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Intersubjective Resilience: Sustaining Collective Life Under Persistent Life-and-Death Risk

Abstract

How do organizations sustain collective life when exposure to life-and-death risk becomes a persistent condition of work? Based on an ethnographic study of two elite police units operating under continuous life-and-death risk, we find that organizations sustain coordinated collective life not by reducing fear, resolving contradiction, or restoring stability, but by continuously reorganizing these destabilizing pressures into shared forms of action. This is accomplished through three interrelated forms of organizing. First, *aspirational discipline* transforms vulnerability into collective moral obligation by aligning individual striving with shared purpose. Second, *paradoxical knotting* enables members to enact persistent competing demands, such as aggression and restraint or autonomy and obedience, as mutually reinforcing rather than opposing dimensions of practice. Third, *routine enactment* continually restores coordinated action by embedding disruption within recurring practices of training, reflection, and operational work. Together, these organizing dynamics explain how organizations reproduce coherent and coordinated collective action when danger is an everyday work condition. In doing so, we conceptualize *intersubjective resilience* as a recursive relational accomplishment which sustains organizing actions under persistent life-and-death risk.

Keywords: collective life, social identity, paradoxical knotting, routine enactment, aspirational discipline, qualitative methods, extreme contexts, high-reliability organizations.

1. Introduction

How do organizations sustain collective life when exposure to life-and-death risk becomes a persistent condition of work? Organizations operating under quotidian life-and-death exposure must preserve meaning, order, and disciplined action while confronting mortality as a routine.

For firefighters, trauma surgeons, paramedics, special forces personnel, and elite police units, lethal risk is not episodic but constitutive of work itself (Bacharach et al., 2008; Desmond, 2007; Hällgren et al., 2018; Le Theule et al., 2020, 2023; Sliter et al., 2014). Mortality shapes how individuals and groups construct meaning, purpose, and action (Becker, 1977; Greenberg et al., 1986), and encounters with death are profoundly disruptive (Grant and Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Pyszczynski et al., 2003). Yet, despite growing attention to death and mortality in organizational research, we still have only limited explanations of how organizations sustain organizational functioning when exposure to life-and-death risk becomes a constitutive and persistent condition of work (Grant and Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Reedy and Learmonth, 2011; Stein and Cropanzano, 2011). In such contexts, action cannot stop; it must remain purposeful, coordinated, and legitimate, even as danger becomes woven into the fabric of everyday organizational life.

We use the term *collective life* in a specifically organizational sense of Durkheimian tradition without reducing our object to it (Durkheim, 1912/1995). We mean by collective life the sustained capacity of an organization to preserve three interrelated things: a *shared moral order* (collective understandings of what members owe one another and of what makes their work legitimate); *coordinated action* (the ongoing production of aligned practice under conditions where individual improvisation is insufficient); and *temporal continuity* (the reproduction of the collective across time despite disruption, loss, and personnel change). These three dimensions correspond to the three organizing mechanisms we develop below.

Prior research in social identity theory suggests that belonging, cohesion, and psychological safety are central to collective functioning (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ashforth et al., 2024; Haslam et al., 2022; Hogg and Terry, 2000), but often treats identity as more stable than conditions of persistent extremity allow. Recent research on intersubjective processes under existential threat further demonstrates how shared identities enable coordinated

functioning when exposure to mortality is acute (Sonpar et al., 2024). Yet little is known about how identity transforms fear into sustained adaptive capacity when exposure to death is chronic rather than exceptional. In parallel, studies of high-risk work emphasize collective processes such as heedful interrelating as foundations for coordinated action under conditions of potential failure (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006, 2015), suggesting that shared understandings of collective identity and role-based obligations become central in dangerous environments (Haslam et al., 2022). However, these insights remain insufficiently integrated into a broader account of how identity operates under persistent existential threat. Despite the centrality of mortality in such settings, identity research has largely overlooked death as a constitutive condition of organizing (Brown, 2020; Tear and Reader, 2023). As a result, we still know little about how identity transforms fear into sustained adaptive capacity when exposure to death is chronic rather than exceptional.

Paradox theory explains how enduring contradictions must be continuously inhabited rather than resolved (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Berg, 1987; Smith and Lewis, 2011), while research on extreme contexts highlights resilience, disruption, and sensemaking (Hällgren et al., 2018; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1993). However, these perspectives rarely examine how such tensions are morally organized and emotionally inhabited over time. Routine theory explains how patterned action is stabilized and reproduced (Feldman and Pentland, 2003), yet pays limited attention to how routines sustain meaning and coordination under chronic existential threat. More broadly, recent work suggests that research on extreme contexts remains theoretically dispersed, often functioning as an umbrella perspective rather than a fully integrated theoretical framework, with key dimensions such as temporality, emotion, and practice frequently examined in isolation (Hällgren et al., 2025). Existing research remains fragmented, limiting cumulative understanding of how coordinated

organizational life is maintained when exposure to risk is not episodic but constitutive and continuous.

We recognize that framing persistent risk as primarily disruptive risks understating a well-documented finding: threat can also intensify identification, strengthen normative commitment, and generate the affective bonds that hold collectives together (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hannah et al., 2009; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Rather than treating this as a competing framing, we regard it as part of the puzzle. Under chronic extremity, the very pressures typically theorized as destabilizing appear to become constitutive of collective coherence. Explaining how this happens, and not only that it happens, is central to the account we develop below.

Taken together, these limitations create a central puzzle concerning how coherent, legitimate, and coordinated collective life is sustained when existential threat cannot be neutralized, and contradictions cannot be resolved. To address this gap, we integrate insights from social identity, paradox, and routine theories to develop an explanation of how coordinated collective functioning is sustained under conditions of persistent risk. Rather than treating these perspectives as separate accounts of organizing under extremity, we examine how they jointly contribute to understanding the ongoing organization of coordinated, meaningful, and legitimate action when fear and contradiction remain enduring features of organizing. We investigate this question through a qualitative study of elite police units operating under conditions of normalized extremity.

Our study contributes to research on social identity, paradox, and organizational routines by offering an integrated explanation of how organizations sustain coordinated collective functioning under conditions of persistent life-and-death risk. First, responding to calls to better understand how social identities operate under conditions of existential threat (Haslam et al., 2022; Muldoon et al., 2019; Tear and Reader, 2023), we extend current

understandings of social identity in extreme contexts by conceptualizing it as an intersubjective and ongoing accomplishment rather than as a relatively stable cognitive or categorical resource. While prior work emphasizes identity as a source of belonging, cohesion, and psychological safety (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Haslam et al., 2022; Hogg and Terry, 2000), we study the intersubjective processes through which identity is continuously reproduced under conditions of chronic mortality salience (Becker, 1977; Grant and Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Pyszczynski et al., 2003). In doing so, we shift the focus from identity as a stabilizing structure to identity as a dynamic relational accomplishment that enables collective functioning when the conditions of stability are themselves absent.

Second, we contribute to paradox theory by showing how enduring contradictions are organized under persistent existential conditions rather than episodic or strategic tensions. Prior research demonstrates how organizations engage competing demands through cognitive framing and dynamic balancing (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Berg, 1987; Smith and Lewis, 2011), yet it often treats paradox as a problem to be managed. We show instead how enduring contradictions are lived, inhabited, and collectively organized as ongoing conditions of work, shaping identity, emotion, and legitimacy under persistent extremity (Desmond, 2007; Hällgren et al., 2018). This extends prior work on paradox as dynamic stabilization (Smith and Lewis, 2011) by showing how multiple tensions become entangled and continuously reproduced under normalized extremity (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022).

Third, we extend routine dynamics research by showing how everyday practices function as organizing mechanisms of temporal and moral repair under chronic threat. Routine theory has emphasized the generative and performative nature of routines in producing stability and change (Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Feldman et al., 2016), yet has paid limited attention to how routines operate under conditions of existential disruption. Specifically, practices such as training, operational briefings, debriefings, and commemorations actively reconstitute

shared meaning and restore collective coherence following disruption, rather than merely reproducing order (Dionysiou et al., 2025; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Sheep et al., 2017).

Taken together, these contributions offer an integrated explanation of how collective life is sustained via the ongoing organization of moral orientation, tension, and temporality under persistent risk. In doing so, we also respond to recent calls to move beyond fragmented treatments of extreme contexts and develop more integrated explanations of organizing under persistent risk (Hällgren et al., 2025), highlighting the lived and relational foundations of collective resilience.

2. Sustaining Collective Life under Persistent Risk

Organizations operating under persistent life-and-death conditions confront a distinctive challenge. They must sustain meaning, order, and disciplined action while remaining continuously engaged with danger. For members of such organizations, including elite police, military personnel, firefighters, and emergency responders, death is neither hypothetical nor exceptional but a routine factor that shapes perception, emotion, and belonging (Collinson, 1999; Desmond, 2007; Hällgren et al., 2018). In these contexts, mortality is not an episodic disruption but an enduring condition of work that permeates everyday organizing. Sustaining collective life therefore requires coordinated action to remain meaningful even when the conditions that typically stabilize organizing, including predictability, interpretive closure, and emotional containment, are themselves persistently undermined. Understanding this challenge requires integrating theoretical perspectives concerned with identity, contradiction, and ongoing coordination.

Organizational scholarship has long recognized that encounters with death fundamentally reshape sensemaking, emotion, and collective life (Grant and Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Weick, 1990, 1993, 2010). Early work on crises and disasters shows how sudden

exposure to mortality disrupts cognitive frameworks and demands rapid interpretive reconstruction (Weick, 1993). In these settings, death appears as an episodic rupture requiring adaptation (Bacharach and Bamberger, 2007; Johns, 2006). Yet in many occupational contexts, including nursing, paramedical work, military operations, and tactical policing, exposure to death is ordinary rather than exceptional (Kessler et al., 2012; Le Theule et al., 2020, 2023). Here, mortality becomes a persistent feature of everyday work, generating an ongoing awareness of risk that cannot be bracketed or deferred (Grant and Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Pyszczynski et al., 2003). Rather than recovering from episodic disruption, actors must sustain coordinated functioning while repeatedly confronting the possibility of death.

Research across these settings suggests that existential threat is not only endured but actively organized through social and organizational processes. Sonpar et al. (2024) show how fighter pilots normalize mortality through collective practices that embed death within routine performance, rendering anxiety manageable without eliminating it. Similarly, Melkonian and Picq (2010) demonstrate how French Special Forces transform lethal uncertainty into actionable knowledge through structured preparation, shared representations, and collective reflection. Thornborrow and Brown (2009) show how aspirational identity narratives redirect existential anxiety into disciplined striving. Complementing these insights, ethnographic studies illustrate how rituals, humor, and storytelling render death more familiar and integrate it into collective life (Desmond, 2007; Hayes et al., 2015), while research on high-reliability organizing highlights collective mindfulness, disciplined routines, and structured vigilance as foundations for coordination under persistent risk (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015). However, these perspectives largely examine identity, contradiction, and coordinated action separately, emphasizing coping, reliability, or sensemaking while offering limited insight into how these processes become interwoven under persistent extremity. Consequently, we still lack an integrated explanation of how organizations sustain coordinated

collective life when mortality is an enduring condition rather than an episodic disruption. This limitation motivates the integrated theoretical framework developed below.

Social Identity and Collective Meaning under Threat

Social identity theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how collective life is organized through shared meanings of belonging (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). By defining the collective self and its normative expectations, identity shapes perception, guides action, and aligns individual behavior with shared understandings of purpose, role, and responsibility (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Weick, 1995). Under conditions of risk, shared identities become particularly salient, strengthening interdependence and reinforcing collective commitment (Hällgren et al., 2018; Hannah et al., 2009).

In high-risk settings, identity is not merely cognitive but relational and enacted through interaction, shared experience, and embodied practice (Brown, 2020; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). It provides a framework through which actors interpret risk, regulate emotion, and coordinate action (Haslam et al., 2022; Sonpar et al., 2024). Practices such as evaluation, storytelling, and ritual reinforce shared understandings of competence, duty, and worth, enabling distributed expertise to cohere in coordinated action (Melkonian and Picq, 2010). Through these intersubjective processes, actors remain attentive to existential threat without becoming immobilized by it (Sonpar et al., 2024). Identity therefore operates not simply as a psychological buffer against threat but as a relational process through which collective action becomes possible under risk.

At the same time, identity processes are inherently tension-laden. Norms associated with toughness, professionalism, and emotional control may constrain vulnerability and shape how individuals respond to fear and uncertainty (Dick, 2005; Ely and Meyerson, 2010; O'Neill and Rothbard, 2017). Research on identity regulation further shows that these norms are

actively shaped through organizational control processes that seek to produce appropriate selves aligned with institutional expectations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). From this perspective, identity reinforces discipline, commitment, and emotional control while simultaneously generating ambivalence and potential resistance. Although social identity theory predicts stronger identification when group boundaries are salient and consequences are severe (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000), it generally assumes relatively stable contexts in which identities can be maintained over time. This assumption becomes problematic under persistent extremity, where exposure to risk is continuous and actors cannot rely on temporal or emotional distance from threat. Consequently, we know comparatively little about how shared identities are continuously enacted and sustained when the conditions that normally stabilize collective life are themselves unstable. In this study, we address this limitation by examining how shared meaning is collectively enacted and sustained under persistent existential threat, moving beyond identity as a stabilizing resource toward understanding it as an ongoing relational accomplishment.

Paradox and Enduring Tensions

Organizations operating under persistent life-and-death conditions confront multiple, interdependent tensions, including autonomy and control, courage and fear, discipline and improvisation, and emotional restraint and relational reliance (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Smith and Berg, 1987; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Paradox theory conceptualizes these tensions as enduring and mutually constitutive, emphasizing that they cannot be resolved but must instead be continually engaged. This perspective has been central to explaining how organizations remain functional despite competing demands that cannot be eliminated.

Research on paradox explains how organizations sustain functioning by engaging competing demands rather than resolving them (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Actors learn to inhabit contradictions, allowing opposing demands to coexist and become

productive (Lewis and Smith, 2014). Empirical studies illustrate this dynamic across high-risk settings. Sonpar et al. (2024) show how fighter pilots maintain risk awareness while sustaining confident performance. Melkonian and Picq (2010) demonstrate how improvisation is enabled through structured preparation. Thornborrow and Brown (2009) further show how disciplined adherence to collective standards coexists with individual agency. Together, these studies highlight the generative potential of contradiction and the capacity of actors to sustain "both-and" orientations in practice.

Earlier work also emphasizes that paradoxes are not only cognitive but also emotional and relational. Vince and Broussine (1996) explained why competing demands evoke anxiety, attachment, and defensive responses that both enable and constrain organizational action. From this perspective, contradiction is not simply interpreted but experienced through affective investments and relational dynamics that shape how competing demands are enacted in practice.

However, this literature has largely examined individual tensions or cognitive framing in isolation. Less attention has been paid to how multiple interdependent tensions become jointly organized under conditions of persistent extremity, where exposure to risk is continuous rather than episodic. As a result, we know comparatively little about how organizations sustain coordinated action when several enduring contradictions must be enacted simultaneously rather than managed one at a time. We therefore examine how multiple, interdependent tensions become jointly organized in practice under persistent life-and-death risk, moving beyond paradox as cognitive framing, a “mindset”, toward a more relational and processual understanding of contradiction.

Routines and the Stabilization of Action over Time

Routine theory explains how patterns of action are reproduced through recurrent practice, enabling coordination and continuity over time (Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Feldman et al., 2016). Repeated practices provide structure and predictability, aligning actions and

expectations while also enabling variation and adaptation. In this sense, routine dynamics are central to understanding how organizations sustain both stability and change.

In high-risk environments, practices such as training, briefing, and debriefing play a central role in sustaining coordinated action and enabling learning (Desmond, 2007; Melkonian and Picq, 2010). These activities transform uncertainty into structured forms of collective action that support both stability and adaptation. Research on high reliability organizing further shows how disciplined routines, collective mindfulness, and structured error reporting enable organizations to function under persistent danger (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015), while heedful interrelating highlights the importance of tightly coupled attentiveness in high-stakes systems (Weick and Roberts, 1993).

At the same time, their contribution extends beyond technical coordination. Repetition also stabilizes shared interpretations of risk, responsibility, and appropriate conduct. However, existing research has largely examined routines under conditions in which disruption is episodic and stability can eventually be restored. Less attention has been paid to how repeated practices operate when disruption itself becomes an enduring condition of organizing, requiring actors to sustain coordination, meaning, and legitimacy simultaneously. We therefore examine how recurrent practices sustain coordinated action under continued extremity, moving beyond routines as stabilizing patterns toward understanding them as mechanisms of temporal and moral repair.

Integrating Perspectives

Social identity, paradox, and routine perspectives each offer important but partial insights into how organizations function under conditions of persistent risk. Respectively, they explain how actors construct shared meaning and moral orientation, engage enduring contradictions, and reproduce coordinated action over time. However, each perspective remains limited in explaining how these processes become interdependent when exposure to danger is enduring .

Consistent with recent calls to move beyond fragmented accounts of organizing under extreme conditions (Hällgren et al., 2025), existing research has generated important insights into each of these dimensions but has offered less explanation of how they become jointly organized in practice.

As a result, we lack a comprehensive understanding of how moral orientation, enduring contradiction, and coordinated action are jointly sustained under normalized exposure to life-and-death risk. This limitation is particularly salient where mortality is not an episodic disruption but a constitutive condition of organizing, requiring actors to sustain coherent and coordinated collective life despite ongoing exposure to danger. Under these conditions, meaning, emotion, and action cannot be stabilized independently but must instead be woven together through organizing.

Addressing this limitation requires moving beyond fragmented accounts toward an integrated explanation of how collective life is sustained under persistent extremity. Specifically, it requires understanding how identity, contradiction, and routine are not only individually mobilized but jointly organized in practice, enabling actors to maintain coordination, legitimacy, and continuity when the conditions that typically stabilize organizing are themselves repeatedly disrupted. Rather than proposing a new overarching theory of organizing under extremity, we explain how these three theoretical perspectives operate in tandem under persistent life-and-death risk. The following sections elaborate this explanation through the empirical analysis.

3. Method

Research focus and setting

This study investigates how collective life is sustained when exposure to life-and-death risk becomes a persistent condition of work. We focus on a setting in which existential threat is not

an episodic disruption but constitutive of everyday activity, offering a distinctive vantage point for examining how individuals and groups sustain meaning, order, and coordinated action when mortality becomes a quotidian possibility.

Our empirical setting comprises two elite police units in Rio de Janeiro, the *Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais* (BOPE) and the *Coordenadoria de Recursos Especiais (*CORE), where lethal threat structures everyday routines (Hällgren et al., 2018). These units operate in densely populated urban environments marked by entrenched criminal governance and sustained armed conflict. Between 2007 and 2022, police forces seized more than 128,000 firearms, including over 5,000 rifles. Between 1998 and 2020, 17,906 officers were shot, and 2,976 were killed, alongside more than 750,000 violent deaths statewide. From 2021 to 2025, high levels of violence persisted, with approximately 300 officers killed and hundreds more injured. Violent lethality reached 3,581 victims in 2024 and 3,881 in 2025, underscoring the permanence of extreme risk as a defining condition of everyday policing (Instituto de Segurança Pública, 2025). Operational demands impose a sustained high tempo, with these units frequently conducting one or two tactical interventions per day, reinforcing the continuous, non-episodic nature of risk exposure.

BOPE comprises approximately 400 members trained in urban warfare and hostage rescue; CORE is a 206-member unit specializing in bomb disposal, high-risk intervention, and aerial operations. Both operate daily in territories where armed groups exploit terrain and social networks to sustain control, and where decades of confrontation have produced a climate of continuous threat shaping operational practices and public perceptions of legitimacy (Colmerauer, 2014). Although rooted in military traditions, police special-operations units operate under distinct constraints, combining tactical flexibility with legal accountability in volatile urban environments. Prior research identifies cohesion, shared identity, and adaptive leadership as central to their effectiveness, while strong group boundaries and collective status

provide psychological and moral anchoring under risk (Hannah et al., 2009; Spulak, 2007; Zanini et al., 2013).

These units provide analytical leverage for examining how collective life is sustained when multiple tensions become entangled under chronic threat. Officers continuously navigate contradictions between aggression and restraint, autonomy and obedience, and control and improvisation while maintaining operational effectiveness and public accountability. Sustaining coordinated collective life is therefore an ongoing accomplishment rather than a situational response, requiring the continual reconstruction of identity, moral reasoning, and institutional purpose. Embedded within democratic institutions and subject to legal oversight and public scrutiny, BOPE and CORE are particularly suited for examining how collective life is sustained when violence must be exercised while legitimacy is simultaneously maintained.

Research design

This study combines ethnographic fieldwork, inductive coding, and abductive reasoning to explain how collective life and coordinated action are sustained under persistent life-and-death risk (Cornelissen, 2025). Ethnographic engagement provided contextual immersion; inductive coding procedures (Gioia et al., 2013) generated first-order terms and second-order themes; and abductive reasoning served as the inferential mode linking inductively identified empirical puzzles to existing theory when available frameworks proved insufficient (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

The distinction between inductive coding and abductive reasoning is central to our analytical approach. First- and second-order coding remained inductive, staying close to participants' language and to categories emerging from the data (Gioia et al., 2013). The analysis became abductive in the subsequent inferential step, when recurring empirical puzzles, such as fear becoming coordinated action rather than individual anxiety, could not be adequately explained by the sensitizing theories of identity, paradox, or routines. We therefore

iterated between empirical puzzles and existing theory to develop the mechanisms presented in this study. Abduction thus refers to the inferential reasoning through which these mechanisms were developed, rather than to the coding procedure itself (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Timmermans and Tavory, 2024).

Throughout the study, social identity, paradox, and routine dynamics functioned as sensitizing concepts that oriented observation, data collection, and early coding (Blumer, 1954; Gioia et al., 2013). They did not operate as predefined explanatory frameworks but as analytical guides that helped identify empirical puzzles requiring further explanation. The three mechanisms, *aspirational discipline*, *paradoxical knotting*, and *routine enactment,* emerged through iterative dialogue between these puzzles and existing theory. This abductive dialogue enabled us to move beyond identity as a stabilizing resource, paradox as cognitive framing, and routines as static patterns toward explaining how collective life and coordinated action are sustained under persistent extremity.

Data collection

Data were collected between March and August 2023 using a multi-method qualitative design that combined semi-structured interviews, oral historiography, participant observation, and document analysis. Combining these sources enabled us to compare what members said, what they did, and how activities were institutionally codified, providing a rich empirical basis for subsequent analysis. Data collection unfolded across three overlapping rounds, enabling emerging observations and preliminary interpretations to inform subsequent inquiry. These rounds describe the temporal progression of fieldwork. The analytical procedures described below explain how material generated across all three rounds was interpreted through inductive coding and abductive reasoning.

The first round focused on scoping and orientation. We conducted ten exploratory interviews and twelve days of preliminary observation in training facilities and command

meetings to map institutional structures, calibrate sensitizing concepts, and build trust with gatekeepers. This phase revealed initial empirical puzzles, particularly that internal competition appeared to deepen rather than fragment attachment. The second round constituted the core of the fieldwork, expanding the interview protocol to probe fear, contradiction, loss, and coordination while extending observation to live deployments and debriefings. The third round focused on refining and challenging our emerging interpretations. We returned with provisional interpretations of the mechanisms and deliberately sought cases, participants, and documents that might challenge them, including former members, critical instructors, and after-action reports from unsuccessful operations. Data collection continued until new encounters no longer generated analytically novel insights relative to the emerging mechanism-based explanation, which we treated as an indicator of theoretical sufficiency rather than strict saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

Access to these elite units required trust-based entry. Snowball sampling, initially facilitated by one author's prior role as an instructor within the Rio State Police, provided relational embeddedness and credibility. As the study progressed, purposive sampling complemented snowball recruitment to ensure variation in tenure, role, and unit affiliation. We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews totaling approximately 45 hours with current and former members of BOPE and CORE; 17 participants held leadership positions. Interviewees recounted 48 operational cases, including high-intensity incursions, hostage rescues, and urban combat missions.

The interview protocol covered four themes: career trajectories and entry into the unit; lived experiences of persistent risk; enduring tensions such as aggression and restraint, autonomy and obedience, and protocol and improvisation; and routine practices, including training, briefings, debriefings, and commemoration. Broad prompts were followed by event-anchored probes, asking participants to reconstruct operations in sequential detail (Flanagan,

1954). Prompts evolved across the three rounds from broad exploratory inquiry to probing emerging empirical puzzles and, finally, to refining and challenging provisional theoretical interpretations.

Due to operational sensitivity, interviews were not audio-recorded. Instead, we adopted a paired-researcher protocol (Clifford, 1990; Emerson et al., 2011), in which one researcher led the interview while the other took near-verbatim notes, followed by immediate reconciliation to produce a consolidated account. To mitigate limitations associated with non-recorded interviews, we relied on paired recording, immediate reconciliation, triangulation across sources, and back-checking by a third bilingual researcher. Quotations are therefore presented as analytically grounded representations of participant meaning rather than literal transcripts.

During data collection, the three theoretical lenses of social identity, paradox, and routine theory functioned as sensitizing orientations shaping interviews, observations, and field notes. Social identity directed attention to symbols, narratives, evaluative practices, and embodied rituals through which belonging was enacted. Paradox sensitized attention to persistent competing demands, including aggression and restraint, autonomy and obedience, and control and improvisation. Routine theory focused attention on recurrent practices such as training, briefings, and debriefings through which actors aligned actions and expectations over time. These lenses operated not as predefined explanations but as empirical guides structuring observation and data collection.

To examine coordination in practice, we conducted 284 hours of participant observation across 38 days, including 12 live deployments, training exercises, commemorations, briefings, debriefings, and 25 internal meetings. The field team combined an embedded researcher with prior policing experience and a non-embedded qualitative researcher, enabling contextual interpretation while preserving analytic distance (Alvesson, 2003). Field notes followed Emerson et al. (2011): real-time jottings were expanded into full narratives on the same day

and reviewed within 24 hours, while descriptive notes were kept separate from interpretive memos. Researchers maintained strictly observational roles and withdrew when safety or sensitivity concerns required it.

We also conducted oral historiographic interviews with 11 senior members and former commanders to capture institutional narratives over time (Yow, 2014). To triangulate interview and observational data, we analyzed 62 internal and external documents, including operational manuals, training protocols, strategic plans, after-action reports, internal communications, legal frameworks, and media coverage. Documents were analyzed both as formal representations of practice and as artifacts whose language and omissions could be compared with observed and reported behavior.

All fieldwork was conducted in Portuguese. Data were initially recorded in Portuguese to preserve idiomatic meaning, with translation into English occurring during the analytic stage. First-order codes were retained alongside original terms, and quotations underwent a two-step bilingual review process. The study received formal ethical approval, and access was governed by agreements specifying safety, confidentiality, and non-interference protocols. Participants provided informed verbal consent, and identifiers were anonymized using role-and-unit codes.

Analytical procedures

Drawing on material generated across the three rounds of fieldwork, analysis proceeded iteratively and in close connection with data collection rather than as a discrete post-fieldwork phase. For clarity, we present the analytical procedures in three interrelated moves: *inductive coding, identifying empirical puzzles,* and *abductive theorizing*. These correspond respectively to the inductive identification of empirical patterns, the recognition of empirical puzzles that could not be adequately explained by our sensitizing theories, and the development of mechanism-based explanations through iterative dialogue between empirical puzzles and

existing theory. Although presented sequentially, these analytical moves overlapped substantially throughout the research process.

Following the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), two authors involved in fieldwork conducted repeated readings of reconciled interview reconstructions, field notes, oral histories, and documents, generating first-order codes that stayed close to participants' language. Examples include "*fear becomes focus*," "*never act alone*," "*controlled aggression*," "*briefing before, debriefing after,"* "*errors are exposed*," and "*your body reacts before you think*." Coding was conducted in NVivo, with each segment receiving multiple codes where warranted. The two coders worked independently on overlapping subsamples and met weekly to compare coding decisions, with disagreements resolved through discussion against the source material. An additional author not involved in coding audited a 15% subsample to identify drift.

Inter-coder reliability was treated as a process indicator rather than a numerical target: persistent disagreement on a code was taken as evidence that the code was insufficiently grounded and prompted re-examination of the underlying material. First-order codes were then aggregated into second-order themes, capturing recurring relational and organizational patterns across participants' accounts (Gioia et al., 2013). Initial themes addressed identity work, including collective belonging, distinctiveness, moral obligation, and embodied identification; the inhabitation of enduring tensions, including control–improvisation, aggression–restraint, and autonomy–obedience; and recurrent practices, including training, evaluation, briefing and debriefing, and commemoration.

Second-order themes were developed through constant comparison across data sources and against the three sensitizing theories of social identity, paradox, and routine dynamics that had oriented our initial reading of the field. Where data corroborated, extended, or qualified existing theoretical claims, we documented these connections in analytic memos. Where data

resisted assimilation to the sensitizing theories, we set such material aside as candidate empirical puzzles (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Figure 1 depicts a condensed representation of the resulting data structure, including first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions.

Insert Figure 1 about here

As coding progressed, four recurring patterns emerged that the sensitizing theories could only partially account for. We treated these patterns not as problems to be smoothed into existing categories but as empirically grounded puzzles whose explanatory inadequacy was analytically productive (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021).

The first puzzle concerned why intense internal competition deepened rather than fragmented collective attachment, contrary to the prediction of social identity accounts that anticipate differentiation under competitive pressure (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). The second concerned why public peer scrutiny of error functioned as care and protection rather than inhibiting voice, contrary to the prediction of psychological safety research (Detert and Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999). The third concerned why fear was synchronized into coordinated movement rather than suppressed or individually managed, a pattern only partially accounted for by coping, sensemaking, or mortality-salience accounts (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2003; Weick, 1993). The fourth concerned why colleague loss generated rhythmic re-engagement rather than prolonged disruption or symbolic closure, contrary to the predictions of trauma and narrative-repair research (Bonanno, 2004; Gabriel, 2004; Ricoeur, 1984). These puzzles were not identified ex post; they emerged through a structured procedure in which all second-order themes that resisted assimilation to the three sensitizing theories were systematically tabulated, cross-checked, and tested against alternative explanations drawn from adjacent literatures, such as terror management theory, dirty work scholarship, and

organizational identification. Themes that could be accommodated by an alternative existing framework were retained as findings but not treated as puzzles. The four patterns reported were those that consistently resisted accommodation across all three data sources (interviews, observations, and documents) and across all members of the team.

Building on these empirical puzzles, we iterated between empirical material and candidate theoretical explanations to develop the three mechanisms presented in this study. For each puzzle, we asked what would have to be the case for the observed pattern to be intelligible. Candidate mechanisms were developed in analytic memos, evaluated against the full body of empirical material, and refined or discarded through systematic comparison across cases and data sources.

This iterative dialogue yielded three interconnected mechanisms. The mobilization of identity as a source of moral obligation and shared striving, which we term *aspirational discipline*, emerged from the inferential demands of Puzzles 1 and 3, where competition and fear required an account in which identity binds individual effort to collective purpose rather than simply categorizing the self relative to others. The organization of enduring tensions as relationally entangled rather than cognitively resolved, which we term *paradoxical knotting*, emerged from Puzzle 2, where scrutiny and care had to be theorized as co-constitutive rather than opposed. The reproduction of coordinated action through repeated and morally laden practices, which we term *routine enactment*, emerged from Puzzle 4, where loss had to be understood through patterned activity rather than worked through narratively in isolation.

Each mechanism was then tested against the full dataset, including material that had not generated the original puzzle. We deliberately searched for negative cases, such as instances in which competition did not deepen attachment, scrutiny inhibited action, or loss produced prolonged disruption. Where such cases arose, we used them to refine the boundary conditions of each organizing mechanism rather than to reject them, and, in two instances, to

reformulate them. The three mechanisms were then integrated into an organizing configuration that we conceptualize as *intersubjective resilience*. This organizing configuration consists of the mutually constitutive weaving of aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment, through which moral orientation, tension organization, temporal repair, and coordinated collective practice are recursively sustained over time. This configuration is not a stage model. Rather, the three mechanisms are simultaneously active and continuously interdependent, each conditioning and reproducing the others over time.

Reflexive engagement was treated as integral to analytic credibility throughout the study. The author team comprised researchers with deliberately heterogeneous relationships to the field. One author had prior institutional ties to the Rio State Police as an instructor, providing access and contextual fluency; a second had extensive experience in qualitative organizational research but no prior involvement with policing or military institutions, providing analytic distance; the remaining authors occupied intermediate positions.

We used this heterogeneity productively through a structured procedure in which non-embedded authors systematically challenged the embedded author's interpretations during weekly analytic meetings, with the burden of evidence resting on the embedded author to justify each interpretive move against the source material. Memos documenting points of disagreement and their resolution were retained as part of the audit trail.

We also attended to the political and ethical sensitivities of researching elite police units operating in highly contested public terrain. We explicitly considered how prior institutional ties and the access they afforded could shape both observation and interpretation, and we used reflexive dialogue to surface and critically examine these risks, including the risk of over-identification with participants, insufficient analytic distance, and underweighting external perspectives. Where interpretations could be read as endorsing rather than analyzing practices, we returned to the data and clarified the analytical distinction.

Credibility was further supported through triangulation across interviews, observation, oral histories, and documents, treated as both confirmatory and generative. Discrepancies across sources prompted further refinement and helped specify boundary conditions. Member reflection (Tracy, 2010) was conducted in the third fieldwork round, when preliminary mechanism-level interpretations were presented to a small set of senior participants. Their responses were treated not as validation but as additional empirical material that informed refinement. An audit trail was maintained throughout, comprising coded data, analytic memos, a disagreement log, and iterative drafts of the data structure and mechanisms.

4. Findings

We present our findings in two movements. First, we examine four empirical puzzles that emerged consistently across operations, training, debriefings, and moments of loss, each challenging expectations derived from our sensitizing theoretical lenses. Second, we develop three interrelated mechanisms, *aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting,* and *routine enactment*, that explain these puzzles and account for how collective life and coordinated action are sustained under chronic extremity. Taken together, these mechanisms constitute the organizing configuration we conceptualize as intersubjective resilience. Following Cornelissen and Werner (2026), we present them as contextual organizing mechanisms that explain how recurrent forms of organizing sustain coordinated collective life under persistent risk, rather than as categories imposed a priori or universal causal laws. We conclude by showing how their continuous interaction constitutes the organizing configuration of intersubjective resilience in practice.

Four puzzles under chronic extremity

Across interviews, observations, and documents, four recurring empirical puzzles emerged, in which destabilizing pressures such as competition, scrutiny, fear, and loss were repeatedly

reorganized into embodied and affectively regulated forms of coordinated action under chronic extremity.

Puzzle 1. ***Competition as collective synchronization***. Participants consistently described how intense internal competition deepened, rather than weakened, collective attachment. Officers openly competed for elite roles, yet performance was evaluated in terms of collective survival. Outperforming meant increasing the group's safety margin; stagnating meant endangering others. Competition was reframed as contribution. Contrary to dominant identity-based expectations that competition produces differentiation or fragmentation (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000), competition intensified interdependence. This also extends work on aspirational identity that has primarily emphasized discursive alignment with valued ideals (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). The process was not only cognitive but embodied. During training, recruits repeated coordinated movements until exhaustion. "*You will be tired before we begin*," an instructor explained, "*because tired is when you discover who you are*" (Interviewee 3, BOPE). Recruits described moments when "*breathing synchronizes and everything narrows down to your partner's shoulder*" (Interviewee 8, BOPE). Individual striving dissolved into collective rhythm. Instead of fragmenting the group, competition appeared to intensify interdependence, binding individual performance to collective outcomes in ways not fully explained by existing accounts. This pattern suggested that aspiration became organized through collective obligation rather than individual achievement, pointing toward a shared form of moral discipline developed in the following section.

Puzzle 2. ***Scrutiny as ritualized care***. Debriefings were direct and emotionally intense, with mistakes reconstructed publicly regardless of rank. Critique was framed as responsibility; failing to correct a teammate meant placing them at risk, while silence was interpreted as disloyalty. Contrary to psychological safety research predicting inhibited voice under public exposure to error (Detert and Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999), scrutiny did not suppress

engagement. This candor coexisted with affective recalibration. After tense operations, humor emerged. "*If we can't laugh after*," a sergeant remarked, "*we are carrying it wrong*" (Interviewee 12, BOPE). Laughter did not reduce threat but redistributed tension across the group. Coherence emerged through shared exposure rather than its avoidance. In practice, scrutiny operated less as interpersonal threat than as a form of protection that redistributed responsibility and reinforced collective accountability. Exposure and care thus became tightly coupled in practice, suggesting that competing demands were actively organized rather than resolved, a dynamic developed in the following section.

Puzzle 3. ***Fear as synchronized action***. "*If I feel nothing, I'm already dead*," a recruit observed. "*Feeling means I can act. Acting with the others makes one feel useful*" (Interviewee 16, BOPE). Rather than being suppressed or cognitively managed, as coping, sensemaking, or mortality-based accounts would suggest (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2003; Weick, 1993, 1995), fear became a coordination resource. Extending work showing how intersubjective identity processes enable functioning under existential threat (Sonpar et al., 2024), participants described fear as collectively organized through movement, rhythm, and mutual orientation. Stability emerged less through solitary interpretation than through synchronized enactment. Fear became rhythm and direction within collective movement. Rather than remaining an individual effect to be attenuated, fear operated as a shared signal synchronizing perception and action in ways not fully captured by existing accounts. This reversal suggested that fear was not eliminated from the collective but reorganized into coordinated engagement through shared obligation and synchronized action, a dynamic developed in the following section.

Puzzle 4. ***Loss as rhythmic reconstitution***. Colleague fatalities did not produce fragmentation but triggered patterned processes of reconstitution. Mourning rituals reaffirmed shared values; training resumed shortly thereafter. After memorial ceremonies, drills intensified, exhaustion returned bodies to motion, and humor resurfaced. Officers repeatedly shared "*first death*"

narratives, converting loss into renewed obligation. Narrative repair was inseparable from rehearsal, and trauma was not only narrated into meaning but drilled into coordination. Contrary to expectations from trauma and narrative-repair research that anticipate disruption or symbolic closure (Bonanno, 2004; Gabriel, 2004; Ricoeur, 1984), loss became reabsorbed into collective rhythms of practice linking memory, action, and obligation. Grief became enacted continuity rather than interruption, suggesting that collective coherence was restored through repeated rhythms of practice rather than symbolic closure alone, a dynamic developed in the following section.

Taken together, these puzzles revealed a distinct mode of sustaining collective life under chronic extremity. Pressures typically associated with fragmentation were reorganized into moral orientation, synchronized coordination, and temporal continuity. Rather than eliminating tension, actors continuously enacted and reproduced collective coherence through it. The following sections develop three interrelated mechanisms, aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment, that explain how these recurring empirical puzzles became sustained forms of organizing over time. As summarized in Table 1, each organizing mechanism explains one or more puzzles; together, they constitute the recursive organizing configuration developed in this study.

Mechanism 1: Aspirational discipline - Mobilizing identity as obligation and purpose

Several participants described identity not as a source of distinction or self-enhancement, but as a moral obligation enacted under conditions in which others could not act. As one BOPE leader explained, "*We know exactly why we're here. We step in when no one else can or will. We are the final barrier between organized society and organized crime*" (Interviewee 1, BOPE). Identity emerged as a normative force orienting action under pressure rather than as a symbolic resource for individual recognition. This obligation was sustained intersubjectively through ongoing scrutiny and mutual accountability. "*You will never truly become a Caveira!*"

instructors repeatedly told recruits (Interviewee 17, BOPE), invoking the skull symbol as both aspiration and warning. Belonging was never fully secured but had to be repeatedly enacted and recognized by others: "*You're only Caveira when the man next to you believes it*" (Interviewee 9, BOPE). Identity thus operated as an obligation rather than a possession, contingent on ongoing collective validation.

The discipline of becoming was inseparable from moral responsibility extending across time. Officers framed belonging as both institutional mandate and relational debt. As one officer reflected before the unit memorial, "*Belonging is a debt to those who came before. You pay it by being ready*" (Interviewee 3, BOPE). Preparedness, in this sense, extended beyond technical competence to moral readiness. Corrective practices reinforced this intersubjective structure. "*Shame is private; correction is public*," a senior operator explained (Interviewee 6, BOPE). After operations and training, debriefings exposed errors to collective scrutiny. As one junior officer described, "*You feel small, but then you feel held*" (Interviewee 10, BOPE). Through these recurring cycles, identity was re-enacted as a moral obligation embedded in collective practice rather than as an individual attribute.

Fear was also consistently reframed as a signal of responsibility and a trigger for disciplined engagement rather than as an individual affect to be suppressed. "*Fear is always there. The difference is that here, you learn what to do with it. You move forward because the mission depends on you*" (Interviewee 7, BOPE). Officers described discipline not as compliance but as an existential stance cultivated under recurrent exposure to death. As one officer explained, "*Failing means someone dies. That is why discipline becomes part of who you are*" (Interviewee 14, BOPE). Emotional regulation became inseparable from moral regulation, as a CORE operator illustrated: "*Controlling aggressiveness despite witnessing cruelty is central to our discipline. Maintaining control prevents further harm*" (Interviewee 3, CORE). Embodied practices sustained this transformation. Training under exhaustion stripped

away performative confidence and revealed commitment. As one instructor explained, "*The body gives up long before the mind does. We train until discipline becomes stronger than exhaustion*" (Interviewee 15, BOPE). Under fatigue, recruits described how "*breathing synchronizes and everything narrows down to your partner's shoulder*" (Interviewee 8, BOPE). In these moments, disciplined engagement and collective synchronization transformed individual vulnerability into coordinated action.

Collective striving under risk was sustained through strong relational bonds that anchored action in shared commitment. "*When bullets start flying, it's not the mission you think about first; it's your teammate. That bond is sacred*" (Interviewee 5, CORE). This collective orientation was enacted through embodied and affective practices that aligned members in real time. Moments of humor and affective release further sustained this dynamic. Following a particularly tense operation, one officer reflected that "*The jokes start almost immediately. It is our way of making sure everyone comes back together before the next mission*" (Interviewee XX, CORE). Humor redistributed emotional tension without fragmenting cohesion.

The evidence presented above helps explain the dynamics identified in Puzzles 1 and 3. Rather than relying on individual motivation or personal resilience, members sustained coordinated collective action by enacting identity as a shared moral obligation. Individual striving became meaningful insofar as it was evaluated against a collective purpose, while fear, fatigue, and vulnerability were reorganized through disciplined engagement, mutual accountability, and embodied coordination. Through these recurrent practices, destabilizing pressures became resources for coordinated collective action, revealing how identity was continuously enacted through collective striving under persistent life-and-death risk.

We define *aspirational discipline* as an identity-organizing mechanism through which aspirational identities are enacted as shared moral obligations under persistent risk, transforming vulnerability into disciplined striving and enabling coordinated collective action

through embodied commitment. This mechanism operates through recurrent practices of scrutiny, correction, embodied coordination, shared fatigue, humor, and affective regulation, which collectively transform fear and vulnerability into disciplined commitment and coordinated action over time.

Drawing on work on aspirational identity and discipline (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009), this mechanism extends existing understandings of aspirational identity by showing that aspiration is directed not toward individual self-enhancement but toward sustaining collective obligation under conditions of persistent extremity. As one officer observed, "*Discipline is not what holds us still; it is what keeps us together*" (Interviewee 5, BOPE).

Mechanism 2: Paradoxical knotting - Entangling moral contradictions in practice

Several participants described operating under conditions in which *aggression* and *restraint* had to be enacted simultaneously rather than treated as opposing choices. Operating in densely populated favelas, the use of force was always simultaneously tactical and moral. "*You carry the mindset of war, but you cannot act like a soldier. Our job is to fight and still protect, even when both are impossible*" (Interviewee 4, BOPE). During an operation in Vila Cruzeiro, a BOPE patrol advanced under fire while civilians appeared unpredictably, forcing constant recalibration. "*In your head, you hear two voices… Press, because this is the chance; hold, because somebody's daughter is behind that wall*" (Interviewee 12, CORE). Aggression was not eliminated but remained inseparable from responsibility. "*Heroes are adventurers. They endanger themselves, the team, and civilians. A leader must identify and exclude them*" (Interviewee 2, BOPE leader). "*A hero here is not someone who kills; a hero is someone who decides not to shoot*" (Interviewee 9, BOPE). "*Anger is necessary in the battlefield, but we're police officers… Controlling anger keeps us mentally healthy. We're there to protect civilians, not for revenge*" (Interviewee 1, CORE leader). Aggression and restraint thus operated as a single moral-tactical configuration in which force was repeatedly recalibrated rather than sequentially decided.

Many participants also described *autonomy* and *obedience* not as conflicting demands, but as interdependent logics of action that had to be enacted simultaneously in practice. Under time pressure, officers were required to act independently while remaining aligned with collective intent. "*In the ground, you often have seconds to decide. You act on your own, but never outside the team's logic*" (Interviewee 2, CORE). "*Sometimes communication fails, and you have to decide alone. But your decision has to fit what was planned. Otherwise, you break the team*" (Interviewee 11, CORE). "*We trust judgment, not instinct. Instinct is private; judgment is collective*" (Interviewee 10, BOPE). Acting beyond orders was legitimate only insofar as it reproduced the plan's underlying logic. Autonomy without alignment meant disruption; obedience without judgment meant failure. Effective action required holding both together in real time.

Similarly, several participants described *control* and *improvisation* as mutually reinforcing dimensions of effective action. Training and repetition stabilized behavior under risk: "*We operate in situations where conditions are often contradictory… Training, training, and more training, repeating rules over time, keeps us safe in the field*" (Interviewee 5, BOPE). At the same time, situational responsiveness remained indispensable: "*No plan survives contact. You follow the protocol, but you adjust all the time. If you don't adapt, you get hurt*" (Interviewee 2, BOPE). Control enabled improvisation by providing a structured baseline, while improvisation preserved control by allowing adaptation to unfolding contingencies. These dimensions were co-produced through recurrent practice.

These tensions became institutionalized through training, hierarchy, and reflexive routines. Formal documents codified both procedural discipline and adaptive responsiveness, reinforcing expectations that actors must simultaneously follow rules and adapt to unfolding situations. Training did not eliminate contradiction but stabilized how tensions were enacted. After a failed mission, one operator asked, "*Where did we push too hard? Where did we hold*

too long?" The commander replied: "*We do not look for villains. We look for challenges we failed to manage*" (Interviewee 9, BOPE). Reflection did not resolve tensions but reorganized their interaction. Professional identity reinforced these dynamics. "*We know what a police officer shall do and what makes us different from criminals. Control of aggressiveness, focus, and tactics is what makes us who we are*" (Interviewee 18, BOPE). Identity provided a shared evaluative frame through which competing demands could be enacted coherently. Humor also served a stabilizing function. After an operation without arrests, a team joked they had "(...) *won by not shooting anyone*." A captain reflected, "*You can win and lose simultaneously here… The work is to live in between*" (Interviewee 10, BOPE). External accountability intensified these contradictions: "*One day they call us killers… the next day they beg for us to come*" (Interviewee 9, CORE). Commanders reframed control accordingly: "*We can't control the story. We can only ensure that when it's told, we can live with what we did*" (Interviewee 10, BOPE). These empirically situated expressions, such as combat and care, lethality and legitimacy, or emotional restraint and moral vulnerability, represented context-specific manifestations of the broader tensions organizing practice.

The evidence surrounding peer scrutiny helps explain the reversal identified in Puzzle 2. Public exposure strengthened rather than inhibited collective functioning because exposure and protection became mutually reinforcing rather than opposing practices. More broadly, organizing enduring contradictions in practice enabled members to sustain coordinated action without resolving the tensions constitutive of persistent risk.

We define *paradoxical knotting* as an organizing mechanism through which enduring contradictions become relationally and collectively articulated in practice, enabling coordinated action without resolving the tensions that constitute persistent risk. Rather than functioning as competing demands requiring cognitive balancing or eventual resolution, tensions such as aggression and restraint, autonomy and obedience, and control and

improvisation become enacted as mutually constitutive dimensions of collective practice. Through this organization of contradiction, members sustain coordinated action while preserving the moral and operational complexity of their work.

We do not claim that paradox theory has previously assumed contradictions to be resolvable; the persistence and non-resolvability of tensions is precisely what distinguishes paradox from dialectic or dilemma (Smith and Lewis, 2011). What we add is more specific: paradoxical knotting theorizes *multiple, mutually implicated* tensions, including aggression-and-restraint, autonomy-and-obedience, and control-and-improvisation, as jointly and relationally enacted within single moments of action, rather than analyzed as parallel dyadic pairs; it foregrounds the *embodied and moral* character of the enactment rather than a purely cognitive framing; and it specifies the enabling condition under which such joint enactment is required, namely chronic extremity, in which the temporal distance for sequential resolution or dynamic balancing is not available. On each point, our contribution is an extension and specification of paradox theory rather than a replacement of its central claims.

Drawing on the conceptualization of paradox as interdependent and mutually constitutive rather than discrete oppositions (Farjoun, 2010; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Putnam et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011), this mechanism extends existing understandings of paradox by showing how enduring contradictions are not simply cognitively reframed or dynamically balanced but become organized through recurrent collective practice. Figure 2 presents the three analytical tensions anchoring our explanation, aggression and restraint, autonomy and obedience, and control and improvisation. These are not intended as exhaustive categories but as central organizing dimensions around which paradoxical knotting is enacted. Context-specific expressions, including combat and care, lethality and legitimacy, and emotional restraint and moral vulnerability, represent empirical instantiations of these broader tensions rather than separate conceptual dimensions. As one veteran summarized, it involved

"*carrying two orders in your head, the tactical and the ethical… letting go of either means losing who we are*" (Interviewee 6, CORE). As another concluded, "*We are always walking a moving line… the task is not to stop it from moving but to keep walking*" (Interviewee 9, BOPE).

Mechanism 3: Routine enactment - Ritual as repair and embodied coordination

Several participants described coordinated action as sustained through structured preparation and repeated training that forged embodied responses under pressure. "*In the heat of operations, time to think is limited. Training and volume of operations forge bodily responses… each sign transforms into action*" (Interviewee 13, BOPE). Coordination was not only cognitive but embodied, emerging through repetition that aligned perception, judgment, and action. Training performed both constitutive and reparative functions. Through relentless repetition, drills inscribed not only technical competence but moral orientation into the body. During one training episode, when a recruit froze in a live-fire simulation, the instructor halted the exercise and intervened directly; hesitation was framed not as an individual failure but as a collective risk. "*You cannot freeze, not for yourself, not for the man next to you*." The sequence was repeated until hesitation disappeared. "*The point isn't just technical skill. It's teaching them that hesitation kills. Drills burn that lesson into the body*" (Interviewee 2, BOPE). Routines redistributed fear into disciplined readiness, transforming emotional exposure into coordinated response.

Several participants described debriefings as critical moments of collective reflection through which disruption became transformed into shared understanding. "*We have rites, rules, and symbols whose true value shows only in combat. Even years after mistakes, we revisit them to learn and evolve*" (Interviewee 9, BOPE commander). These interactions made errors visible and collectively processable. "*If you f****up, someone will tell you. There's no hiding here*" (Interviewee 13, BOPE). Yet these exchanges were not punitive but restorative. "*We do it because silence is dangerous. If we don't talk, mistakes live inside us*" (Interviewee 4, BOPE).

Debriefings thus functioned as spaces where errors were surfaced, processed, and reintegrated without fragmenting cohesion. "*It hurts, but it cleanses. You walk out stronger because the group has seen your weakness and still keeps you inside"* (Interviewee 14, BOPE). Reflection did not simply correct action but restored alignment, transforming vulnerability into collective learning.

Participants repeatedly emphasized the role of rituals, symbols, and narratives in sustaining shared meaning and collective continuity over time. "*Our symbol, the Skull [Day of the skull], means 'Victory over Death', achieved when civilians are unharmed, enemies are captured, and no officers are hurt*" (Interviewee 11, BOPE). This symbolic framework was enacted through everyday practices and formal rituals, such as *Dia da Caveira*, during which fallen members are remembered, and new recruits are inducted. "*We don't forget, they walk with us*" (Interviewee 12, BOPE). Memory became a form of preparedness, integrating past sacrifice into ongoing readiness (Ancona et al., 2001; Desmond, 2007; Ricoeur, 1984). Storytelling functioned as an additional mode of temporal repair. Participants frequently shared narratives of critical incidents, particularly those involving loss and return to action: "*It's not the first shooting that makes you an operator, it's the first time you come home knowing one of us didn't, and then you go to training the next day anyway*" (Interviewee 2, BOPE). These narratives reorganized experience, transforming grief into obligation and reinforcing continuity (Gabriel, 2004). Coordination was also grounded in relational expectations embedded in repeated interaction. "*You have to be sure your teammate will cover your back. We accept missions only when partners are technically and emotionally qualified*" (Interviewee 1, CORE). "*You don't need to talk much. You already know how the other will move*" (Interviewee 12, BOPE). Through repetition, coordination became based on mutual attunement rather than explicit communication. Embodied micro-practices reinforced this alignment. Before operations, officers exchanged silent gestures, hands on shoulders, brief squeezes, signaling

readiness. "*Each sign transforms into action*" (Interviewee 14, BOPE). During a CORE hostage rescue, when an initial breach failed, a secondary team adjusted immediately without explicit command. "*No one gave that order, they already knew*" (Interviewee 10, CORE). "*We train until we stop thinking about ourselves. That's when we're ready*" (Interviewee 12, CORE). Humor also contributed to this process. After an uneventful operation, a team joked they had "*risked everything for a ghost*" (Interviewee 3, BOPE). "*If we can laugh, we're still together*" (Interviewee 12, BOPE). Humor redistributed tension while reaffirming cohesion.

The evidence surrounding loss, rituals, and collective remembrance helps explain the reversal identified in Puzzle 4. Rather than producing prolonged disruption or fragmentation, loss became reorganized into renewed readiness through recurrent collective practices. In doing so, the repeated enactment of routines transformed disruption into coordinated preparedness by reconnecting memory, action, and anticipation under persistent risk.

We define *routine enactment* as an organizing mechanism through which repeated practices align values, actions, and interpretations, enabling the repair of disruption and the reproduction of coordinated action under persistent risk. Beyond reproducing stability and enabling the situated, open-ended adaptation emphasized in recent routine-dynamics research (Dionysiou et al., 2025), routine enactment operates as temporal and moral repair, reorganizing experience by reconnecting memory, action, and anticipation through recurrent collective practice. Training, debriefings, rituals, storytelling, and embodied coordination do not simply repeat established routines; they renew their meaning by integrating fear, loss, and uncertainty into coordinated action over time.

Drawing on research on routines as generative systems composed of ostensive commitments and performative enactments (Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Feldman et al., 2016), this mechanism extends routine dynamics by showing how routines function not only as sources of stability and variation but also as mechanisms of temporal and moral repair under

persistent extremity. Through repeated enactment, routines reconnect past experience to future action, transforming disruption into renewed preparedness and sustaining collective functioning over time. As one instructor explained, "*Every time we repeat, we are reminded of past failures*" (Interviewee 3, BOPE). Routines thus reorganize the relationship between memory, action, and anticipation (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009).

The organizing configuration of intersubjective resilience

Our findings converge on a central insight: sustaining collective life under persistent life-and-death risk is not achieved through individual resilience alone, but via the organizing configuration conceptualized here as intersubjective resilience. This configuration comprises three mutually constitutive mechanisms that continuously organize moral orientation, tension organization, and temporal repair. Aspirational discipline anchors action by transforming vulnerability, fear, and individual striving into shared moral obligation and collective synchronization. Paradoxical knotting organizes enduring contradictions, such as aggression and restraint, autonomy and obedience, and control and improvisation, as interdependent dimensions of coordinated practice. Routine enactment continuously reabsorbs disruption through training, debriefings, rituals, storytelling, and embodied coordination, processing fear, loss, and uncertainty into renewed readiness over time.

These mechanisms do not operate as discrete or sequential stages. Rather, each continuously conditions and depends upon the others. Aspirational discipline stabilizes why action is justified by anchoring identity in obligation rather than self-enhancement. Paradoxical knotting structures how action becomes possible when competing demands cannot be resolved but must instead be jointly enacted in practice. Routine enactment restores continuity by re-embedding moral commitments and coordinated responses within shared temporal and embodied rhythms. Through their continuous interaction, moral obligation becomes actionable

under pressure, tensions become collectively manageable, and disruption becomes reorganized into continuity rather than fragmentation.

Across the data, destabilizing pressures such as competition, scrutiny, fear, contradiction, and loss were not eliminated or cognitively neutralized. Instead, they were continuously reorganized into coordinated forms of collective life. Competition intensified interdependence rather than fragmentation. Scrutiny became ritualized care rather than interpersonal threat. Fear became synchronized action rather than individual paralysis. Loss became rhythmic reconstitution rather than prolonged disruption. As one officer noted, "*We don't overcome fear, we give it direction. Every mission reminds us who we are*" (Interviewee 13, CORE). Coherence, in this sense, did not emerge as a stable condition but as an ongoing accomplishment enacted through the continuous alignment of identity, action, and time.

The resulting pattern is therefore best understood as rhythmic rather than static. Collective life was sustained through repeated cycles of moral anchoring, tension organization, and temporal repair, which together generated coordinated responsiveness under persistent extremity. We conceptualize this organizing configuration as intersubjective resilience. In this formulation, intersubjective resilience does not denote recovery from disruption but the capacity to sustain coordinated life within it. Extending Sonpar et al. (2024), intersubjective processes do not merely enable actors to function under existential threat; they actively reproduce collective life over time by transforming persistent exposure to risk into an ongoing, embodied configuration of organizing.

Following Cornelissen and Werner (2026), the three mechanisms developed here are best understood as contextual organizing mechanisms rather than universal causal laws. Their explanatory power lies not in representing independent or universally applicable mechanisms, but in revealing how familiar forms of organizing become relationally configured under persistent risk. Rather than introducing entirely new organizing processes, our findings show

how moral orientation, tension organization, and routine enactment become mutually constitutive, jointly generating the sustained coordination observed in this extreme context.

Table 1 summarizes the contextual organizing configuration developed in this study. Together, aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment constitute three mutually constitutive organizing mechanisms through which intersubjective resilience is enacted under persistent life-and-death risk. Taken together, these mechanisms provide the contextual organizing explanation developed from the recurring empirical puzzles identified in this study.

Insert Table 1 about here

Figure 2 illustrates how the three mechanisms constitute the organizing configuration of intersubjective resilience. Through their recursive interaction, aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment jointly sustain coordinated collective action under persistent life-and-death risk. Rather than representing sequential stages, the figure depicts their mutually constitutive and recursive relationship over time.

Insert Figure 2 about here
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5. Discussion

This study advances understanding of how organizations sustain coordinated collective life under persistent life-and-death risk. We show that sustaining collective life under normalized extremity does not depend on eliminating fear, resolving contradiction, or stabilizing meaning through interpretation alone. Rather, it depends on the organizing configuration we conceptualize as intersubjective resilience, constituted by the mutually constitutive interplay of aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment. Together, these mechanisms form an organizing configuration through which organizations sustain

coordinated collective action by recurrently reproducing moral orientation, organizing enduring tensions, and enabling temporal repair under persistent extremity.

Our theoretical contribution builds on four empirical puzzles that emerged consistently across the data and could not be fully explained by existing theory. We explain these puzzles through three interrelated mechanisms that together constitute the organizing configuration we term intersubjective resilience. Each of the contributions developed below addresses one or more of the empirical reversals identified in our findings: competition intensifying attachment, scrutiny functioning as care, fear becoming coordinated action, and loss generating renewed alignment. Together, these patterns show that, under persistent risk, destabilizing pressures are not eliminated or attenuated but continuously reorganized into coordinated collective life through intersubjective forms of organizing.

Following Cornelissen and Werner (2026), we present aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment as contextual organizing mechanisms rather than universal causal laws. Their contribution lies less in introducing entirely novel mechanisms than in demonstrating how their mutually constitutive interplay forms the organizing configuration we conceptualize as intersubjective resilience. Through this organizing configuration, organizations sustain coordinated collective life under conditions of normalized extremity.

We begin with the overarching contribution and then develop three more focused contributions to social identity theory, paradox theory, and routine dynamics, maintaining the guiding question of how collective life is sustained when risk is constitutive rather than episodic.

A contextual organizing explanation of intersubjective resilience

Our primary contribution is a contextual organizing explanation of how collective life is sustained under persistent risk. Rather than treating resilience as an individual trait, structural

capacity, or episodic response (Hollnagel et al., 2006; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007), we conceptualize intersubjective resilience as an organizing configuration constituted by three mutually constitutive mechanisms: aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment. Together, these mechanisms form an organizing configuration through which organizations recurrently reproduce moral orientation, organize enduring tensions, and enable temporal repair, thereby sustaining coordinated collective life under conditions of normalized extremity. Extending Sonpar et al. (2024), we move from explaining how intersubjective processes enable individuals to function under existential threat to explaining how organizations sustain coordinated collective life under persistent risk.

Viewing intersubjective resilience as an organizing configuration also redirects analytical attention from regulating fear to explaining how organizations recurrently reproduce coherence under persistent life-and-death risk. Fear, contradiction, and disruption are neither contained nor episodically resolved; instead, they are recurrently reorganized into coordinated and meaningful action. When danger becomes an organizing condition rather than a situational disruption, resilience lies in the collective capacity to transform instability into morally grounded and temporally structured practice. Collective life is therefore sustained not as a stable state but as an ongoing accomplishment enacted through recurrent processes of alignment and reconstitution.

Importantly, this organizing configuration is grounded in the empirical puzzles that motivated our analysis. Competition intensifies attachment as aspirational discipline reorganizes differentiation into collective striving (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Scrutiny functions as care as paradoxical knotting transforms exposure into mutual accountability (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999). Fear becomes a resource for coordinated action as it is collectively reorganized through disciplined engagement rather than individually managed (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2003; Weick, 1993). Loss

generates renewed alignment as routine enactment reincorporates disruption into the shared rhythms of organizational practice (Bonanno, 2004; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Ricoeur, 1984). Together, these empirical patterns demonstrate how destabilizing pressures become recurrently reorganized into coordinated collective life rather than eliminated or attenuated.

In doing so, we bring together three dimensions that have often been examined separately in research on extreme contexts, namely identity, relational tension, and temporality, into a single contextual organizing explanation (Hällgren et al., 2018, 2025). Rather than treating identity, paradox, and routines as independent explanatory perspectives, we show how aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment become mutually constitutive within the organizing configuration we conceptualize as intersubjective resilience. This integrated explanation clarifies how organizations sustain coordinated collective life when disruption is recurrent rather than exceptional. We also show that temporality is not simply the background against which organizing unfolds but an integral dimension of this organizing configuration. Rather than viewing disruption as episodic and recovery as its endpoint, our findings suggest that coordinated collective life is recurrently renewed through collective practices that restore organizational coherence over time.

Although military organizations also confront uncertainty and contradiction (Kark et al., 2016), they operate under distinct institutional logics. Military violence is externally directed, legally exceptional, and temporally bounded (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960; King, 2013), whereas police authority unfolds within continuous democratic legality and public scrutiny (Bittner, 1970; Brodeur, 2010; Loader and Mulcahy, 2003; Reiner, 2010). Lethal authority must coexist with democratic constraint, autonomy with hierarchy, and emotional control with accountability. Officers protect civilians while confronting armed actors embedded within the same communities, making the central tension one of coercive capacity

and sustained legitimacy. The challenge is thus not only to act under threat but to sustain coordinated, legitimate, and morally grounded collective action over time.

Extending social identity theory under persistent extremity

Our findings extend identity as a moral and relational infrastructure under persistent risk. Classic accounts emphasize belonging, self-categorization, and psychological safety (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Haslam et al., 2022; Hogg and Terry, 2000), while mortality research highlights identity as a psychological buffer against death anxiety (Becker, 1977; Pyszczynski et al., 2003). These perspectives assume that identity stabilizes action by reducing uncertainty or mitigating existential threat.

Our findings suggest that, under conditions of persistent extremity, identity also operates as a normative force enacted through everyday organizing practices. Building on Thornborrow and Brown (2009) and Sonpar et al. (2024), identity becomes aspirational, performative, and continuously enacted through aspirational discipline. Rather than suppressing fear, identity organizes it into moral obligation through disciplined striving, relational evaluation, and embodied coordination. In our empirical setting, identity operates as a mechanism of moral orientation, transforming vulnerability into obligation and belonging into responsibility.

This interpretation addresses the empirical puzzles observed in the data. Competition intensifies attachment because identity is organized around collective obligation rather than individual differentiation. Fear becomes coordinated action because it is reoriented toward shared purpose rather than managed as individual anxiety. Our findings therefore suggest that identity contributes to sustaining coordinated action while reinforcing the legitimacy through which coercive authority is exercised under continuous public scrutiny. Rather than treating identity primarily as a cognitive resource, this perspective highlights its role as a moral infrastructure through which collective life is continuously organized.

At the same time, this moral anchoring introduces important ambivalence. The same processes that sustain coordination may also intensify pressure toward conformity and self-discipline, potentially constraining dissent or amplifying commitment under conditions of risk. In contexts of recurrent armed confrontation and contested legitimacy, intersubjective resilience may enable purposeful action under extreme conditions while also insulating collectives from internal and external critique. This condition helps us to understand the broader implications of identity as a moral obligation.

Advancing paradox theory as relational and embodied organization

Our findings extend paradox theory by showing how enduring contradictions become relationally and collectively organized under risk. Prior research emphasizes "both-and" thinking and the balancing of competing demands (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011), often assuming that tensions can be managed or temporally separated.

Our findings suggest that, under conditions of persisting extremity, contradictions cannot simply be resolved or bracketed but must instead be continuously enacted as interdependent dimensions of collective action. Tensions such as aggression and restraint, autonomy and obedience, and control and improvisation become organized through paradoxical knotting as mutually conditioning dimensions of coordinated practice. This organizing mechanism helps explain the empirical puzzle of scrutiny functioning as care. Rather than inhibiting voice, critique becomes a mechanism of protection because it is embedded in a relational structure in which individual performance is inseparable from collective survival. Coordinated action therefore emerges through their continuous organization in practice.

Extending Putnam et al. (2016) and Jarzabkowski et al. (2022), our findings suggest that paradox under persistent risk is enacted not only through cognitive or discursive processes but also through embodied and relational forms of organizing. Paradoxical knotting helps

sustain coordinated action by holding multiple interdependent tensions together within single moments of action, an embodied and moral organization of contradiction rather than its cognitive resolution.

Extending routine dynamics as temporal and moral repair under persistent extremity

Our findings extend routine dynamics by showing how routines function as mechanisms of temporal and moral repair under persistent life-and-death risk. Prior work conceptualizes routines as generative systems balancing stability and change (Feldman and Pentland, 2003) and as carriers of institutional memory (Becker, 2004), typically examining disruption as episodic rather than constitutive of everyday organizing.

Our findings suggest that, under conditions of persistent extremity, routine enactment operates as a mechanism through which disruption is continuously reorganized into shared rhythms of practice. Training, debriefings, rituals, and storytelling not only reproduce coordinated action but also reconnect memory, action, and anticipation, re-anchor moral commitments, and sustain temporal continuity.

This mechanism helps explain the empirical puzzle of loss generating renewed coordination. Rather than producing fragmentation, disruption becomes reorganized through repeated and embodied practices that sustain coordinated collective life. Extending Weick (1995) and Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), our findings indicate that resilience under persistent risk depends not only on recovering from disruption but also on continuously repairing and reorganizing collective life through recurrent practices within disruption as normal.

At the same time, continuous enactment introduces important tensions. While routines sustain coordination, they may also reinforce existing patterns and constrain variation, limiting adaptability under changing conditions. This highlights the dual role of routines as both enabling and constraining mechanisms under persistent extremity.

Limitations and future research

Our study is subject to several methodological limitations. First, the operational sensitivity of the field prevented audio recording of interviews. Quotations reported here are analytically grounded reconstructions derived from cross-validated paired-researcher notes rather than verbatim transcripts. Although we mitigated this through immediate reconciliation, back-checking of analytically weighted passages by a third bilingual researcher, and triangulation with observational and documentary data, some fidelity to exact wording was inevitably lost, and researcher interpretation entered the analytical chain earlier than a verbatim transcription would have permitted. Second, one member of the research team had prior institutional ties to the Rio State Police as an instructor. While this access made the study possible and provided contextual fluency, it also carries the risk of over-identification with participant accounts and of insufficient critical distance from the units' self-understanding. We addressed this through a structured devil's-advocate procedure between embedded and non-embedded authors and through explicit reflexive attention to how prior ties could shape observation and interpretation, though we cannot claim that this fully neutralized the risk. Third, the contextual organizing mechanisms we develop, in the sense specified by Cornelissen and Werner (2026), are best treated as bounded to the setting we studied; their transportability across institutional regimes with different logics of authority, legitimacy, or accountability is an empirical rather than assumed matter.

Our findings are analytically bound to contexts in which danger is constitutive rather than episodic and where collective identity carries strong normative force. In such settings, moral orientation, tension organization, and temporal repair become tightly interdependent in sustaining coordinated collective life. The contextual organizing mechanisms identified here were developed from observations of elite police units operating under continuous exposure to lethal risk and may assume different configurations across institutional settings.

Although our study is theory building rather than theory testing, the organizing relationships identified here provide a foundation for future empirical examination. Future research could investigate how aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment operate across contexts characterized by persistent, non-episodic risk, and how variations in institutional logics influence their configuration. Comparative studies across military organizations, bureaucratic agencies, private security firms, humanitarian operations, or other high-risk occupations may clarify how differences in authority, legitimacy, and accountability shape the moral anchoring of identity, the organization of enduring contradictions, and the temporal organization of routines (Loader and Walker, 2007; Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Future research should also examine the limits and trade-offs of intersubjective resilience. Although the organizing configuration identified here enables coordinated collective action under persistent extremity, it may also reinforce conformity, constrain dissent, or increase organizational exposure to ethical and operational risks. In policing contexts, issues such as the use of force, accountability, and public legitimacy illustrate how the same organizing configuration may generate different consequences under different institutional conditions. Future research should therefore examine how institutional arrangements shape the benefits, limits, and unintended consequences of intersubjective resilience across organizational settings.

6. Conclusion

Risk-laden work is indispensable to societal functioning, yet its effectiveness depends on the capacity of individuals and groups to sustain coordinated collective life under conditions in which danger, uncertainty, and the possibility of death are constitutive elements of everyday work. This capacity cannot be reduced to psychological resilience, structural design, or

technical expertise alone. Rather, our findings show that it is sustained through the organizing configuration we conceptualize as intersubjective resilience, in which aspirational discipline, paradoxical knotting, and routine enactment operate as three mutually constitutive mechanisms. Together, these mechanisms continuously organize moral orientation, tension organization, and temporal repair, enabling coordinated collective life under persistent risk.

In BOPE and CORE, resilience reflects not the absence of fragility but its disciplined inhabitation: fear becomes moral obligation, contradiction becomes coordinated practice, and loss becomes renewed readiness through training, rituals, and collective memory. Collective life is therefore sustained not by eliminating uncertainty, but by continuously reorganizing it through shared forms of organizing that transform vulnerability into coordinated action.

Theoretically, the study extends current understandings of social identity, paradox, and routine dynamics by explaining how these perspectives become jointly organized under persistent risk. Rather than proposing a universal model of organizing under extremity, we develop a contextual organizing explanation of how organizations sustain coordinated collective life when danger is constitutive rather than episodic. In doing so, we show that coordinated collective life depends not on the resolution of fear, contradiction, or disruption, but on their continuous organization through intersubjective resilience.

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Table 1. Contextual Organizing Mechanisms of Intersubjective Resilience

Organizing Mechanism	Core Dimension	Theoretical Definition	Constitutive Features	Illustrative Quotes
Aspirational Discipline	**Moral Orientation**	An identity-organizing mechanism through which desired selves become enacted as shared moral obligations, transforming vulnerability into disciplined striving under persistent life-and-death risk.	Identity as moral obligation; fear transformed into duty; collective self-binding; aspirational striving.	*"Fear becomes focus."* *"We know exactly why we're here. We step in when no one else can. That shared purpose defines everything we do."*
Paradoxical Knotting	**Tension Organization**	An organizing mechanism through which enduring contradictions become collectively organized in practice, enabling coordinated action without resolving competing demands.	Simultaneous enactment of competing demands; interdependence of tensions; disciplined improvisation; embodied balancing of contradictions.	*"Heroes are dangerous."* *"We act aggressively, but always under control. Losing control is what gets people killed."*
Routine Enactment	**Temporal Repair and Reproduction**	An organizing mechanism through which repeated practices reconnect memory, action, and anticipation, continuously repairing disruption and reproducing coordinated collective life.	Ritualized learning; alignment of values and action; collective reflection; reproduction of shared meaning; temporal repair.	*"Training keeps us alive."* *"After every mission, we go back, review, and make sure we are ready again."*

Figure 1. Data Structure

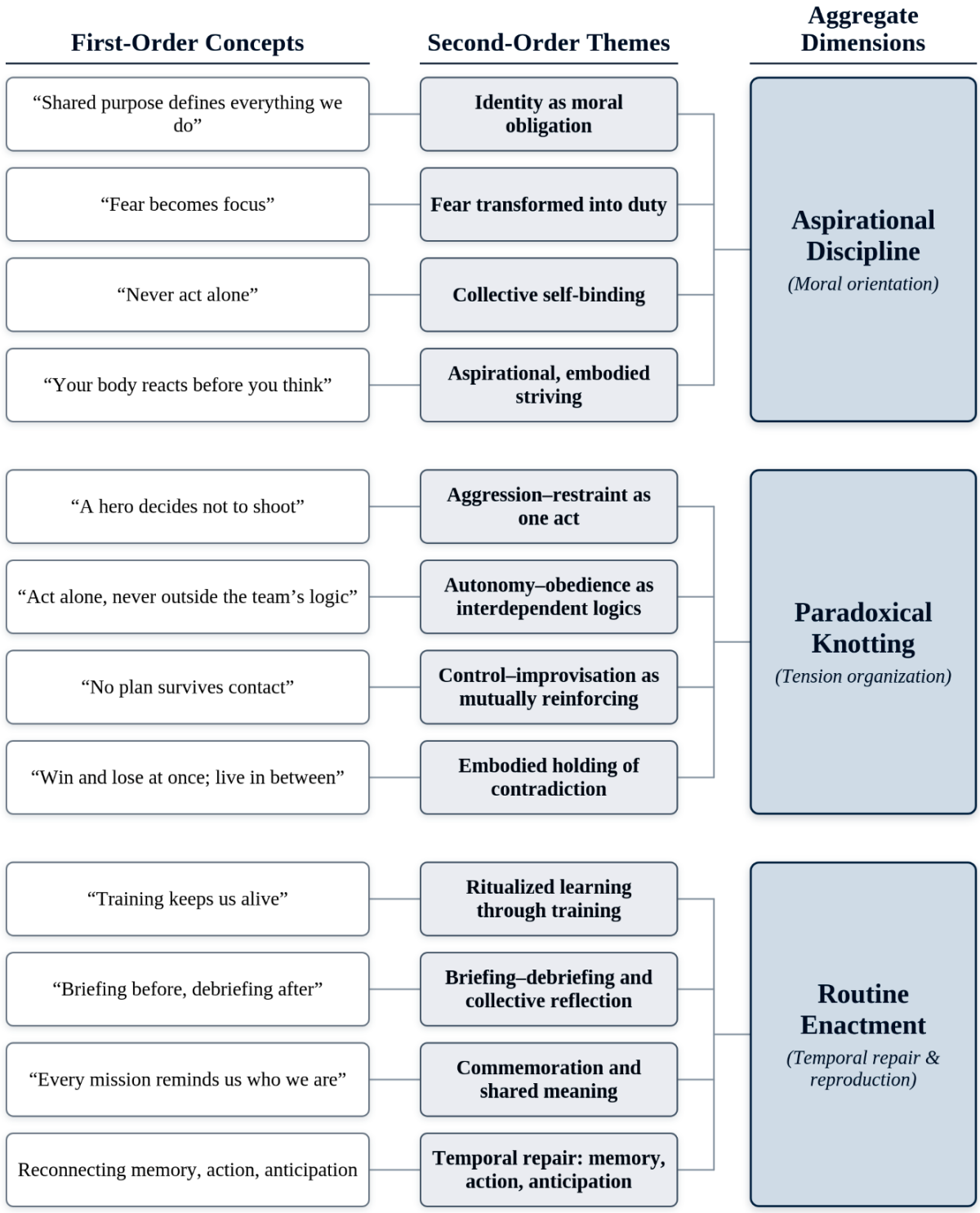


Figure 2. Organizing Configuration of Intersubjective Resilience under Persistent Life-and-Death Risk

