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Articles

Renegotiating Work Identity in Organizational Change: A Processual Analysis of Group Interventions in the Italian Prison System

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Abstract

Background: The Italian prison system has experienced considerable normative reforms, which have altered professional practices and institutional interactions within a highly bureaucratic environment. In such situations, organizational change may generate ambivalence, confusion, and emotional distress among professionals. However, limited attention has been paid to how organizational members process and symbolically elaborate change in their daily work experience, particularly in terms of work identity.

Methods: This qualitative study adopts a process-oriented perspective to examine the dynamics emerging within a reflective group intervention (RGI) implemented following the institutional reform, as well as how work identity is symbolically constructed within this setting. The intervention was based on a systems psychodynamic framework and involved a group of 12 prison administration employees. Textual data from the group sessions were analyzed using T-LAB, lexicometric software combining Elementary Context and Correspondence Analyses to support qualitative interpretation, capturing processual patterns and symbolic tensions.

Results: Findings show that participants' narratives were organized into three interconnected domains: representations of organizational complexity, relational dynamics, and the negotiation of work identity within hierarchical structures. These processes were associated with tensions between subjective experience and institutional role positioning, as well as individual regulation and organizational belonging.

Conclusion: Overall, the results suggest that RGIs might serve as reflective spaces supporting the collective symbolic elaboration of organizational change, through which professionals may rethink the meaning of their professional roles within changing institutional contexts.

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1. Introduction

Organizational change in the public-sector is often characterized by high levels of complexity, constraint, and emotional strain. Public organizations typically operate within a dense framework of rules, regulations, and procedures established by higher authorities, which shape both decision-making processes and everyday practices (Rainey et al., 2021; Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995, p. 548). These features become particularly salient in prison systems, which can be considered extreme cases of bureaucratic organization, where institutional reforms intersect with rigid organizational cultures and high-stress working conditions (Bezerra et al., 2016; Britton, 2003; Clements & Kinman, 2022; Goffman, 1961; Sorge et al., 2026).

In recent years, the Italian prison system has experienced significant legal and regulatory changes, largely driven by the incorporation of European standards into national legislation (Sorge et al., 2021). While these reforms are necessary, they have introduced significant challenges, changing daily practices and contributing to increasing workplace stress (D'Angelo et al., 2018).

In many institutional and public-sector settings, such transformations are frequently introduced through top-down regulatory and strategic reforms aimed at enhancing efficiency and accountability (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The Italian prison system – entirely state-administered – represents a paradigmatic case of a highly formalized public governance structure. Within this system, strict hierarchy and top-down culture reinforce a strong dependence on directives issued by higher levels of authority (Gozzoli et al., 2018). As these directives are translated into practice, they may generate interpretive gaps, ambivalence, and emotional strain, particularly when reforms are experienced as externally imposed or insufficiently negotiated (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2011; Saita, 2018; Vakola et al., 2021).

As a result, resistance to change can be understood as a multidimensional process that involves identity, belonging, and legitimacy, rather than merely opposition to new procedures (Augustsson et al., 2017; Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018; Deng et al., 2023; Oreg et al., 2018).

Organizational change may be experienced both as a necessary transition and as a destabilizing process, often triggering defensive reactions and emotional strain, such as fatigue, frustration, and feelings of insecurity (Sorge et al., 2021).

Beyond individual responses, organizational change is also influenced by systemic dynamics. Organizational systems may display inertia not only because of individual resistance, but also due to structural constraints and relational patterns that limit their adaptive capacity (Gozzoli et al., 2018; Santos de Souza & Chimenti, 2024).

In this perspective, change emerges as a complex interplay between structural conditions and relational processes, where employees actively interpret, evaluate, and emotionally respond to it (Breutner & Roth, 2025), and meaning is continuously negotiated through social interactions (Maitlis et al., 2013). As everyday work practices are reconfigured and responsibilities redistributed, established meanings and professional reference points may become destabilized (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

It is therefore important to distinguish between the ways in which organizations change and the processes through which individuals elaborate that change. While the former may be driven by regulatory measures and top-down decisions, the latter involve slower and more complex subjective dynamics (Frigelli, 2017). Organizational transformation thus extends beyond structural redesign, involving symbolic and interpretive dimensions through which work is experienced and enacted (Brown & Coupland, 2015), continuously negotiated through processes of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia et al., 2010; Liang, 2025).

Within this perspective, identity-related processes play a central role. Work identity provides a key interpretative framework through which individuals make sense of shifting expectations, roles and institutional demands (Fugate et al., 2012; Liang et al., 2022; Yue, 2021).

When reforms challenge previously consolidated professional coordinates, employees may experience identity threats, role ambiguity, and fragmentation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Liang, 2025). In this sense, identity becomes a central dimension through which organizational change is subjectively elaborated (Nordhall et al., 2025).

Despite extensive research on organizational change, evidence regarding the effectiveness of interventions aimed at supporting employees during these processes remains inconclusive (Abildgaard et al., 2018; Nielsen, 2024). Existing studies tend to prioritize outcomes over the processes through which individuals and groups engage with change in context (Roodbari et al., 2023). This underscores the need for more process-oriented approaches that can capture how organizational members interpret and make sense of change as it unfolds, particularly within group settings, and how these processes are intertwined with the reconstruction of work identity. To our knowledge, current research offers only limited insight into how group-based, psychologically informed activities support the elaboration of change at both processual and identity-related levels.

Group-based approaches are theoretically warranted insofar as employees' attitudes and responses to organizational change are shaped through collective, group-level processes of social interaction, rather than simply aggregating individual responses (Bouckennooghe et al., 2019). Reflective Group Interventions (RGIs) may represent one such practice, however, their theoretical foundations and applications remain heterogeneous. RGI is best understood as an

“umbrella term”, drawing on differing traditions such as psychodynamic and systemic-relational approaches, to indicate structured group formats, including group supervision, work discussion groups, peer support groups, and reflective practice groups (Gregory et al., 2025). They have been employed across high-demand professional contexts, particularly in healthcare, to support staff in processing the emotional demands of clinical work, offering containment and relief from the emotional intensity of ward-based work (Bruno & Bracco, 2016; Nickson, 2026). Similar formats have also been applied in social work (Brooks et al., 2012; Dempsey & Halton, 2017; Lees & Cooper, 2021), and in educational and training contexts to support group reflection and awareness (Rania et al., 2021; Tobin et al., 2024). Their applications within highly hierarchical public administrations, such as the prison system, remain scarce (Britton, 2003; Clements & Kinman, 2022), and existing wellbeing interventions in correctional settings have relied predominantly on individually oriented approaches such as CBT, mindfulness, and stress management, while reflective group-based and psychologically informed interventions remain largely absent (Forsyth et al., 2025; Owusu Ansah et al., 2025).

To address this gap, the present study adopts a process-oriented perspective to examine the relational, emotional, and symbolic dynamics emerging among employees within a psychologically informed reflective group intervention (RGI) in a highly bureaucratic prison context undergoing institutional reform.

Building on a preliminary analysis of organizational demand (Saita et al., 2026), this paper presents an RGI focused on professional identity and meaning-making processes. The intervention was commissioned by a Regional Office of the Italian Prison Administration (PRAP) and is analyzed in relation to the broader institutional transformations affecting the system.

1.1 Contextual background

The PRAP represents an intermediary administrative level between central governance and local institutions. In the present case, a northern Italian PRAP requested psychological support and training to help staff cope with changes introduced by recent legislative reforms. As these reforms redefined roles, responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms, their implementation required local adaptation. This process contributed to the reconfiguration of daily practices and professional relationships, sometimes generating ambiguity and tension across organizational levels.

1.2 Intervention framework

This study is grounded in the Systems Psychodynamic approach, which views organizations as emotional and symbolic systems shaped by both conscious and unconscious dynamics (Gould,

2018; Gould et al., 2006; Hirschhorn, 1990; Jaques, 1970; Perini, 2007; Steyn & Cilliers, 2016). Within this framework, organizational functioning is influenced by latent anxieties and defensive processes, which may emerge in response to change (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2022), particularly when institutional reforms disrupt established symbolic equilibria related to authority, belonging, and professional identity (Vince, 2001).

The intervention is further informed by the Italian model of Collusive Processes (Carli & Panaccia, 2003), which focuses on shared emotional symbolizations in the relationship between individuals and institutions (Carli, 2016), guiding both the preliminary analysis (Saita et al., 2026) and the intervention design.

The reflecting group setting provided a space for participants to elaborate work experiences and explore tensions, ambivalences, and identity-related challenges (Bruno & Bracco, 2016; Rania et al., 2021).

In line with action-research principles (Kagan et al., 2008; Kaneklin & Galuppo, 2009; Kaneklin et al., 2010; Marshall, 2011), the intervention was conceived as a process through which organizational change could be explored at the level of lived experience and meaning-making.

Accordingly, the study focuses on both the processual dynamics within the group and the symbolic elaboration of work identity, examining the processes activated during the implementation of the RGI in the context of institutional reform.

Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1.** Which relational, emotional, and symbolic processes were activated and evolved within the group during the organizational change?
- **RQ2.** How did the employees symbolically explore and elaborate their work identity within the RGI?

2. Methods

This study adopts a process-oriented qualitative research design aimed at examining (a) the relational, emotional and symbolic processes emerging within a Reflective Group Intervention (RGI) during institutional reform, and (b) how work identity was symbolically elaborated by employees across the RGI's five sessions. The research was conducted between October and November 2024 in a Regional Office of the Italian Prison Administration (PRAP) in Northern Italy. All participants provided informed consent, and data collection complied with ethical guidelines and EU data protection regulations, ensuring anonymity. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed after each session.

The study received approval from the Ethics Commission for Research in Psychology (CERPS) of the Department of Psychology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy (protocol no. 175/24).

The intervention and data analysis were conducted in Italian to preserve linguistic and cultural validity; selected quotations were later translated into English for publication.

2.1 Structure of the Reflective Group Intervention (RGI)

The intervention took place in a conference room within the PRAP. It was designed by a multidisciplinary team of psychologists and researchers with expertise in organizational, correctional, and psychodynamic psychology. Sessions were facilitated by two trained psychotherapists, with a third researcher acting as co-facilitator and observer; all three took written notes to support the flow of discussion.

The intervention consisted of five weekly three-hour sessions focused on work identity and organizational experience. Each session integrated experiential activities and group discussions to foster reflection on professional practice, relational dynamics, and organizational change. The group setting served as a reflective space (Heffron et al., 2016; Miller, 2005; Rania et al., 2021) in which participants explored tensions, shared experiences, and co-constructed meanings related to their work context. The intervention combined symbolic, experiential, and standardized tools to support reflection on work identity, relational dynamics, and coping processes. Graphic-symbolic and visual prompts (e.g., Figure S1) facilitated the exploration of work representations, while role-playing and scenario-based activities addressed relational dynamics in hierarchical contexts. Standardized instruments (e.g., COPE-NVI, Sica et al., 2008) and the Interpersonal Influence Inventory (III; Glaser, 2005) were used as reflective tools to enhance awareness of coping and communication styles, rather than for assessment purposes.

Details of each session are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Structure of the RGI: Session Themes, Tools, and Activities Supporting Identity and Processual Exploration

Session	Theme	Tools	Activities
1	Participants' representations of work identity.	Symbolic Design of Professional Life Space (DSSVP, Gozzoli et al., 2012); Symbolic Drawing of the Organizational Life Space (DSSVO; D'Angelo et al., 2021).	Individual and subgroup graphic-symbolic representations of work experience, followed by plenary discussion aimed at exploring role-based differences and shared meanings related to work identity.

2	Personal resources, perceived skills, and coping processes.	Skills target exercise; Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced – New Italian Version (Sica et al., 2008); Brief autogenic training exercise.	Individual completion of a symbolic-reflective exercise aimed at mapping role-related skills, followed by group discussion on perceived resources, skill gaps, and training needs. The session then included a theoretical introduction to coping, individual completion and interpretation of the COPE-NIV, and a final brief autogenic training exercise.
3	Relational and interactional dimensions of work identity, including positioning within hierarchical relationships.	Brief autogenic training exercise; Visual stimulus with open-ended prompts (e.g., “What am I doing here?” and “How am I here?”) (See Figure S1); Role-playing activity.	The session began with a brief autogenic training exercise. Participants then engaged in an individual reflective activity prompted by a visual stimulus and open-ended questions aimed at exploring their positioning, motivations, and ways of being within work relationships. In the second phase, a role-playing activity was conducted to simulate hierarchical workplace interactions, followed by group discussion focusing on communication styles (e.g., aggressive, passive, assertive) and their effects on relational dynamics.
4	Organizational change, focusing on current and desired organizational configurations.	Graphic-symbolic representation of organizational structured based on the organization-living organism analogy (Comi et al., 2011)	Participants were asked to graphically represent and describe both the current and the ideal organizational structure of their work context. The activity was followed by group discussion aimed at exploring perceptions of organizational change, tensions between existing and desired

			configurations, and the role of agency and planning in shaping future organizational arrangements.
5	Communication styles and their role in shaping professional interactions and identity enactment.	Theoretical input on communication; Scenario-based exercises; Interpersonal Influence Inventory (III; Glaser, 2005).	The session began with a brief theoretical introduction to communication styles (Waldherr & Muck, 2011). Participants then engaged in scenario-based exercises in which they identified and discussed different communication styles in everyday work situations within small groups. Finally, participants completed the Interpersonal Influence Inventory, followed by group discussion aimed at reflecting on how individual communication patterns influence professional relationships.

Note. RGI = Reflecting Group Intervention

2.2 Participants

Participation was voluntary and based on an institutional invitation to take part in the intervention, during working hours. Senior/apical figures were excluded from participation to preserve a horizontal group dynamic and reduce the potential influence of hierarchical relationships on participants' openness during the sessions. No further inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied.

Participants were 12 professionals ($M_{\text{age}} = 48.83$ years, $SD = 7.30$) employed at the PRAP, including administrative staff ($n = 7$) and prison officers assigned to office-based roles ($n = 5$). The group included 8 participants identifying as women and 4 identifying as men. None of the participants were in direct contact with incarcerated individuals at the time of the study. Years of service varied across participants ($M = 22.04$ years, $SD = 10.25$). Although this group constituted the overall sample involved in the intervention, attendance across the five individual sessions varied ($M = 9$, $SD = .71$) due to work-related contingencies and hierarchical directives, a common occurrence in institutional contexts characterized by strict organizational demands.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the word-driven and question-oriented textual analysis software T-LAB (version 10.6.1; Lancia, 2004). T-LAB is a mixed-method tool that generates derived data and enables the analysis and comparison of the lexical characteristics and semantic specificities of texts by integrating qualitative interpretative procedures with a range of linguistic, statistical, and graphical tools.

Prior to proceeding with the software application, the verbatim transcripts of the five RGI sessions were combined into a single corpus (i.e., “textual material,” in T-LAB terminology). This corpus was prepared by two researchers (GB and DV) through a series of systematic and rigorous pre-processing steps.

First, the corpus was “cleaned” to resolve ambiguities (e.g., in the case of homographs), unify synonyms under a single label, and anonymize personal identifiers (Vagnini et al., 2024). Then, the researcher divided the corpus into five smaller parts, identified by encoding strings (i.e., **** *SESSION_n), which allowed the text segments for each session to remain distinct (from **** *SESSION_1 to **** *SESSION_5).

Subsequently, the corpus was imported into T-LAB, and the software was instructed to build a vocabulary of terms (lemmas, in the software’s terminology) with a minimum frequency threshold of ≥ 10 within the text. This criterion was adopted to prioritize shared semantic patterns over isolated expressions, in line with Lancia’s (2004) emphasis on recurrence as a prerequisite for identifying meaningful semantic structures.

The final vocabulary included a total of 283 lemmas and was retained across all subsequent analyses.

2.3.1 Thematic analysis: Elementary Contexts

To achieve the first aim (i.e., to examine the processual dynamics that emerge within an RGI during institutional reform), the Thematic Analysis of Elementary Contexts was employed. This procedure, specific to the T-LAB software (Lancia, 2004), should not be confused with “Thematic Analysis” as understood in the qualitative research tradition (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006): although both approaches share the aim of identifying recurring patterns of meaning, the T-LAB procedure relies on statistical clustering, with outputs subsequently interpreted through a qualitative lens.

This clustering-based approach identifies the main thematic content patterns characterizing the corpus by automatically segmenting the text into minimal units (elementary contexts), typically corresponding to sentences or short paragraphs. During preprocessing, these units were grouped using an unsupervised clustering method, the bisecting k-means algorithm (Savaresi & Boley, 2004; Steinbach et al., 2000), with a maximum partition of 10 clusters per solution.

T-LAB generates multiple cluster solutions, from which the researcher selects one based on: (a) internal homogeneity, whereby each cluster comprises lemmas that are maximally similar (i.e., exhibiting low within-cluster variance); and (b) external heterogeneity, ensuring adequate differentiation between clusters, reflected in sufficiently high between-cluster variance.

Once the most suitable cluster solution was identified, each cluster was described using the most significant lemmas ($p < .05$) with high χ^2 values, the proportion of explained inertia, and representative textual segments sharing the same word patterns. Finally, a descriptive label was assigned to each cluster through an inductive interpretative process grounded in the examination of keywords and representative text segments. This procedure aligns with an intersubjective construction of meaning (Kaneklin, 2010), in which the attribution of meaning to textual content is part of a transformative interaction between the researcher and the analyzed material.

2.3.2 Comparative analysis: Correspondence Analysis

To achieve the second aim (i.e., to examine how work identity was symbolically explored and elaborated by employees across the five RGI sessions), a comparative analysis using Correspondence Analysis (Greenacre, 2017) was employed to examine similarities and differences between textual segments corresponding to each session, isolated using the encoding strings described previously (from `**** *SESSION_1 to **** *SESSION_5`). The analysis produced new factors describing relationships among the five RGI sessions, along with a graphical representation of their distribution in factorial space. In this map, the relative distance between sessions indicates the degree of difference between them. Lemmas with V-test values $\geq |1.96|$ and $p < .05$ at each pole were considered significant. This enabled comparison of opposite poles, supporting the analysis of contrasts and the interpretation of each factorial dimension. Although each session was organized around a distinct activity and thematic focus (see Table 1), all sessions were designed as part of a coherent reflective arc, sharing the same overarching aim of fostering reflection on professional practice, relational dynamics, and organizational change. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the lexical differences captured by the correspondence analysis may partly reflect the specific content of each session's activity, rather than purely emergent processual dynamics; this is addressed as a limitation of the study.

2.4 Reflexivity and Methodological rigor

In line with the study's framework, the research team's presence is treated not as a neutral methodological factor but as part of the group's relational field, shaping participants' engagement with the reflective process. This is consistent with evidence on the facilitator's role in shaping engagement within reflective group settings (Yiu et al., 2025). The pre-existing relationship with the PRAP, established through a preliminary organizational needs analysis,

informed the design of the intervention; the research team maintained an explicitly declared position throughout, communicating their role and objectives transparently to participants.

The T-LAB outputs were interpreted by two analysts: the co-facilitator and observer (G.B.) and a researcher who had not participated in the group sessions (D.V.), providing complementary vantage points, one grounded in direct experience of the group process and one independent from it. The interpretive process was supervised by the two group facilitators (E.S. and A.S.), who contributed clinical and experiential knowledge of the sessions to support the interpretation of cluster and factor solutions. Interpretive disagreements, when they arose, were resolved through discussion among the research team until consensus was reached; no substantial or unresolved disagreements occurred during the interpretive process. This reflects a strategy of analyst triangulation, consistent with recognized approaches to enhancing credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Morgan, 2024).

3. Results

3.1 Thematic Analysis of Elementary contexts

The final output yielded a three-cluster solution, highlighting the main processual dynamics that emerge during institutional reform. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of these clusters within the factorial space. Clusters, in order of explained variance, were Cluster 1 (CL_1), 39.90%; Cluster 3 (CL_3), 35.27%; and Cluster 2 (CL_2), 25.47%.

Figure 1

Cluster analysis: spatial configuration of the three clusters (CL) in the factorial plane

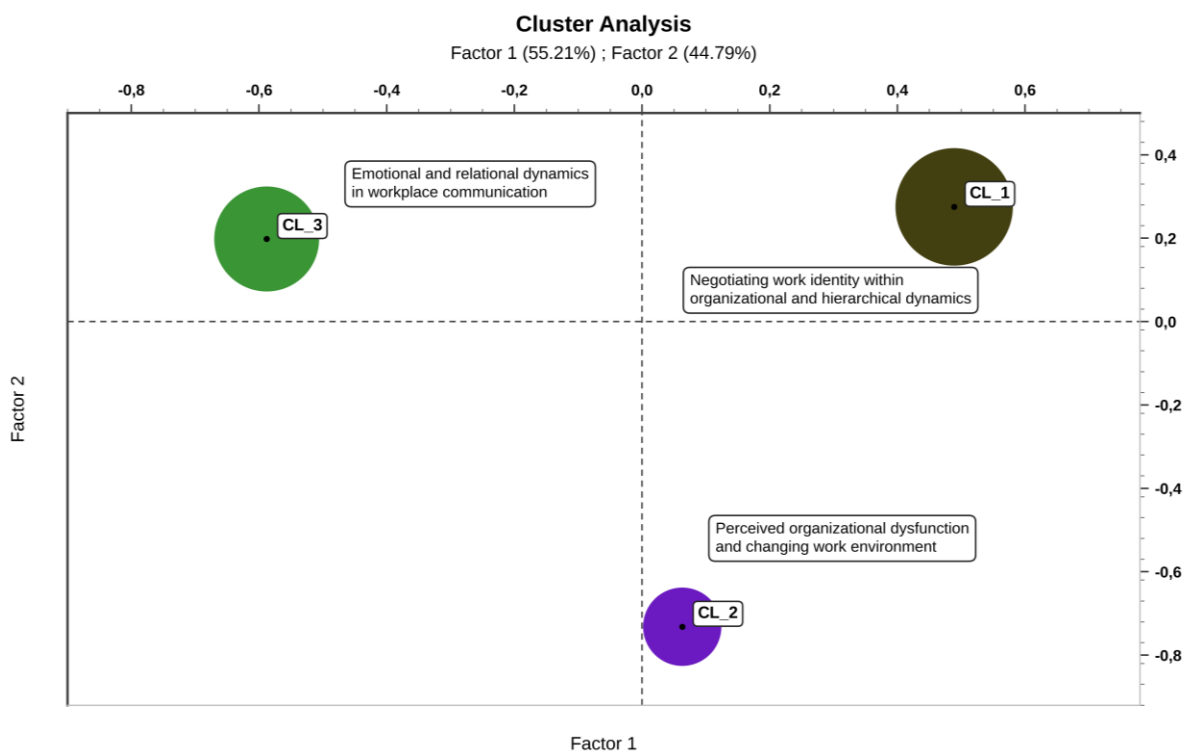


Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the three clusters with significant lemmas and significant χ^2 values, with examples of quotes taken from participants' verbalizations.

Table 2

Description of the Clusters in Order of Size (%)

Cluster: label	Cluster size (%)	Significant lemmas (χ^2)*	Representative Quotations
Cluster 1: Negotiating work identity within organizational and hierarchical dynamics	39.90%	relationship (21.493); today (19.39); official (18.234); police force (13.795); arrive (11.098); create (10.722); position (10.722).	<i>"We all described the relationship as difficult, noting in the 'boulder policy' the presence of higher levels of leadership. [...] Then, of course, there are still two distinct units within the Prison Administration, civilians and the police force" (Session 1).</i> <i>"Today, I admit that we need to talk about things and make sure the administration changes" (Session 4).</i> <i>"In the past, when a new person arrived, there was an immediate desire to get involved, to prove oneself professionally. Today, however, it seems that everyone arrives with a negative attitude" (Session 3).</i>
Cluster 3: Emotional and relational dynamics in workplace communication	35.27%	make a mistake (19.983); she (15.418); refuse (14.471); find (14.23); person (13.643); evaluation (10.882); manager (9.206).	<i>"A person who shouts may appear insecure [...] but they are also the one who, when they make a mistake, reveals all their fragility" (Session 5).</i> <i>"If I were a manager, I would visit the workers every now and then. Here, it seems that even the workers have to do everything on their own. You feel left to your own devices" (Session 4).</i> <i>"A person's character is no small detail. Some people are more thoughtful, while others find certain situations more difficult to deal with; the same critical issue may be addressed impulsively by one person and in a completely different way by another. I seem to perceive a common thought, a sense of disorientation regarding the way we are working and what we are doing" (Session 1).</i>

Cluster 2:		course (21.735);	<i>"There is no unified management; there is something fundamentally wrong that prevents the work from flowing smoothly" (Session 4).</i>
		organization (16.208);	
Perceived organizational dysfunction and changing work environment	25.47%	avoid (13.905);	<i>"Our organization is so different that putting it together with other realities means facing completely different worlds." (Session 2).</i>
		years (13.302);	
		happen (12.103);	<i>"Over the years, we have made enormous efforts: we have invested in courses, focused on training, and educated ourselves [...] to improve the organization. However, the reality is that we have not been able to bring about real change" (Session 1).</i>
		division (12.103);	
		improvement (12.103);	
		pull (12.103);	
		call (11.268);	
		you (11.268).	

Note. In the "Representative Quotations" column, the significant lemmas corresponding to the "Significant lemmas (χ^2)" column are shown in bold. $*p < .05$.

The analysis of participants' narratives revealed three interconnected thematic clusters.

First, participants frequently described their work environment as characterized by organizational complexity and dysfunction (Cluster 2, 25.47%), highlighting unclear management structures, ongoing disputes, and a perception of instability generated by recent organizational changes [e.g., "*organization*", "*division*", "*happen*"], despite efforts toward adaptation [e.g., "*course*", "*improvement*"]. This cluster's narratives were not entirely convergent: some participants attributed dysfunction to unclear management ("something fundamentally wrong"; Session 4), while others stressed that dysfunction persisted despite sustained efforts, describing training and improvement initiatives that ultimately "have not been able to bring about real change" (Session 1).

Second, the quotations emphasized the relational and emotional dimension of workplace communication (Cluster 3, 35.27%), particularly the need for recognition, support, and clearer interpersonal exchanges within the organizational context [e.g., "*evaluation*", "*manager*"]. Differences in individual communication styles and emotional reactions were perceived as influencing the quality of professional relationships and the overall work climate [e.g., "*make a mistake*", "*refuse*", "*person*"]. Within this cluster, relational difficulties were attributed both to individual character ("some people are more thoughtful [...] others find certain situations more difficult"; Session 1) and to a lack of organizational support, participants feeling "left to your own devices" (Session 4).

Finally, participants' reflections pointed to an ongoing process of negotiation of work identity within hierarchical structures (Cluster 1, 39.90%). Uncertainty in the relationship with higher levels of leadership and the coexistence of different professional groups appeared to shape how individuals position themselves within the organization and interpret their professional role [e.g., “*relationship*”, “*official*”, “*police force*”].

Within this cluster, orientations toward hierarchical distance diverged: some called for direct engagement (“we need to talk [...] and make sure the administration changes”; Session 4), while others offered a more resigned comparison between past and present, noting that newcomers today tend to “arrive with a negative attitude” (Session 3).

Taken together, these themes suggest that perceptions of organizational instability, relational dynamics, and identity processes are closely intertwined in shaping participants' experience of their work context.

3.2 Correspondence Analysis: Comparison between the five RGI's sessions

Correspondence Analysis was used to explore similarities and differences between the five RGI's sessions, led to the extraction of a number of new factors defined by a software formula (i.e., number of factors = number of levels of the design variable – 1). In the present study, the design variable (i.e., group session) comprised five levels, resulting in the extraction of four factors by the software.

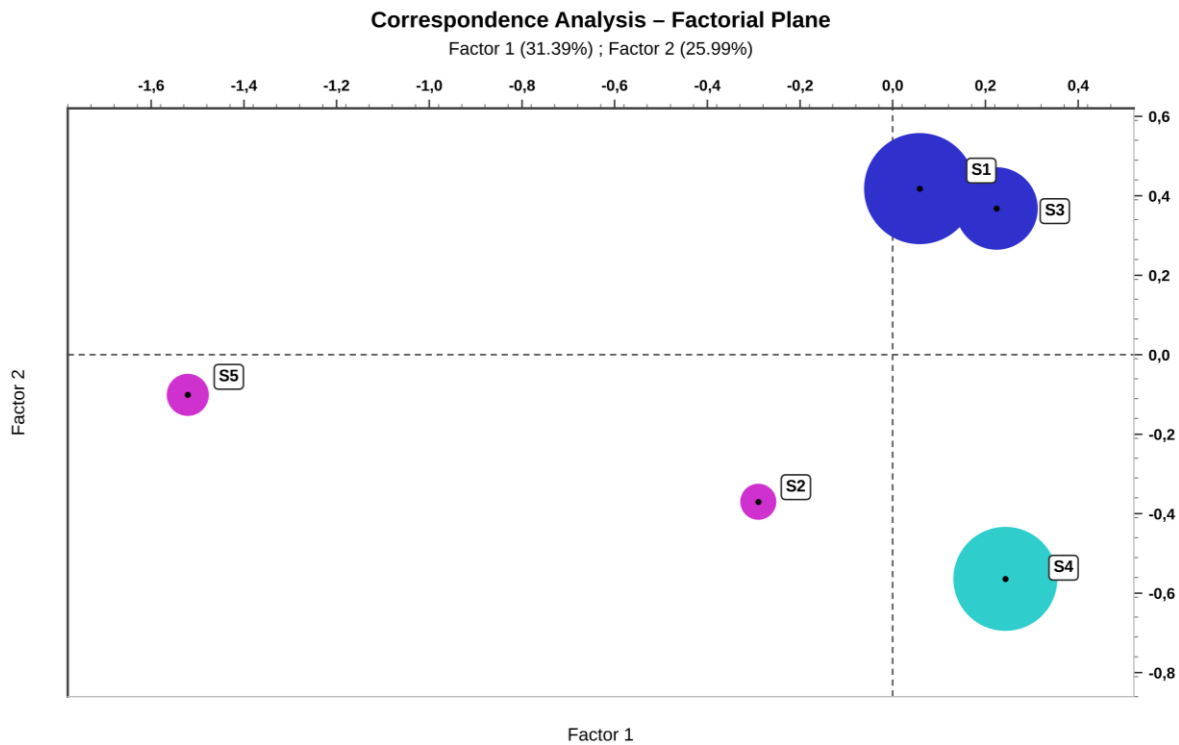
Only the first two factors (F1 and F2), which explained the largest share of the total variance, were taken into consideration: F1 accounted for 31.39%, while F2 accounted for 25.99%. The subsequent factors (F3 = 22.90%; F4 = 19.72%) were excluded from the interpretation, as they were characterized by a lower explanatory capacity and a less defined semantic structure.

Figure 2 shows the positioning of the five sessions in the factorial space. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the lemmas saturating the factorial poles of Factors 1 and 2.

The final interpretation of the factors was conducted by integrating the quantitative data (i.e., the V-test statistics and corresponding p-values) with the qualitative and semantic properties of the lemmas at the factorial poles, to provide a coherent reading of the semantic oppositions that emerged.

Figure 2

Correspondence analysis: distribution of the five sessions (S) of the intervention in the factorial plane



Note. The factorial plane displays the first two dimensions of the Correspondence analysis (Factor 1 and Factor 2). The orientation and direction of the axes are conventional and may be subject to rotation or reflection; therefore, interpretation is based on factorial polarities rather than on the spatial direction of the axes (Lancia, 2004).

The first factorial dimension (F1) highlights a tension between two different discursive orientations (See Table 3). The negative pole is characterized by lemmas referring to relational, emotional, and reflective communication [e.g., “assertive”, “passive”, “relationship”, “compromise”], mainly associated with Session 5 and, to a lesser extent, Session 2. In contrast, the positive pole includes terms related to a more institutional and operational representation of the work context [e.g., “manager”, “office”, “arrive”, “see”], typical of Sessions 1, 3, and 4.

Overall, F1 can be interpreted as a continuum between a “Role/Subjective Self” and a “Role/Working Self”, reflecting different ways of positioning oneself in relation to the professional role.

Table 3*Correspondence Analysis: Lexical Polarities Factor 1*

Negative Polarity (F1)	Test Value*	Positive Polarity (F1)	Test Value*
Session 5	-26.08	Session 4	9.64
Passive	-7.66	Session 3	6.68
Scene	-6.99	I	3.36
Friend	-6.25	See	2.67
Assertive	-6.25	Manager	2.22
Aggressive	-6.19	Arrive	2.18
Compromise	-4.98	Session 1	2.15
Occasion	-4.85	Office	2.08
Seek	-4.18		
Relationship	-4.15		

*Only lemmas with a V-test value $\geq |1.96|$ ($p < .05$) were included in the factorial polarity tables.

The second factorial dimension (F2) captures a different tension concerning how participants relate to the institutional context (see Table 4). The negative pole includes lemmas expressing individual effort, responsibility, and regulatory pressure [e.g. “manage”, “problem”, “evaluation”, “rules”], associated mainly with Sessions 4 and 5, and partly with Session 2. The positive pole instead gathers terms referring to institutional belonging and shared professional identity [e.g., “police force”, “uniform”, “colleague”, “hierarchy”, and “administration”], particularly linked to Sessions 1 and 3. F2 can therefore be interpreted as a continuum between “Individual Regulation” and “Organizational Belonging”, reflecting two different ways of relating to the institutional environment.

Table 4*Correspondence Analysis: Lexical Polarities Factor 2*

Negative Polarity (F2)	Test Value*	Positive Polarity (F2)	Test Value*
Session 4	-21.68	Session 1	15.61
Session 2	-5.13	Session 3	11.17
Function	-4.41	Believe	3.08
Refuse	-3.88	Uniform	2.96
Problem	-3.60	Discourse	2.88
Maximum	-3.58	Police force	2.84
Note	-3.45	Division	2.81
Manage	-3.27	Burden	2.50
Evaluation	-3.10	Place	2.50
You (singular)	-3.04	Return	2.48
Rules	-3.02	Institution	2.45
Directly	-2.83	Leave	2.44
Reason	-2.83	Big	2.36
Chief	-2.53	Suitcase	2.32
Department	-2.53	Colleague	2.26
Education	-2.53	Previous	2.12
Line	-2.53	Hierarchy	2.10

*Only lemmas with a V-test value $\geq |1.96|$ ($p < .05$) were included in the factorial polarity tables.

Finally, F1 (“Role/Subjective Self” vs. “Role/Working Self”) and F2 (“Individual Regulation” vs. “Organizational Belonging”) were used to interpret the positioning of the five RGI sessions in the factorial space, generating hypotheses regarding the significance of their proximity or separation from one another and from the origin of the factorial space.

Specifically, sessions 1 and 3 are in the upper-right quadrant of the factorial plane (positive F1 and F2), indicating a discourse strongly anchored in the institutional and organizational dimension and oriented toward the collective and symbolic elaboration of professional

belonging. The associated lexical patterns refer to shared identity, organizational representation, and recognition within the institutional system.

Session 4 also lies on the positive side of F1 but in the lower-right quadrant (negative F2). This configuration reflects a discourse focused on the organizational sphere from a more operational and regulatory perspective, emphasizing management practices, procedural responsibilities, and the functional aspects of professional roles.

Session 5 occupies the lower-left quadrant (negative F1 and F2), corresponding to a discursive register centered on relational and emotional experiences combined with references to individual effort and the demands of work. Narratives in this area highlight interpersonal dynamics and the subjective management of organizational difficulties.

Finally, Session 2 is positioned closer to the center of the factorial plane, slightly oriented toward the negative polarity of F2. This more balanced configuration suggests a transitional moment in which experiential and relational elements coexist with emerging reflections on organizational roles and institutional functioning.

4. Discussion

This study examined how work identity was symbolically elaborated within a Reflective Group Intervention (RGI) implemented in a Regional Office of the Italian Prison Administration during a period of normative and organizational transformation (e.g., Ministero della Giustizia, 2008, 2013). Grounded in a Systems Psychodynamic (SD) perspective (Hirschhorn, 1990; Jaques, 1955/2018) and informed by the model of Collusive Processes (Carli & Panicia, 2003), the intervention was conceived as a structured reflective space intended to support the collective elaboration of professional experience.

The discussion is organized around the two research questions, addressing the processual dynamics emerging within the RGI (RQ1) and the symbolic elaboration of work identity (RQ2). It should be noted that the present study was not designed to test, and cannot demonstrate, the effectiveness of the RGI in producing these outcomes. Consistent with the process-oriented aim and with calls in the literature to prioritize the study of processes over outcomes in organizational change research (Roodbari et al., 2023), the present study instead offers a process-oriented account of how relational, emotional, and symbolic dynamics were articulated by participants within the intervention.

4.1 Processual dynamics (RQ1)

The configuration emerging from the thematic analysis suggests that participants' reflections unfolded across multiple levels of professional experience. Narratives frequently shifted between representations of institutional relationships (Cluster 1), attempts to interpret the

complexity of the organizational environment (Cluster 2), and the expressions of subjective exposure associated with professional roles in a changing institutional framework (Cluster 3).

These dynamics can be interpreted as indicative of an ongoing process of sensemaking and emotional elaboration activated within the group setting (Maitlis et al., 2013), through which participants collectively negotiated meaning during organizational change. Consistent with SD literature, organizational change appears to mobilize latent emotional and relational dynamics, generating uncertainty, anxiety, and defensive responses among organizational members (Jarrett & Vince, 2024).

While the thematic analysis identifies the main experiential domains structuring participants' narratives, the comparison between the five RGI's sessions (i.e., correspondence analysis) highlights the symbolic tensions organizing these narratives. In particular, the factorial dimensions suggest an oscillation between institutional role adherence and subjective experience. From a psychodynamic perspective, organizational structures may function as social defenses that help members manage anxieties related to authority and task (Long, 2006). When institutional arrangements are disrupted by reform processes, these defensive structures may weaken, releasing anxiety into the organizational system and increasing perceptions of instability. Since role mediates the relationship between individuals and institutions and is sustained by both structural and unconscious dynamics (Hornung & Höge, 2021; Long, 2006), normative transformations may accentuate the tension between formal institutional positioning and lived professional experience. Linked to this, these findings suggest that resistance to organizational change (Augustsson et al., 2017; Oreg et al., 2018), rather than manifesting as observable behavior or measurable attitudes as typically captured through self-report tools (Oreg, 2003), emerged here as a non-static, symbolic and latent process, visible only through the analysis of the group sessions, shifting from institutionally anchored elaboration toward more subjective and relational registers.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the RGI functioned as a processual space in which participants could articulate, negotiate, and partially reorganize their experience of organizational change.

4.2 Identity Processes (RQ2)

The results also highlight the centrality of identity processes within participants' reflections. Previous studies have described the "Self" as a dynamic structure continuously negotiated in organizational contexts undergoing transformation (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Hultman & Hultman, 2018). In such contexts, changes in institutional frameworks may challenge established meanings associated with professional roles and belonging.

From this perspective, Rogers's (1959) conceptualization of the "Self" offers a useful interpretive lens, suggesting that psychological equilibrium depends on the congruence between lived experience, subjective perception, and social recognition (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). When this balance weakens, tensions may emerge between institutional expectations and personal meaning structures, potentially producing what has been described as structural identity incongruence (North, 2015).

Moreover, the findings are consistent with theoretical conceptualizations of identity threats and role ambiguity as central responses to institutional reform (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown & Coupland, 2015). However, rather than remaining individually managed, these processes became collectively visible and were subsequently explored at the group level.

These findings suggest that, within this specific context, the RGI provided a shared space in which aspects of work identity could be symbolically explored. Through collective reflection, participants were able to articulate tensions between institutional roles, organizational change, and personal experience. In this sense, the intervention may be interpreted as facilitating a process of collective re-symbolization of professional experience (Carli & Paniccchia, 2003), supporting the integration of identity processes at a group level and enabling participants to reframe their relationship with the institutional context (Kaneclin, 2010).

This study contributes several distinct advances to existing literature.

While RGIs have been applied across diverse domains (e.g., healthcare, social work, education), existing research has rarely grounded these applications explicitly in a systems psychodynamic framework. By adopting this framework and foregrounding work identity renegotiation as an explicit aim within a highly hierarchical, security-oriented public administration where reflective, group-based interventions remain scarce (Britton, 2003; Clements & Kinman, 2022; Forsyth et al., 2025; Owusu Ansah et al., 2025), the present study extends both the theoretical grounding and the applied scope of RGI research, illustrating how group-based symbolic work can support not only individual reflection but also a collective, process-oriented elaboration of symbolic experience. The study also speaks to the broader international literature on professional identity renegotiation in public sector reform (Jalocha, 2023), extending it to the correctional/prison administration context. Similarly, hierarchical, security-oriented public organizations show identity being continuously reshaped under institutional pressure (Workman-Stark, 2025), including within criminal justice services undergoing structural transformation (Haggard & McDermott, 2025).

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the understanding of organizational change by highlighting how processual dynamics and identity-related tensions are intertwined and can be jointly addressed within RGI, suggesting that work identity in this highly bureaucratized context unfolded as a non-linear, oscillatory process rather than a progressive resolution. It also advances systems psychodynamic perspectives by illustrating how such interventions may function as temporary containers for the elaboration of anxieties activated by institutional transformation.

The results highlight the role of Reflective Group Interventions (RGIs) as spaces for the collective elaboration of organizational experience during institutional change. Findings show that change processes activate emotional and symbolic dynamics, with participants oscillating between institutional role adherence and subjective experience. In this context, resistance emerges as a latent, dynamic process rather than overt behavior. Consistent with prior research, one of the major obstacles to change concerns employees' attitudes: when the potential benefits of change are not fully understood, individuals may experience fear and perceive organizational transformations as unfair (Rehman et al., 2021).

At the identity level, organizational transformation challenges established professional meanings, generating tensions and ambiguity. Within the RGI, these processes became collectively visible and symbolically elaborated, reflecting shared sensemaking rather than individual coping. In this regard, these findings also resonate with the concept of identity leadership, which emphasizes the role of leadership in fostering a shared sense of "us" through processes such as identity entrepreneurship and advancement, thereby supporting collective engagement with change (Gjerald et al., 2026). Overall, the study suggests that RGIs can function as temporary containers for the anxieties triggered by change, fostering collective meaning-making and the ongoing reworking of work identity in highly institutionalized contexts.

This study also has limitations that need to be mentioned. The small sample size, discontinuous participation, and the qualitative, process-oriented design limit the generalizability of the findings and do not allow for causal claims. The findings are also situated within a single institutional context and may not generalize to other prison administrations or organizational settings. The lack of follow-up data further prevents inferences about the development of processual dynamics over time. This is compounded by the distinct predefined theme and activity of each session, which may have contributed to the lexical differences observed in the correspondence analysis, and which should therefore not be read as unambiguous evidence of emergent processual change. Additionally, the limited number of lemmas may have constrained the analytical depth of the analysis, potentially limiting the capacity to capture finer distinctions

within the five RGI sessions and to fully articulate the complexity of the emerging themes. Moreover, the intervention took place within a strongly hierarchical institutional structure, which may have shaped participants' willingness to disclose certain experiences, particularly regarding relationships with senior figures. Finally, the potential influence of the research team on group dynamics, although addressed in relation to the study's systems psychodynamic framework, should also be considered.

Practically, the findings highlight the need to address the emotional and symbolic dimensions of organizational change. RGIs may support collective sensemaking, particularly in highly bureaucratic contexts such as prison administration, where psychological demands are increasing (Liang, 2025; Sorge et al., 2026) but such interventions remain underexplored, despite the growing need for stronger vertical collaboration between each prison and central prison administration (Lausi et al., 2020).

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Psychology at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy (CERPS: Commissione Etica per la Ricerca in Psicologia), date of approval: December 2024; protocol N° 175/24.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Each participant was informed about the aims and procedures of the study and gave written informed consent before being included and audiotaped.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because there are privacy and ethical restrictions. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: G.B., A.S., E.S., C.G.; Methodology: G.B., D.V., A.S.; Data collection: G.B., A.S., E.S.; Formal analysis: G.B., D.V.; Writing - original draft preparation: G.B., E.S.; Writing - review and editing: G.B., A.S., D.V., C.G., E.S.; Supervision: C.G., E.S.; Project administration: E.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

AI Disclosure Statement

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT (GPT-5) for linguistic revision.

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Supplementary Materials:

Figure S1. Symbolic visual prompt used to explore work identity and positioning (“What am I doing here?”; “How am I here?”)



Note. In Figure S1, the stimulus is presented in Italian, the participants' native language. Translations of the prompts are provided to facilitate scientific dissemination.