

Emotional inequities: exploring qualitatively the relationship between gender, emotional labour and well-being in UK prison officers

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WHAT WE KNOW...

Emotional labour involves inducing or suppressing feelings to bring about positive emotional states (Hochschild, 2012). It is based on implicit and informal rules, known as **'feeling rules'**. This project explores how prison officers in the UK use emotional labour to manage their own emotions, along with those of co-workers and prisoners. Limited research shows that one dominant rule is that emotions should be suppressed, often in ways that conform with the masculine occupational culture (Barry, 2020). "The relationship between emotional labour and mental health is considered a 'double-edged sword' (Phillips et al, 2021), with relatively little known about the adverse psychological impact of managing emotions within this occupational group."

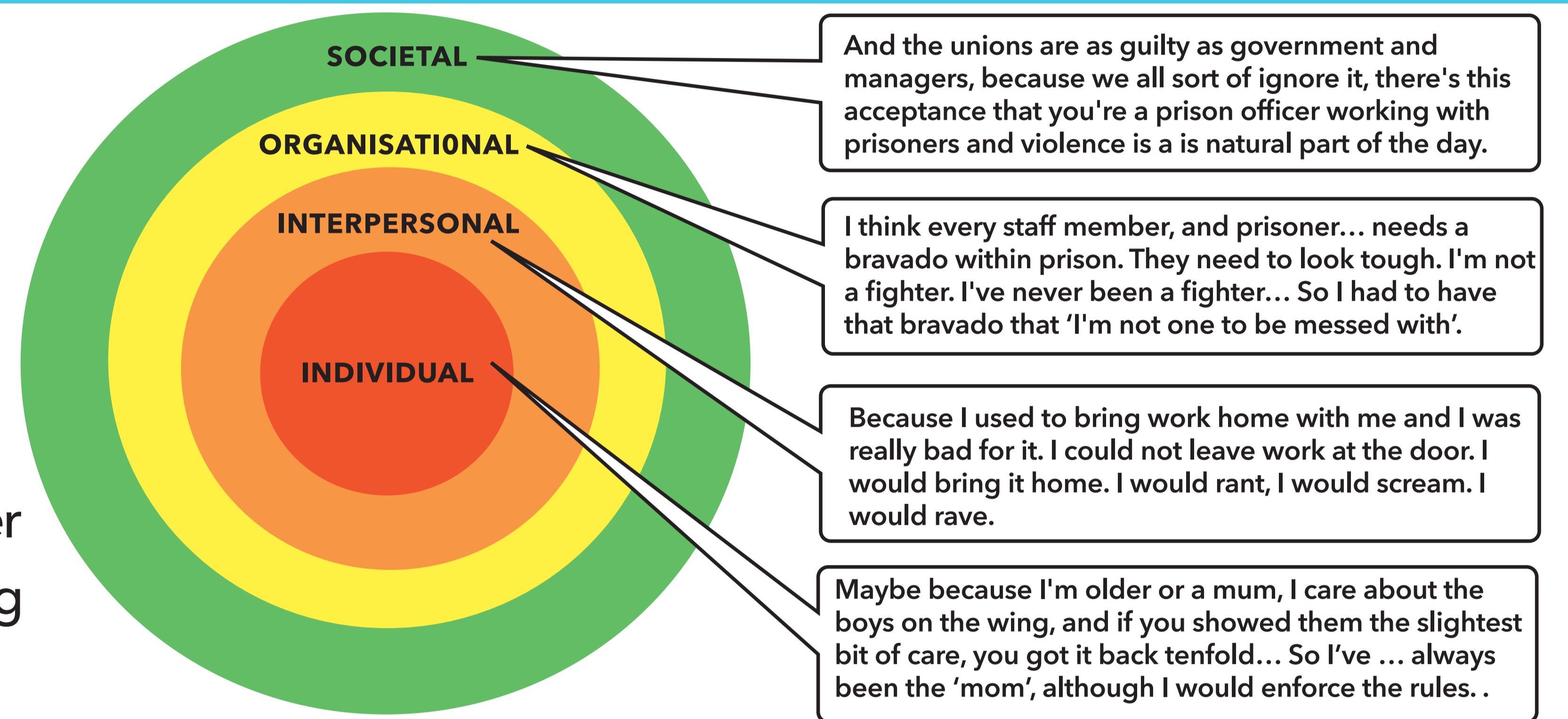
WHAT WE DID...

- Semi-structured interviews
- Conducted online (MS Teams)
- Oct 2025 to Jan 2026
- 16 prison officers (6F, 10M)
- Former and current
- English & Welsh prisons
- Thematic analysis
- **Ecological approach** used to frame the findings

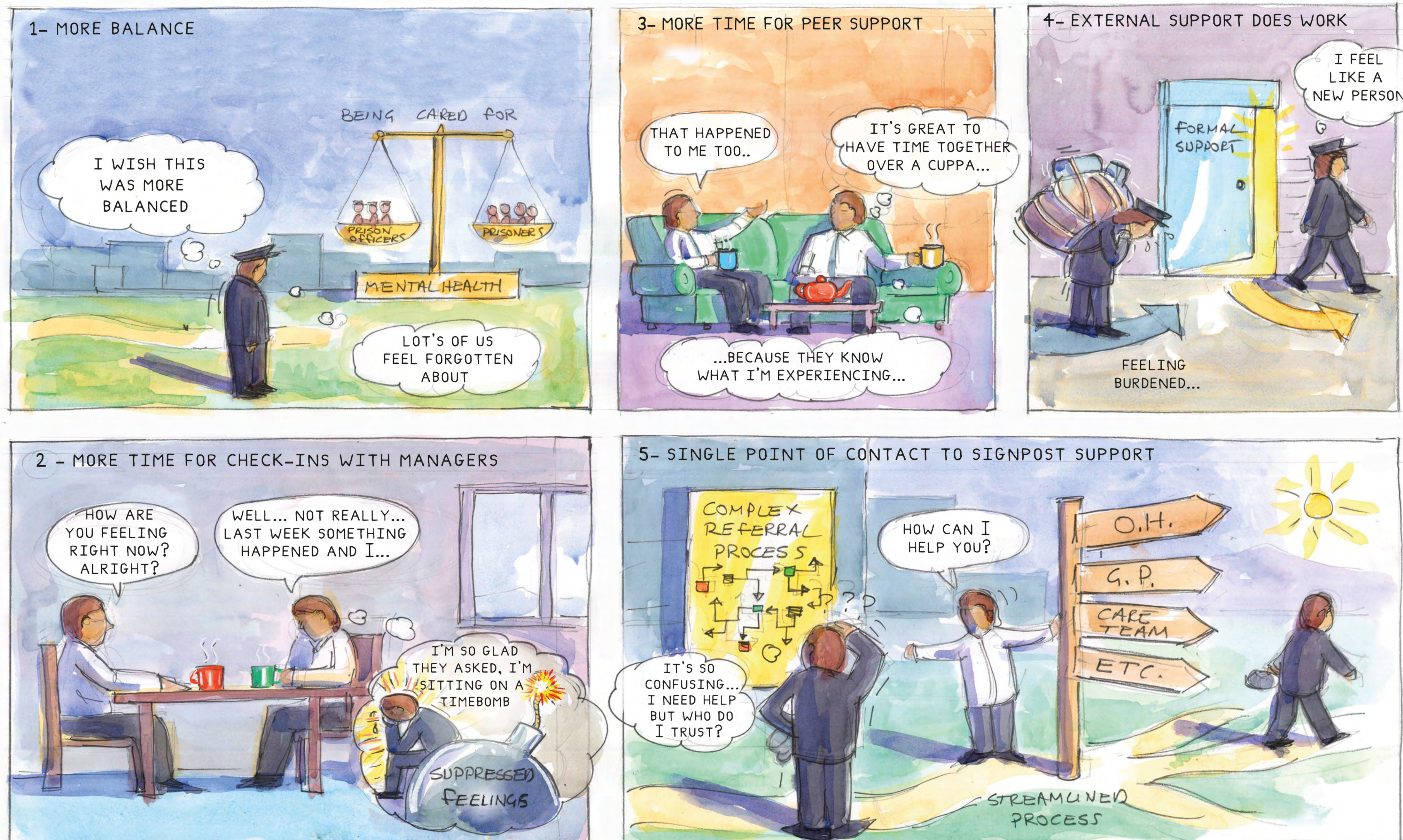
RESEARCH QUESTION: What are the psychological consequences for officers in managing emotions in their day-to-day roles in the UK prison service?

WHAT WE FOUND...

- **Societal level:** public perception of officers; political landscape; cultural stigma
- **Organisational level:** macho culture; poor access to support systems; operational restraints
- **Interpersonal level:** supportive peer networks; weak relationships with managers; managing work-life spillover
- **Individual level:** officer demographics; individual coping strategies; psychological factors



WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE OFFICER MENTAL HEALTH...



References:

Barry, C. (2020) 'You can't tell anyone how you really feel: Exploring emotion management and performance among prison staff who have experienced the death of a prisoner.' *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 61: pp. ? <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2019.100364>

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Hochschild, A. R. (2012) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.

Phillips, J., Westaby, C., Fowler, A., and Waters, J. (2021) *Emotional labour in criminal justice and criminology*. (Eds). Routledge: Abingdon.

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Next steps:

To share these findings with other academics (research papers), the prison service itself (report) and prison officers (podcast).

