long been a topic of discussion for individuals in high-risk occupations, such as COs (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). I conducted a critical review of the literature on COs working in SC and the lack of extant research on the topic led to the need for this study. This study addressed the gap in the literature and helped to develop an in-depth understanding of the stressors experienced by COs working in SC units. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature focusing on the experiences of COs working in the general prison setting as well as SC. Specific ways that CBT informed this study also are discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The stressors that accompany the duties of COs working in SC units has not been researched adequately. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the stressors (i.e., lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making, and perceived danger) experienced by COs working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. In this literature review, I summarize and synthesize previous research on the phenomenon being investigated. Chapter 2 includes a discussion of the literature search strategies, theoretical foundation informing this study, and key variables and concepts related to the stressors encountered by COs working in SC units. It ends with a summary.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review was limited to research conducted in the last 5 years. I searched the following databases accessible through the Walden University Library for sources relevant to the current study: PsycINFO, SAGE Premier, Google Scholar, ProQuest Criminal Justice, and Science Direct. The keyword search terms used were *burnout, correctional officer, prison guard, segregation, disciplinary segregation, stress, officer, job satisfaction, sense of belonging and reward, lack of pay, sense of control, perceived danger, correctional officer's job perception, effects of solitary confinement, and solitary confinement*. Literature found in earlier studies considered germane to the phenomenon was reviewed through Google Scholar and added where necessary.

Theoretical Foundation

CBT has been refined by researchers since the early 1900s. Some notable contemporary researchers who have contributed to CBT were Beck (1999) and Ellis (1992). These researchers took their principles from theorists who developed behaviorism, such as Pavlov (1927), Skinner (1953), and Watson (1924). The purpose of research on behaviorism was to find ways to address human problems by applying the principles of behavior according to behaviorism theory (Watson & Watson, 1921).

Watson (1924) studied behaviorism from an observable perspective rather than through the lens of human consciousness. Watson and Watson (1921) found that classical conditioning could change behaviors. Pavlov (1927) reported that behavior could be changed through the application of the principles of classical conditioning, which involve presenting different stimuli, such as a loud noise, to generate the wanted responses. As an example, if a dog hears a loud noise before being fed, over time, the loud noise will elicit the salivation that typically occurs after the dog is given food. Skinner (1953) applied the principles of behaviorism to develop the concept of reinforcement to increase the likelihood that a particular behavior will occur again. For example, a rat is more likely to enter a box if food is used to reinforce the behavior of entering the box. The rat also is more likely to stay in the box and complete an internal maze if it receives food at the end of the maze run.

Beck (1999) and Ellis (1995) took principles from the research of Pavlov (1927), Skinner (1953), and Watson (1924) to address a criticism of behaviorism that predicting behaviors requires more than the use of principles of stimulus and reinforcement. Beck,

Ellis, and other researchers such as Bandura (1986) asserted that the thoughts that occur following the presentation of the stimulus that signals the potential reinforcement of certain behaviors must be considered. CBT was created to expand the stimulus-response sequence to include cognitions in a model in which certain antecedent events occur that trigger thoughts and feelings prior to the way in which individuals behave (Beck, 1999).

Beck (1999) described CBT by breaking down primal thinking, which operates within the frame of what is bad or good for the individual and is egocentric. Beck argued that primal thinking overtakes reflective thinking when individuals are in defense or danger mode. When human beings exaggerate this type of thinking, they tend to overwork and then damage the nervous system (Beck, 1999). People with chronic anxiety are a good example of individuals constantly in the mode of primal thinking (Oakley & Shapiro, 1989).

Primal thinking occurs when individuals believe that their vital interests may be in jeopardy, such as during emergencies, when they do not have time to reflect on what is happening (Beck, 1999). Primal thinking is disruptive to solving everyday problems, but it can be useful during life-or-death encounters (Beck, 1999). Primal thinking is unbalanced, so it creates problems for individuals who exaggerate this way of thinking (Beck, 1999). Adaptive cognitive skills such as problem solving, negotiation, and compromise become displaced when primal thinking is exaggerated, becomes dominant, and overtakes adaptive thinking (Beck 1999).

Primal thinking can lead individuals to believe that they are living under constant life-and-death circumstances in the same way that soldiers on the battlefield believe that

death might be imminent. Primal thinking can lead to considerable errors in thinking, psychological distress, and health problems (Beck, 1999). In the following example, Beck (1999) illustrated how primal thinking can result in errors in thinking and psychological stress: In what the wife thinks is an innocuous interaction, the husband explodes in anger at her because she questioned his choice of a vacuum cleaner. Errors in thinking led the husband to exaggerate the significance of his wife asking him why he had bought a certain vacuum cleaner. The husband's assumptions about why his wife asked him this and his belief that she thought he was incompetent led to his angry reaction. Initially, the wife's intention for asking was to learn about vacuum cleaners. Instead of using rational thinking in response to her question, the husband lapsed into primal thinking because he thought that his integrity was being threatened. This type of primal thinking occurs when a person overgeneralizes, which leads to exaggeration and anger. In CBT, dysfunctional thinking can explain the irrational ways that human beings might respond during simple daily interactions.

Dichotomous, or all-or-nothing, thinking is another error in thinking in which thoughts swing quickly between polar opposites (Beck, 1999). For example, individuals or situations are perceived as either all bad or all good, so if the initial perception is "all good," the discovery of one small flaw could lead to the conclusion that the individuals or situations are "all bad." Dichotomous thinking also can regulate focus in individuals who perceive everything as either good or bad (Beck, 1999). Dichotomous thinking can affect COs during their day-to-day duties in prisons. An example would be COs' attitudes toward offenders who are mentally ill. COs have reported having inadequate training

when dealing with offenders who are mentally ill, which leads to the escalation of crises that occur with inmates (Canada et al., 2020; DuBose, 2019). There is a perception that offenders who are mentally ill are violent, so a lack of training versus the use of deescalation techniques causes these type of situations to worsen (Canada et al., 2020). This type of thinking from COs contributes to dichotomous thinking because COs view any crisis with offenders who are mentally ill as “all bad;” however, when properly trained COs recognize that mental health symptoms are causing the crisis, they can use appropriate deescalation techniques instead (Beck, 1999; Galanek, 2014).

Another type of thinking that Beck (1999) applied and is referenced as primal thinking occurs when an individual labels someone else’s behavior before considering the reason for the behavior. Primal thinking plays a role in the ways that individuals process unpleasant encounters (Beck, 1999). A good example is someone getting upset after tripping over someone’s cane (Beck, 1999). After looking into the situation further, the person who tripped realizes that the other person is blind and mistakenly dropped the cane. Once this discovery occurs, the individual reevaluates the event and admits that no one is to blame. Individuals can learn to stop themselves whenever they are approaching the point of becoming angry or agitated and realize that they are about to overgeneralize the situations (Beck, 1999). Once they recognize themselves as being on the verge of this type of problem thinking, they can use certain strategies that focus on evidence that may contradict their problem thinking and ultimately correct the primal thinking that may be taking place (Beck, 1999). Beck believed that human beings could use flexible thinking

that will then open the door to logical and rational thinking. This type of thinking requires deeper thinking and more energy to problem solve more efficaciously throughout life.

CBT was useful in the current study in allowing the COs to better view the situations that they encountered by recognizing when their thoughts and behaviors were related to thinking errors. Research into the application of CBT in the correctional setting has produced effective intervention strategies that COs can use to address occupational stressors (Nordin & Ahin, 2016). Nordin and Ahin (2016) conducted a study with a sample of COs and participants from other occupations to identify occupational stressors and ways to manage them. Different factors were found to be contributing to occupational stress: unrealistic objectives, deadlines, time pressure, heavy workloads, long hours, incompetent supervisors, role ambiguity, and insufficient number of staff. Nordin and Ahin used CBT strategies to help the participants to learn to cope by either changing their thinking patterns or seeking support. Specific coping strategies included diversionary thinking to focus on doing something more practical or enjoyable; positive reframing, such as finding positive elements in negative situations; and emotional support that consists of seeking or giving reassurance from or to others. Employers can use positive reframing and emotional support strategies to reduce stress by offering programs and resources to employees who may need them. Diversionary thinking strategies, such as networking events, team outings, and effective communication training sessions, can help employees to reduce their levels of stress.

Trounson and Pfeifer (2017) wrote about different programs that have used evidence-based practices such as CBT to implement programming for COs to reduce

their levels of stress as well as improve their health and work productivity. Many of the programs initially were not specifically directed toward COs; rather, most of them had been developed for police officers or other closely related occupations. One program that used evidence-based practices was Road to Mental Readiness, a 160-minute class session during which officers learned to deal with stress and different mental health problems. During the session, COs learned what mental health is, developed stress management skills, and changed their attitudes toward mental health problems. The goal of the program was to focus on the responsiveness to occupational stressors. The program produced positive outcomes in high-risk occupations such as those in the military and the police. This program has been used in correctional settings in Canada, and the brevity of the program has been proven beneficial to high-risk occupations (Trounson & Pfeifer, 2017). The implementation of more evidence-based programming will assist COs in improving their productivity, motivation, and overall health as well as reducing psychological stress (McCraty et al., 2009).

The principles of CBT were used by Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) to explain the stressors that the COs in their study described. The COs in their study reported that they had no involvement in decisions regarding DS policy, procedures, and their responsibilities working in DS. The COs also reported feeling strained because they were subjected to constant verbal abuse from offenders, supervised violent and mental health offenders, and felt unvalued by the organization.

The primal thinking concepts described in CBT can be used to break down the thinking of COs, who work under stressful conditions. When COs are constantly in

defense or danger mode, primal thinking takes over and can be exaggerated, which may lead to errors in thinking (see Beck, 1999). The reflective thinking that COs should use on the job is intercepted by primal thinking.

The dichotomous thinking and problem-thinking concepts described in the CBT model can be used to explain COs' lack of a sense of belonging, lack of rewards, negative perceptions of policies and procedures, inadequate independent decision making, and potential burnout. COs' perceptions of not being valued or not being able to make decisions, as evidenced by Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016), could be viewed as dichotomous because the COs did not feel in control or that they belonged. The COs also described feeling vulnerable because of the way that they were being abused verbally while working with violent offenders (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016).

Problem thinking occurs when primal thinking takes over the ability of individuals to look at the reason for someone else's troubling behavior before making their own conclusions (Beck, 1999). Maladaptive primal thinking can be replaced by more adaptive ways of thinking to cope with negative feelings and actions (Beck, 1999). COs have reported not liking their lack of control; not being able to decide who goes into DS (i.e., SC); and not having the opportunity to communicate problems to supervisors, all of which have led to strain while performing their duties (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). One example would be teaching COs to use an adaptive thinking skill such as negotiating to address negative perceptions of policies in SC to reach consensus. Negotiations can be used as an adaptive way of thinking with the intent of COs and supervisors communicating about questionable policies to reach a mutual understanding.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

SC Units in Prisons

SC units hold adult or juvenile offenders whose contact with custodial staff, noncustodial staff, and visitors is minimal (“Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation],” 2016). This study from 2016 was seminal in understanding SC units in prisons, being cited numerous times in the literature on correctional health care and providing data specific to SC.

Offenders in SC have little access to vocational and educational programs or recreation; they may even experience sensory deprivation (“Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation],” 2016). Deprivation occurs when no meaningful contact occurs for certain periods and the individuals are deprived of normal stimuli, such as light and sound (*Merriam-Webster*, n.d.). The term SC is not used by every jurisdiction in the United States. Some jurisdictions may refer to SC as isolation, permanent lockdown, intensive management, disciplinary segregation, or administrative (“Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation],” 2016). Any individuals who are being deprived of normal stimuli are in SC.

Offenders can be placed in SC units for several reasons, including, but not limited to, administrative reasons, clinical reasons, gang membership, need for protection, and punishment for not following the rules (“Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation],” 2016). Violent offenders often are placed in SC units to keep staff and other offenders safe (DuBose, 2019; Ricciardelli & Crichton, 2016). The federal courts and the

American Psychiatric Association (2012) have found that placing offenders who are mentally ill in SC units is unconstitutional.

According to Gendreau et al. (2014), placement in SC has little effect on the individuals being housed in such units if the facilities meet the basic standards of human care, including adequate lighting, structure, food, water, shower facilities, and a limited amount of time to exercise. These standards are required and must be met by facilities housing offenders in SC units (Gendreau et al., 2014; “Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation],” 2016). However, the United Nations and the World Health Organization, among others, have argued that SC can be harmful (“Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation],” 2016). Some sources of harm may be a lack of lighting in the units and few, if any, social interactions. There has been an increased use of SC over the past 30 years, and on any given day, 80,000 offenders in the United States are being housed in some type of SC units in federal and state prisons (“Position Statement: Solitary Confinement [Isolation],” 2016). Many state and federal prisons use SC to ensure the safety of their facilities when dealing with violent offenders, as well as other reasons stated previously (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016).

Staff are selected to work in SC units based on experience and time employed at their perspective facilities. From my experience, staff members working in SC units have been on the job for more than 1 year (unless staffing is an issue). COs selected to work in these units often complain and must deal with issues regarding policies and procedures specific to offenders being placed in SC units, along with their lack of control over decisions making (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016).

COs supervise inmates around the clock and deal with violent offenders, offenders who are in danger, and offenders who may be in SC for administrative reasons (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). COs working in SC units are outnumbered by inmates and often are short staffed (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). Two COs must be working inside the units, and another CO must be assigned to work in the control booth to open doors inside the units. SC units are typically staffed and run differently from other prison units.

Experiences of Custodial COs Working in SC Units

COs working in SC units can have negative experiences that are the result of the nature of their duties with offenders who may be violent or mentally ill (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). COs find it stressful to work in SC units because of the increasing number of violent offenders overcrowding the units and lack of decision making regarding the placement of inmates in the unit (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Ricciardelli, 2019). COs have expressed the need to be very careful in their daily encounters with the violent offenders in SC units (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). COs who also have expressed not having the proper resources to deal with offenders in SC units who are mentally ill have shared the perceptions that these offenders belong in mental hospitals (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Ricciardelli, 2019).

Based on my own experience working in SC units, I know that COs must conduct welfare checks on offenders housed in SC units every 30 minutes and make notations of offenders' behaviors or requests. Two COs must be working inside the units, and another CO must be working in the control booth. Whenever any inmates must be moved, two or

more officers, depending on the behavior of the inmates, must escort them. The staff shortage in prisons increases the challenges that COs face while working in SC units, such as being put into dangerous situations (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016).

In their qualitative study, Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) interviewed COs ages 21 to 61 years to determine how the organization and policies affected the ability of the COs to perform their duties. The participating COs were asked to answer questions about DS in SC units. NVivo was used to code different meanings to identify patterns in their responses. The participants mentioned the lack of decision making in how DS was being run and the stress that they felt while working with violent offenders (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). One CO reported constantly placing the same offenders in DS for verbal exchanges and the frustrations from those encounters (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). Other responses focused on the challenges of dealing with psychotic offenders in DS and the lack of support from supervisors (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). The COs shared that they felt stressed because they were responsible for offenders who were placed in DS; they also felt unvalued (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016).

It was important to consider the COs' perceptions based on their lived experiences of working in SC units (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). Three themes emerged from the study: Theme 1 highlighted the COs feeling that they were managing more offenders than before, the role in public legislation shaped outcomes that may give out harsh sentencing, and how little to no new rehabilitation initiatives were created (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). Theme 2 focused on the COs reporting that management placed more offenders in DS to control the rising numbers of offenders. COs also reported having no decision-

making powers regarding the placement of offenders in DS, despite being responsible for incidences that occurred in SC units (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). Theme 3 focused on the stress of the working conditions experienced by COs working in DS (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). The COs also reported a lack of resources to help offenders with mental health challenges housed in DS and the issue with offenders just being left in their cells all day with nothing to do (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016). Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) suggested that more research be conducted on penal management of DS, rehabilitative initiatives for offenders, and involvement of correctional staff.

Ricciardelli (2019) conducted semistructured interviews either in person or by telephone with a sample of 130 COs working in Canada. The COs were recruited through word of mouth or in-person contact with the researcher. The participants were current and retired COs. Five topics were chosen for inclusion in the interview guide: motivation for entering the field; gender experiences and understanding; negotiations and constructions of safety, risk, and vulnerability; orientation toward and interactions with prisoners; and understanding of the occupational structure (Ricciardelli, 2019).

Ricciardelli (2019) analyzed the data using thematic coding. Conceptual themes emerged from the analysis. The study provided real-life accounts of COs' experiences while working in SC units and other areas of prisons (Ricciardelli, 2019). The COs expressed feeling vulnerable and fearful for their safety while working in DS units, where offenders were sent for committing infractions (Ricciardelli, 2019). The COs also expressed feeling stressed when dealing with offenders with psychiatric problems who needed to be in hospital, not DS. These COs dealing with offenders with psychiatric

problems were on constant high alert while working in SC units and sometimes needed to have three of four other COs present when cell doors were opened (Ricciardelli, 2019). One CO felt that DS and other special management units were dangerous to work in because they housed inmates who could or who had hurt other COs and inmates (Ricciardelli, 2019).

The COs in Ricciardelli's (2019) study reported dealing with common tragic events while working in prisons, such as trying to resuscitate an inmate who had committed suicide by asphyxiation in a DS unit. The COs whom Ricciardelli interviewed described stressful encounters during their daily duties indicating that working in SC units could be dangerous and contributory to the stress factors that the COs had to try to manage. Ricciardelli called for more research on COs' experiences working in prisons as well as more training for COs on how to recognize and deal with stress.

Lambert et al. (2018) conducted a cross-sectional quantitative study to survey custodial and noncustodial staff about the perceived danger of working in a high-maximum prison that housed violent and disruptive offenders. A total of 420 staff were surveyed, and 272 surveys were used in the analysis. Positions surveyed were case managers, unit managers, medical employees, recreational staff, and facility maintenance employees. Of the 272 responses, 24% were from supervisors, 76% were from men, and 50% were from custodial staff. The dependent variable was perceived danger, and the independent variable comprised a variety of workplace variables (i.e., formalization, input decision making, instrumental communication, integration, inmate daily contact, and supervision consideration; Lambert et al., 2018). Custodial staff were COs,

counselors, kitchen workers, and other staff who worked with offenders. Noncustodial staff were workers who had minimal contact with offenders. One source of stress for custodial staff was their exposure to danger; another was lack of decision making (Lambert et al., 2018). Custodial staff such as CO supervisors reported stress with their duties and perceived danger (Lambert et al., 2018). Noncustodial staff reported lower perceived danger than custodial staff did (Lambert et al., 2018). This study by Lambert et al. highlighted the need to understand the effects of high-stress jobs to implement strategies to improve working conditions.

The research has shown that working in SC units can cause strain, so it was important to focus on COs working in SC units and the stressors that they described, such as the lack of decision-making authority and the perceived danger of the job. The psychological effect on COs of working in SC units comes from being on high alert constantly for attacks by inmates and from dealing with other factors, such as coworkers, negative perceptions of policies and procedures, perceived danger, lack of a sense of belonging, lack of rewards, and lack of independent decision making (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Lambert et al., 2018; Ricciardelli, 2019).

Stressors of Custodial COs Working in Other Prison Settings

Some researchers have used instruments to measure burnout among COs working in the prison setting. Burnout is a factor mentioned in the current study to address one of the many stressors that COs experience. One popular instrument is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI, 4th ed.), which assesses burnout among different occupations (Iwanicki & Schwab, 1981). This instrument uses different scales to measure the structure of

burnout: emotional exhaustion (EE), cynicism (CY), personal accomplishments, and professional efficacy (PE; Iwanicki & Schwab, 1981; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). EE can be related to COs' lack of rewards as well as their lack of resources. CY relates to COs' perceptions; overall health; and external factors such as marital status, sex, education, and perceived danger of the job. Personal accomplishments are related to COs' lack of positive feedback from supervisors and lack of ability to provide input into decision making regarding daily operations. PE is related to COs' perceptions of being able to get the job done and dealing with occupational stress such as the lack of control over decision making and long hours (Iwanicki & Schwab, 1981).

The MBI (Iwanicki & Schwab, 1981) has helped researchers to understand burnout among different occupations to ensure the development and implementation of effective interventions (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The human services version of the MBI has been used to study the occupational burnout of COs (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Lambert et al. (2018) used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The questions answered by staff measured their perceived job danger, formalization, integration, input into decision making, feedback, supervisor communication, and instrumental communication (Lambert et al., 2018). The 5-point Likert-type scale measured responses as not informed, informed very little, informed somewhat, informed, and informed very well (Lambert et al., 2018). Ferdik et al. (2014) used a multi-item scale to survey 1,650 COs. Ferdik et al. asked the COs about age, tenure, education, security level, benefits, safety, job desirability, compensation, job excitement, coworker relations, supervisor relations, emotional dissonance, and turnover

intent. By using these types of instruments, researchers can develop themes from the data to measure the level of burnout experienced by COs.

Burnout is a “psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 206). This section focuses on COs who do not work in SC units but may work in other general prison areas. COs’ perceptions, environmental impacts, and background characteristics have been used to predict increased levels of burnout (Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2016). COs’ work perceptions have been identified as contributors to burnout among COs (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015). EE (i.e., feeling tired) is a concept showing that increased emotional exhaustion can cause burnout among COs (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Burnout can have mental and physical outcomes (Green et al., 2014). Workplace violence contributes to the burnout of COs because of the mental and physical conflicts that arise while they are conducting their duties. COs are more likely to encounter workplace violence because of their specific duties, which require that they maintain the safety and security of the prison setting (Trousion et al., 2016). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reported that COs have the highest rates of nonfatal injuries that require visits to the emergency room. COs, knowing that they may encounter life-threatening adversities while performing their duties, experience stress, and ongoing exposure to stress can lead to burnout (Trousion et al., 2016).

Ferdik et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative cross-sectional study to survey COs to predict their turnover intentions. Ferdik et al. measured specific variables: job satisfaction, work environment, salary/benefits, emotional dissonance, and job

satisfaction. Job satisfaction was directly related to the COs' input in the organization and compensation, or appreciation received (Ferdik et al., 2014). The work environment was related to the COs' perceptions of supervisor fairness, relationships with supervisors, and perceptions of independent decision making (Ferdik et al., 2014). Salary/Benefits were related to the COs' perceptions of the overall benefit packages offered to them.

Emotional dissonance referred to being able to suppress emotions and appear jovial while conducting several duties for managers, coworkers, and clients (i.e., inmates; Ferdik et al., 2014). According to Ferdik et al., COs were expected to maintain positive emotional dissonance levels while conducting highly stressful job duties and working in dangerous conditions. Job desirability was related to job-induced stress, perceptions before entering the position of CO, and coworker/supervisor evaluations (Ferdik et al., 2014). Ferdik et al. found that emotional dissonance did not have an impact on the COs' turnover intentions; however, the COs' job desirability did have a significant impact on turnover intentions. Ferdik et al. concluded that COs' turnover intentions could be reduced through better working conditions, more emotional support, and more organized as a profession.

Viotti (2016) studied stress and burnout among COs in Italy. Twenty-eight COs working in an Italian jail were interviewed in face-to-face sessions using a semistructured interview guide (Viotti, 2016). Template analysis was used to identify themes that emerged from the responses (Viotti, 2016). The interview questions fell into five categories: work content factors, contract and work organization, social factors, external factors, and organizational factors (Viotti, 2016). Example of some of the interview questions follow: "Do you think that your work is stressful?" "What are your feelings and

emotions concerning the situations to which you are exposed?” “How do you describe the social climate here among the staff of the detention block?” and “How do you describe how this institution as a whole works?” (Viotti, 2016, p. 874).

Viotti (2016) found that challenging work hours, demanding contact with prisoners, critical events, high level of responsibility, negative social image, physical structure of the prison building, and work organization contributed to the COs' work-related stress. Some of the COs expressed feeling overwhelmed having to deal with many inmate requests and responded that they could not fulfill offenders' requests because of the lack of resources (Viotti, 2016). Some COs responded to the questions about challenging work hours by saying that some COs would work 3 weeks with no break or would be called into work at the last minute (Viotti, 2016). Negative social interactions with coworkers also contributed to the COs' stress. The COs responded to questions about relationships with coworkers by stating that gossip would spread rapidly and that some COs would be excluded if they were not in certain cliques with other COs on shift (Viotti, 2016). Viotti concluded that contact with inmates was one of the most stressful parts of the COs' job.

Lack of a Sense of Belonging and Lack of Rewards

The studies described next used instruments to measure burnout among COs working in prisons. Hu et al. (2015) used the MBI-General Survey (Maslach et al., 2012) and the Work Stress Scale (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) using a 5-point Likert-type scale of responses ranging from 0 (*no effect*) to 4 (*very strong effect*) to measure burnout among Chinese COs employed at medium-security prisons. Three components used to

measure burnout were EE, CY, and PE. Hu et al. examined the contribution of work-related characteristics to burnout. A total of 1,769 usable responses were included in the analysis. Results showed that EE was related to work hours, perceived threat, alcohol drinking, education, job positions, rank, sex, and overall health; CY was related to sex, education, marital status, work hours, alcohol drinking, and perceived threat (Hu et al., 2015). PE was related to overall health, alcohol drinking, sex, education, marital status, rank, perceived threat, and chronic illness (Hu et al., 2015). Tables were used to show the results of the tests that were conducted with the participants. Hu et al. concluded that COs in China were in a more vulnerable position than other occupations because of the lack of compensation and/or reward.

Worley and Worley (2016) used a self-report survey instrument with a 5-point Likert-type scale of responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Examples of some of the statements in the survey follow: “If I am hungry enough, I would let an inmate give me food.” “I would never let an inmate break a rule. “I would never shake hands with an inmate.” “I have never had an inmate try to give me something.” “If I caught two inmates fighting, I would report this to my supervisor, no matter what” (Worley & Worley, 2016, p. 6). The categories were boundary violations focused on self-report and perception (Worley & Worley, 2016). The researchers surveyed COs’ perceptions about what they would not do or how far they would be willing to break rules with inmates in different circumstances.

Page Holding Facility, located in Coconino County, Arizona, was the site of a study where an incentive program was implemented to increase supervisor-to-staff

relationships and boost the morale of COs on shiftwork (Clouse & Wiltenmuth, 2014). A survey was conducted to see if the incentives were working for the COs (Clouse & Wiltenmuth, 2014). COs would get incentives for conducting searches in the facility and stepping up to do extra work (Clouse & Wiltenmuth, 2014). In doing these things, the facility was able to increase the safety and security of the prison and boost the COs' morale because of the rewards that they received. Supervisors also were able to get to know their staff better and create a positive workplace environment (Clouse & Wiltenmuth, 2014). The results of this study highlighted the importance of making employees feel as if they are a part of something. This study did not differentiate between COs working in SC units and COs employed in other settings inside of the prison.

Giving reward to COs also has been researched in terms of compensation and COs' perceptions of their compensation. Worley and Worley (2016) conducted a quantitative study to examine ways that compensation for COs could contribute to their violating prison policies and dealing personally with inmates. A total of 501 COs participated in the study during in-service training (Worley & Worley, 2016). A self-report instrument was used to obtain the data. Worley and Worley found that inadequate pay contributed to the COs' lack of a sense of pride and low job satisfaction. The results also indicated that perceptions of role conflict, supervisor support, peer support, and family support contributed to the ways that the COs had personal dealings with the inmates (Worley & Worley, 2016). The researchers did not differentiate between custodial COs working in SC units and COs working in other settings inside the prison.

Research on the lack of a sense of belonging and lack of rewards has shed light on important variables and concepts that help to understand CO burnout rates. Those concepts showed commonalities that included COs' perceived danger of the job, long work hours, peer support, supervisor support, job satisfaction, lack of decision making, perceptions of policies and procedures, compensation, alcohol drinking, education, position, marital status, and overall health (Hu et al., 2015; Worley & Worley, 2016). The RQ that guided the current study (i.e., What are the lived experiences of the stressors facing custodial COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons?) may add to the body of research because it focused on the lived experiences of COs conducting specific job duties.

There has been a gap in the literature focusing on the stressors experienced by COs working in SC units. Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) found that COs' perceptions of their lack of independent decision making regarding the placement of offenders in SC units directly contributed to their stress. Lambert et al.'s (2018) results indicated that COs experienced stress from the lack of feedback from supervisors on performance as well as their perceptions of policies and procedures. DuBose (2019) concluded that COs' perceptions of the way that SC units were run, along with not having the proper resources to deal with inmates who were mentally ill, contributed to their daily stress. McCarthy (2012) surveyed 197 staff from three penal institutions and noted that high levels of stress and burnout were the result of a lack of involvement in decision making, low pay, and inadequate support from administrative staff.

The current qualitative study was conducted to fill the gap in the research literature to gain an in-depth understanding of the stressors experienced by a sample of COs working in SC units to determine how they affected their sense of belonging and reward and identify the experiences contributing to COs' negative perceptions of policies and procedures. The RQ that guided the study allowed me to explore these issues.

The review of the literature highlighted the problem of burnout among COs working in general positions within the prison setting. There was a need for data on the environments that COs encounter while working in SC units to be collected and analyzed. Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) showed that COs' experiences in transporting offenders to SC were affected by the environment and their ability to make independent decisions and receive support from staff. My study addressed COs' lack of a sense of belonging, lack of rewards, perceived danger of the job, and their negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibited independent decision making.

Summary and Transition

Custodial employees such as COs have a demanding job, and they experience stressful challenges while working in SC units (DuBose, 2019). Multiple research efforts have focused on the factors contributing to stress in this occupation, including the lack of adequate compensation, high demands, and organizational factors (Lambert et al., 2018). COs' lack of organizational permission to make decisions about admitting inmates to SC units and not receiving adequate feedback on performance from supervisors have been identified as contributing to their levels of stress (Lambert et al., 2018). COs experience more strain when affected by the procedures of transporting and handling offenders in DS

(Lambert et al., 2018). Perceptions of danger also have been identified as contributing to COs feeling stressed while transporting offenders two and from SC units (Lambert et al., 2018).

Crichton and Ricciardelli (2016) studied the experiences of Canadian COs and the effects of different stressors. They found that COs were affected by having to transport offenders to DS and the perceived danger of dealing with these offenders, who had nothing to do for hours at a time because of DS policies. In addition, the COs were not allowed to make decisions about how to manage inmates when incidents happened, which was another contributing factor adding to job stressors (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016).

Dealing with offenders with mental health issues who were housed in SC units identified yet another stressor, and proper training was found to help correctional staff to feel more comfortable working with this inmate population (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Giblin et al., 2012). In another study, COs reported that the inmates with psychiatric issues whom they encountered needed to be in a mental hospital, not a prison (Ricciardelli, 2019). There was a need for this study to find ways to reduce or prevent the occupational stressors experienced by COs working in SC units to ensure that positive social implications can be implemented to assist COs while conducting their day-to-day duties. Explained in Chapter 3 are the research methods used to answer the RQ.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the stressors (i.e., lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making, and perceived danger) experienced by COs working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. This chapter addresses the rationale for the chosen RQ and research design. My role as the researcher and the methodologies of this study are explained in depth. In the chapter, I also present an overview of the data collection and analysis protocols, participant selection, sampling procedures, and data collection and analysis instruments used. Issues of trustworthiness also are addressed. Chapter 3 ends with a summary of ethical procedures, overall research rationale, and transition to the next chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The study was guided by the following RQ: What are the lived experiences of stressors of custodial COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons?

Central Concepts

In this study, I investigated several concepts, including COs' lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, and lack of independent decision making; negative interpretations of policies and procedures; and perceived danger while conducting their job duties. The lack of a sense of belonging and the lack of reward referred specifically to job satisfaction, employee-manager relationships, and the ways that these relationships contribute to the satisfaction of employees working in different organizations (see Hu et al., 2015). The concepts of the lack of independent decision making and negative

perceptions of policies and procedures focused on COs' understanding of the reasons that offenders are placed in SC units and COs' ability to have input into these procedures while working in SC units (see Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016; Lambert et al., 2018). Lambert et al. (2018) noted that perceived danger also contributed to COs' stress while working in SC units.

Rationale for Selected Research Method and Design

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore a phenomenon through the direct lens of the participants' experiences. Qualitative traditions are appropriate when researchers want to explore the lived experiences of the phenomena under investigation by collecting data from individuals and groups (Creswell, 2014). After a thorough review of the five designs that can be used in qualitative research (i.e., phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, and case study), I chose phenomenology as the most appropriate approach to conduct this study.

The phenomenological approach is used by researchers to explore individuals' lived experiences of the phenomena being investigated to identify themes that emerge from the analysis of the data (Creswell, 2014). Using a phenomenological approach allowed me to understand the participants' lived experiences of working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. I sought to determine how the COs' experiences related to their lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, and lack of independent decision making; negative perceptions of policies and procedures; and perceived danger of the job.

The other four qualitative research designs were not as suitable for this study. Researchers use a narrative approach to obtain data from one or two participants through

stories shared by the participants about their experiences related to the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2014). Researchers who are interested in obtaining stories from only one or two participants might find that this approach serves their research needs; however, researchers who are interested in deriving theoretical principles from the participants' lived experiences use the grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2014). It was not my intention to develop a theory or have the participants tell stories while conducting this research, so these two approaches did not meet my research needs. In the case study approach, researchers collect data from multiple sources that are combined to conduct thematic analyses (Creswell, 2014). Researchers who employ the ethnographic design explore learned patterns of values, norms, and behaviors from groups and how they contribute to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2014). In this study, I focused on the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon, so neither the case study nor the ethnography design was appropriate.

Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2014), researchers can assume one of four roles while conducting their studies: participant as observer, nonparticipant observer, observer, or participant. The participant as observer observes and participates in the activity, the nonparticipant observer has no direct contact with the participants, the observer observes the participants' responses without the participants knowing when the researcher is present, and the participant role occurs when the researcher participates with the participants during data collection (Creswell, 2014). In the current study, I served as an

observer because I documented the experiences that the participants shared with me when they completed the structured online questionnaire.

My role as the researcher presented minimal ethical issues because I did not personally know the participants who completed the questionnaire. I ensured that all data remained confidential by assigning codes to keep the data organized. I had no correspondence with the participants because the study was anonymous. Participants were notified of the study criteria via Facebook on the approved group's page. Informed consent was provided via a link to Google Docs in the initial post.

The administrators who oversee the social media page gave me permission to post the solicitation for participants. The closest relationship that I had with the participants was that we worked in the same profession but in different states and at different prison facilities. I addressed all possible biases that could have arisen because of my history of employment as a CO in the SC units of state prisons. As a CO, I experienced situations that may have been similar to those experienced by the participants, so I used bracketing during every part of the data collection phase. My bracketing process was documented, and the chair of my dissertation committee was able to review and monitor the data collection and analysis procedures. No ethical issues arose because I ensured that no participants were identified, and no conflicts of interest occurred.

Methodology

Population

The phenomenological approach used in qualitative studies requires the selected participants to have experience of the chosen topic (Creswell, 2014). To join the study,

potential participants had to have worked as COs and must have held responsibilities associated with working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. Participants also needed to have 1 year or more of experience working as COs.

I used the approved Facebook group for participant recruitment because its members had to be COs. During the initial criteria screenings, interested COs had to verify the departments and/or agencies that they were affiliated with. Interested members also had to list their job titles and years of service for their respective departments or agencies.

Sampling

I used purposeful sampling to obtain participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative studies to gain specific information based on the lived experiences of the participants with the phenomena being investigated (Patton, 2015). Using this rationale allowed me to conduct an in-depth study of the lived experiences of custodial COs working in the SC units of U.S. prisons and the stressors that they experienced (see Patton, 2015). When using purposeful sampling to obtain in-depth information from the participants, researchers must use approaches that fit their investigative goals (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), extreme or deviant cases are appropriate for researchers who want to do some type of investigative learning to foment changes in specific areas or programs.

I obtained data from a sample of COs who had experience working in SC units. The results of this study shed light on the experiences of the COs related to stress while working in this setting and the ways that their experiences may contribute to positive

social change in the prison setting.

Sample Size

Phenomenological studies have samples ranging in size from three to 25 participants (Creswell, 2014). A small sample size allowed me to conduct in-depth reviews of the participants' responses to obtain rich data (see Creswell, 2014). I recruited the participants for this study from a large group on Facebook by posting a request on the site for volunteers. The announcement informed potential participants of the purpose of the study and the criteria to join. Volunteers were asked to complete a questionnaire via an online link to determine their eligibility to be in the study and confirm that they had worked or were currently working in SC units and for how many years (see Appendix A). Participants who met the eligibility requirements were directed to click on the online consent form to agree and then complete the online questionnaire (see Appendix B). All disclaimers were written in the consent form, and once potential participants agreed to the consent, they were directed to the questionnaire.

The online social media group from Facebook currently has 53,000 members who are COs, have been COs working in other positions in the U.S. correctional system, or have retired as COs. I was given permission from the administrator of the online social media group to recruit participants to complete the online questionnaire. I also shared my letter of approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB; approval #03-08-22-0451091) to assure them that I was going to conduct ethical research.

Instrumentation

I collected data from a sample of nine anonymous participants, all of whom completed the semistructured online questionnaire. The questions were developed from past research on CO burnout rates but were adapted specifically for custodial COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons. The phenomenon included stressors such as COs' lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, perceived danger of the job, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that disallowed independent decision making while working in SC units, and how these stressors could lead to burnout. This instrument facilitated the collection of data from which I could develop a full understanding of the SC environment from the perspectives of COs.

Data Collection

I collected data from a semistructured online questionnaire. The participants, whom I recruited from their Facebook social group, completed the questionnaire anonymously. Many previous researchers have used qualitative methods to create questionnaires to collect their data. According to Patton (2015), researchers can use three types of questionnaires: semistructured, structured, or unstructured. The specific needs of a study and a researcher's preference will determine which type is the most appropriate. Patton described strategies that can be used in questionnaires: open-ended questions, fixed responses, closed questions, informal conversations, and interview guides. There are strengths and weaknesses in each approach, and Patton suggested that researchers weigh them based on the needs of their investigations.

I chose a semistructured questionnaire protocol because it gave the participants access to an online link to answer the questions without my needing to be present as the researcher (see Patton, 2015). In the questionnaire, I asked open-ended questions to allow the participants to respond in a discussion format. The straightforward question-and-answer questionnaire format that uses structured and closed questions was not appropriate for this study. There was a need for the participants to provide detailed responses that closed questions could not provide.

Questionnaire Protocol

Participants provided informed consent via an online link. I followed the suggestions of Patton (2015) by advising the participants to read the consent page and contact me if they had any questions. After the participants gave their consent, they were directed to the questionnaire. COs who were currently working in or had worked in SC units completed the questionnaire. All correspondence took place either online or through email. I kept confidential records of communication throughout the data collection process. The results will be published, so the participants will have access to the finished study, and this process will serve as the debriefing procedure.

Data Analysis Plan

I used bracketing during the data analysis phase to ensure that only the participants' responses on the questionnaire were included in the reporting phase. All participant responses were read multiple times, and all interpretations were recorded via logs. I recorded different interpretations of the participants' responses (see Giorgi, 2012).

Giorgi (2012) stated that to ensure the credibility of their studies, researchers must set aside personal experiences, draw out any interpretations, and analyze them.

I used NVivo v.11 as the primary data analysis tool. The software also was used to organize the data collected from the participants (see QSR International, 2015).

Researchers can organize the data for analysis and store them using NVivo v.11 (QSR International, 2015). Creswell (2014) noted that software programs used in qualitative studies provide efficiency during the data analysis phase because they help researchers to organize emergent themes. I also used hand coding as a secondary data analysis tool.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility and Confirmability

Researchers play an important role in qualitative investigations. According to Creswell (2014), the beliefs and related interpretations that qualitative researchers bring out in their studies make them a unique part of the research process. I used reflexivity, the process by which researchers constantly examine what they know and how they know it, to ensure trustworthiness in this study (see Patton, 2015). By using reflexivity, I was able to review the participants' responses from the same perspectives as the participants, and I constantly checked to make sure that I was not reviewing the data based on what I already knew about the phenomenon. I reviewed the collected data to ensure that I was not including any experiences that I may have gained from working as a CO. I also mentioned my previous connection to this phenomenon to the participants because I worked in corrections and was a CO for 5 years prior to conducting this study. Reflectivity was constantly revisited during this study. Creswell asserted that qualitative

researchers need to shed light on the participants' past experiences with the phenomena and record their interpretations of them. This process increased trustworthiness during the data collection phase.

Dependability and Transferability

I assessed both dependability and transferability for the qualitative study.

Dependability was assessed by ensuring that the research procedures remained consistent. There was no change in the way that the participants were recruited, and there were no changes made during the data analysis. Triangulation requires the use of data collection methods that facilitate a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) viewed triangulation as adding credibility to qualitative studies. I achieved triangulation by obtaining the different perspectives of a sample of COs working in SC units of U.S. prisons. Using this method also allowed me to gather data and reach data saturation, which occurs when no new data are being collected, and at which point, data collection can stop (see Patton, 2015). Transferability is a method whereby detailed descriptions obtained during the data collection phase can be used in other contexts or settings (Patton, 2015). Transferability was assessed in this study by thoroughly explaining the data that were collected.

Ethical Procedures

Researchers must address ethical issues at each phase of qualitative research. Creswell (2014) described the four stages of research when ethical considerations must be made: (a) beginning, (b) data collection and analysis, (c) data reporting, and

(d) publication. It also is important for researchers to receive IRB approval from the university supporting the study as well as participant approval before collecting their data (Creswell, 2014). As mentioned earlier, I secured approval from Walden University's IRB before conducting the study.

Creswell (2014) stated that the beginning phase should include disclosure of information about the study to potential participants to avoid undue pressure to join the study. Full disclosure of the purpose of the study and an explanation of the data collection protocol were given to the participants to ensure that no ethical concerns arose. Prior to data collection, I assured the potential participants that they did not need to provide any confidential or otherwise sensitive information to be eligible to join the study. I also advised them that the online questionnaire was anonymous. I gave all participants alphanumeric identifiers (i.e., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) that were used during data analysis. During the analysis phase, I addressed ethical concerns by reporting the results with honesty and integrity (Creswell, 2014). For compliance purposes, I maintained an audit trail of the data that I collected and stored during the study. For the publication phase, I will post the results of the study on the online social media page. Proof of compliance with Walden University's IRB will be kept to address any ethical concerns.

Security Measures

I stored all of the collected and confidential data on my personal computer inside an encrypted folder. The data were backed up on a USB drive. All hard copies of any documents used during this study are stored in a locked filing cabinet in my residence. Only my committee chair and I have access to the confidential stored data, and no data

will be shared unless the university's IRB requests them. I will store the data for 5 years following completion of the study, after which time I will destroy all electronic and hard copies of all data that I used and collected.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the stressors (i.e., lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making, and perceived danger) experienced by COs working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. Included in this chapter were details about the rationale for choosing a phenomenological approach and explanations of the recruitment, data collection, and data analysis protocols.

Phenomenology is the most appropriate approach when conducting exploratory research. Only participants who had experience with the phenomenon under investigation were recruited. I recruited participants from Facebook. The administrator of the group approved my request to recruit participants. Participants were COs who were working in SC units or had worked in SC units for more than 1 year. Data were collected using a semistructured online questionnaire. I used NVivo v.11 to assist in the analysis of the questionnaire responses.

Issues of trustworthiness were addressed by ensuring that credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability were achieved. Ethical issues were addressed throughout the study. Researcher bias was addressed using reflexivity and bracketing. Results are reported in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the stressors (i.e., lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making, and perceived danger) experienced by COs working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. Data were collected from participants through an online questionnaire. The study was guided by the following RQ: What are the lived experiences of stressors of custodial COs working in SC units of U.S. prisons? In this chapter, I explain the data collection and data analysis processes as well as provide the results.

Setting

As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, I recruited participants for this study using Facebook. There was one outlier regarding the stressors that the COs experienced with one participant mentioning that some inmates in were placed in quarantine because of their exposure to COVID-19 had to be housed in SC units (i.e., segregation). This participant reported the number of beds that had to be dedicated to inmates in quarantine. This information was collected from one participant early in the recruitment process, so I continued to monitor for further mention of quarantine or COVID-19, but no other participants reported this issue.

There was some difficulty obtaining participants during the initial recruitment effort, so I posted the same recruitment information on Facebook again. After doing this, I did obtain a few more participants. Data for the study were obtained from the nine participant responses that resulted from both recruitment posts.

Demographics

Nine participants who met the criteria to be in the study completed the online questionnaire. To be included in the study, they had to be working in SC units as COs at the time of the study and had to have been working in SC for at least 1 year. They also had to complete and return the signed informed consent before completing the questionnaire. The participants remained anonymous, and I initiated no contact with anyone who completed the online questionnaire. All participants were assigned alphanumeric identifiers (i.e., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.).

Data Collection

As mentioned in the recruitment post on Facebook, participation on the study was voluntary and anonymous. I did not ask for or collect any identifying information from any of the participants. The goal was to encourage more participants to complete the online questionnaire. During the data collection phase, I was aware of the concerns some participants might have had about not wanting to share frustrations about working in SC units. The online questionnaire was posted on Google Forms for 1 month, so this provided ample time for the nine participants to complete it.

Google Forms facilitated creation of a semistructured online questionnaire of 25 open-ended questions that could be completed anonymously. The participants could response to the questionnaire in as much detail as they chose. Because the questionnaire was anonymous, I saw only the participants' responses, not who specifically answered any of the questionnaire items. The 25 questions asked for responses about the central concepts of COs' lack of sense of belonging, lack of reward, and lack of independent

decision making; negative interpretations of policies and procedures; and perceived danger while conducting their duties in SC.

Data Analysis

I imported the questionnaire responses into a Microsoft Excel document from Google Forms. The Excel spreadsheet was organized to show each participant's responses in the order in which they were received. The spreadsheet also was broken down to show each participant's responses to the 25 questions. This Excel spreadsheet was then imported into NVivo v.11 to be organized and analyzed (see QSR International, 2015). I coded in NVivo v.11 to identify patterns and themes in the responses (see QSR International, 2015).

From this coding, three themes emerged that highlighted the ways that COs experienced stress while working in SC: problem inmates, COs' decision making, and supervisors. The theme of problem inmates was identified as playing a role in how the COs experienced stress while working in SC. There were several subthemes related to this theme: inmates with mental health issues, violent inmates, inmates flooding their toilets or sinks, and good inmates. These subthemes were prevalent in the data obtained from six of the nine participants. The theme of COs' decision making emerged in the responses indicating that the COs were not able to make decisions about ways that the SC units were administered. The subtheme of making the ultimate decision pointed to the inability of the COs to decide who would be housed in SC and the time frame the inmates were housed there. The theme of supervisors also was identified as playing a role in COs' stress while working in SC. The subtheme of good supervisor appeared in the responses

of five of nine of the participants. These three themes and their subthemes were dominant contributors to the ways that the COs experienced stress while working in SC.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Recruiting as many participants as possible helped to maintain the transferability of the data to other research settings. Nine participants completed the anonymous online questionnaire. As already mentioned, the participants had to be working in SC at the time of the study and had to have worked in SC for at least 1 year. Age, rank, and gender were not criteria for joining the study or completing the questionnaire. Participants completed the online questionnaire with the understanding that their responses would be anonymous.

To ensure the credibility of the data being analyzed, I conducted constant self-checks of the collected data to address any researcher biases and ensure that I did not misrepresent the data. I interpreted the data as authentic because the responses were anonymous, which gave the participants the opportunity to express themselves more openly. My own experience with the phenomenon being studied did not influence the participants during the announcement of the study. I used reflexivity and bracketing to ensure that the data accurately reflected the participants' responses. There were no adjustments needed for transferability. I collected all the responses to the questionnaire and did not set a limit on the sample size.

Results

COs' Lack of Independent Decision Making and Negative Perceptions of Policies and Procedures

According to the data obtained from the online questionnaire, the COs had opinions about policies, procedures, and independent decision making. Six of nine participants responded that SC policies put a strain on their workday. Participant 6 wrote that “no, not really, I may say I have an issue or be concerned about an inmate, but the supervisor makes the ultimate decision” when asked about the ability to make decisions on SC policies and procedures. Participant 9 gave a similar response, noting that “no, leadership will review policy, make changes and without asking our opinions about conditions in SC.” Participant 1 wrote “every single day, every hour” when responding to a question about policies and procedures putting a strain on daily duties while working in SC. Three of the nine participants had similar views that the policies, procedures, and independent decision making did not affect their daily duties while working in SC. Those same three participants had similar views that focused on the policies and procedures being put in place for a reason and that they were good for the facilities.

Six participants had negative perceptions of the policies and procedures in SC, and those same six participants had similar views about their ability to be able to make independent decisions. Participant 2 responded that COs' contribution to policies and procedures in SC “depend[ed] on the captain in charge of the unit.” There were no other significant responses relating to their perceptions of policies, procedures, and decision-making abilities in SC.

COs' Lack of a Sense of Belonging and Lack of Reward

The COs expressed a variety of viewpoints when answering questions about the lack of a sense of belonging and lack of reward. Four of the nine participants had similar viewpoints focusing on administration's views of the COs' work in SC. The COs felt that administration viewed their work as very important. Participant 4 responded that it was "very important [because] without the line staff, they'll have to do the work." Participant 7 wrote that "they say we are very important," and Participant 8 responded that "I think they view us as the wheels of the operation." These participants agreed on how they were viewed by administration.

Five of the nine participants had different views. Participant 1 wrote that administration viewed them as "the scum of the earth, and the inmates are always saints. They didn't do nothing wrong to be incarcerated." Participant 6 responded that "they say we are important, but I don't think they mean it." Participant 9 answered the question by writing that "they do not value the work we do, but they always tell us they do."

In one question on the survey, I asked if the COs felt that they were part of a team. Seven of the nine participants did feel this way, but two other participants did not. Participant 9 wrote, "Ultimately, I feel like it is everyone for themselves." Participant 1 wrote, "No, not always, but we try to get along until the shift ends."

A similar question asked the participants to share how the COs got along with each other while working in SC. Seven of the nine participants responded that everyone got along. Participant 2 wrote that "there is no time to not get along." Participant 9 wrote that "the staff are okay for the most part, and the ones I don't like, I just stay away from."

All nine participants gave positive responses to the question asking how much the COs in their units helped or supported each other. Participant 2 wrote that “to the extreme, we talk with each other about our good and bad days and talk through problems when we can. Alcoholism, substance abuse, sleep deprivation, use of force, follow-throughs and finding out a long-time staffer is dirty.” Participant 6 answered that “we assist each other if there is an emergency, or we go and get lunch for each other if we don’t have enough time separately.” Participant 4 wrote that “anytime there is a call for assistance, we’re all coming with blue lights on to each other’s aid.”

All nine participants answered the question about how often they talked to their supervisors as every day or daily. The participants also had similar responses when asked what triggered talks with supervisors. They noted that the supervisors commonly conversed with them when making their security rounds to check on the COs and the SC units. The participants also responded that their supervisors showed them respect.

I also asked specific questions on the survey that focused on the COs’ receipt of rewards or incentives for working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. Eight of the nine participants wrote “no” when asked if they received incentives for working in SC units. Participant 4 answered with “hazardous pay” as a reward for working in an SC unit. Participants had different responses when asked if receiving incentives affected their ability to do their jobs negatively or positively. Participants 1, 3, and 5 had similar responses that receiving incentives did not affect their ability to do their jobs. Participants 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9 wrote that not receiving any incentives had a negative impact on how

they did their jobs. Participant 9 wrote, “Negatively, we need incentives.” Participant 4 answered that “it doesn’t, it would be nice getting paid shift differential.”

Perceived Danger While Conducting Duties

The last few questions on the questionnaire addressed perceived danger and typical stressors while working in SC. When asked how they got along with inmates while working in SC, four of the nine participants answered that the inmates were generally good and only gave them problems occasionally. The other five participants responded that the inmates were constant problems. Participants 7, 8, and 9 wrote that the inmates would curse them out, throw food, spit on them, and try to fight with them.

All nine participants answered that working in SC was dangerous. Their perceptions of danger were centered around experiences related to being attacked by offenders or by inmates refusing to comply with rules in the SC units. Participant 4 wrote a response explaining how an offender who refused to lock down after getting a time out resulted in a use of force to gain compliance from the offender. Participant 1 responded that “every day is dangerous when working with convicted felons.” Participant 2 wrote about feeling in danger when having to take a weapon away from an offender who was 6’4” and weighed about 260 pounds.

In other survey questions, I explored the participants’ overall feeling of stress while working in SC. Participants had similar responses to these specific questions. Two questions focused on the workload in SC units when they are staffed and understaffed. Participants wrote that working in understaffed SC units was difficult. Participant 7 wrote, “Very, very, very hard, it’s just exhausting for all staff having to do multiple jobs.”

Participant 1 answered that “it’s always understaffed.” Except for Participant 1, the other eight participants were consistent in mentioning that working in SC units was less stressful when the units were fully staffed.

Six of the nine participants responded with a “yes” to the question about feeling exhausted while conducting their duties in SC. Participant 6 did not answer this question. The last question focused on burnout while working in SC. Six of the nine participants responded that they felt burned out working in SC, while the other three participants answered that they did not.

Summary

The recruitment, data collection, and data analysis were consistent with the information presented in Chapter 3. Potential participants were apprised of the criteria to join the study, the rationale for conducting the study, and ways to contact the researcher on the informed consent page. Accessing the link and completing the questionnaire indicated the participants’ consent. No participant contacted me directly with any questions about the study.

Analysis of the participants’ responses to the questionnaire indicated that the COs experienced stress while working in SC. They also reported having minimal decision-making abilities, with supervisors making the ultimate decisions about inmates being housed in SC units. The responses to the questions about the lack of a sense of belonging and the lack of rewards were mixed: Some participants responded that they were viewed by administration as important, whereas other participants felt that they were not. Feeling stressed and exhausted were consistent responses to some of the questions. All

participants wrote that it was dangerous to work in SC units. The COs also reported being exhausted while working in SC units, especially when they were understaffed. The results are interpreted and discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the stressors (i.e., lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making, and perceived danger) experienced by COs working in the SC units of U.S. prisons. Because there has been scant previous research on the ways that COs working in SC units experience stress, it was necessary to develop an in-depth understanding of these stressors so that changes may be considered to improve COs' working conditions. Currently, only supervisors make the ultimate decisions about the functioning of the SC units. The results indicated that the COs in the study had negative views of constant policy changes being made in SC units. The COs also reported that the constant changes put a strain on their ability to complete their duties and increased their levels of stress.

Interpretation of Findings

CBT (Beck, 1999) was the theoretical foundation of the study. CBT has been used to develop evidence-based programming to help employees to handle job stress more efficaciously (Beck, 1999). Dysfunctional thinking may explain the irrational way that humans might respond during daily interactions (Beck, 1999). According to Beck (1999), because individuals perceive situations as good or bad, dichotomous thinking may help them to make more rational and less emotionally based responses. The goal of evidence-based job readiness programs is to help employees to reduce their levels of job-related stress and handle crisis situations by positively reframing such negative encounters (Nordin & Ahin, 2016). Positive reframing help employees to find the positive aspects of

negative situations (Nordin & Ahin, 2016). Prior to this study, research on the ways that COs experience stress working in SC units in U.S. prisons was scant. Based on the results of the current study, COs' negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibited independent decision making and identified their perceived danger of the job were contributing factors to their stress.

Viewing the results through the lens of CBT (Beck, 1999) confirmed the need for evidence-based programming for COs working in SC units. There was consensus among the nine participants regarding their inability to make decisions related to the functioning of SC units. However, the results indicated that administration viewed the COs' jobs as important and that positive interactions did occur with supervisors. The results also highlighted the need for more staff in SC units to share the workload and alleviate the need for COs to perform multiple jobs because of insufficient staff.

Previous research has shown that COs have expressed negative perceptions of offenders with mental health issues based on their encounters with them and the lack of training to deal with various situations that arise from the issues (DuBose, 2019). Canada et al. (2020) reported that the lack of training in dealing with offenders with mental health issues often led to the escalation rather than the deescalation of crises.

The COs in the current study also perceived the work environment as dangerous, stemming from encounters such as being attacked by offenders. Only four participants reported having minimal conflicts with inmates, but all nine participants reported the SC work environment as dangerous. Because of their inability to make decisions regarding the functioning of SC units (Crichton & Ricciardelli, 2016), the COs identified the need

for incentives to work in SC units and the strain of not getting more money to perform their duties. Eight of nine participants reported not receiving incentives for working in SC units.

The use of evidence-based programming would help to improve COs' thinking processes when dealing with crises in SC units. Beck (1999) asserted that human beings can use adaptive thinking to deal with negative perceptions. Using adaptive thinking also might help COs to communicate their concerns to administration in clear and forthright ways.

Limitations of the Study

I anticipated limitations in the data collection related to not knowing if the participants would answer each question honestly or fully read the consent page. There was no way of knowing if the COs who chose to join the study did, in fact, work in SC. I intend to report the results of the study on the Facebook page.

Another limitation was not being able to control the willingness of members on the Facebook page to participate in the study. The data collection process was reflective of the experiences that the COs had had over the course of their careers. There was no time-specific requirement for this study, except that the participants had to have worked in SC for at least 1 year.

Data collection continued until data saturation was reached. I was confident that the responses from the sample of nine participants would be adequate for data analysis.

Recommendations

Because of the sensitive nature of the phenomenon under investigation, future researchers might also consider collecting their data from anonymous participants who complete online questionnaires. Some potential future participants may not be comfortable engaging in personal interactions with researchers. Consideration also should be given to inviting potential participants who may no longer be employed at U.S. prisons or SC units in particular. Individuals no longer employed in the U.S. prison system may be more comfortable or amenable to responding to questionnaires without fear of reprisal. Other recommendations include expanding the target population beyond U.S. borders or conducting research in different prison settings (i.e., state versus federal) to explore differences in policies and procedures relevant to their SC units and shed light on the different aspects based on custody level.

SC is a topic that can be explored in different ways to develop a better understanding of the working conditions of COs assigned to SC units. Discussing mental health offenders housed in SC and the stressors that COs encounter when dealing with that specific SC population is another area of research worth considering. I did not specify inmate demographics in this study, so future researchers might want to consider focusing on those differences, particularly in terms of the role of COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons.

Implications for Social Change

The position of CO requires mental and physical readiness. Different aspects of the CO work environment in U.S. prisons can result in job strain and stressors. This study

focused specifically on the stressors (i.e., lack of a sense of belonging, lack of reward, negative perceptions of policies and procedures that inhibit independent decision making, and perceived danger) experienced by COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons. Unless these stressors are dealt with by wardens and other administrative leaders, the work will continue to put a strain on the COs working in SC units. The results of this study indicated the need for reform in terms of the ways that administration handle those stressors.

Prison facilities across the United States need to implement specific evidence-based programming and provide incentives and positive changes to address the stress experienced by COs working in SC units. Additional CBT-based research may help to generate more opportunities for positive social change because it may give prison administrators a deeper understanding of the needs of the COs working in the SC units in their correctional facilities. Policy changes need to focus on the safety and security of everyone in prison facilities. Cognitive distortions, as defined by CBT, can contribute to stress-related disorders such as burnout.

Conclusion

COs protect the community and undertake duties that can result in stress and danger to themselves. COs who work in the SC units of U.S. prisons are responsible for guarding inmates who have been placed in SC for committing offenses that include violating prison rules and attacking staff and other inmates. Other reasons may be related to administrative issues or the mental health challenges experienced by some inmates. The stress that accompanies the job highlights the importance of prison facilities having

resources available to help COs deal with different and, sometimes, difficult daily encounters. By exploring the stressors experienced by a sample of nine COs working in SC units in U.S. prisons, the results of this study add to the body of literature on the topic and give administrators and researchers alike the opportunity to improve the working conditions of COs.

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Appendix A: Correctional Officer Qualification Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in completing this questionnaire to assist me in this study.

Please answer these short questions below to ensure you meet the criteria to participate in this study. Again, thank you for your help!

1. Are you currently a Correctional Officer working in a solitary confinement unit of a prison?
2. How long have you been working in the solitary confinement unit?

(If COs meet the criteria they will be sent to a link where they can read the consent form).

Appendix B: Semistructured Online Questionnaire

1. Describe the type of solitary confinement unit you work in (e.g. segregation, administrative, disciplinary unit).
2. Describe a typical shift, what do you do when you first get to work, then as the shift continues, and what do you do at the end of your shift?
3. How often do you talk to your supervisor?
4. What triggers a talk with your supervisor?
5. How much respect does your supervisor show you?
6. How comfortable are you with talking to your supervisor about topics that could get you or someone else in trouble?
7. Do you feel that you are a part of a team?
8. How do you get along with other COs in your unit?
9. How much do COs in your unit help or support each other? Give examples of help or support?
10. Can you make decisions about policy and procedures in solitary confinement?
11. How much are you able to contribute to administrative decision-making that affects your job directly?
12. Do the policy and procedures set forth by your administration for conducting duties in solitary confinement put a strain on your workday?
13. How does your administration view the work of COs? How important does the administration think COs are?
14. Do you receive incentives for working in solitary confinement units?

15. Does receiving incentives affect your ability to do your job negatively or positively?
16. How do you get along with inmates while working in a solitary confinement unit?
17. What is stressful about your job?
18. How does job stress affect you during work?
19. How does job stress affect you after work?
20. Describe a situation that was very high stress for you and what was stressful about it?
21. Describe a situation that was very dangerous for you?
22. How is the workload while working in the solitary confinement units when it is under-staffed?
23. How is the workload while working in the solitary confinement units when it is fully staffed?
24. Do you feel exhausted while conducting your duties in the solitary confinement unit?
25. Would you say you were burned out since taking on the duties, specifically in the solitary confinement unit?