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Theorising the police support volunteer experience in an English constabulary: A role identity perspective

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ABSTRACT

Police Support Volunteers (PSVs) – citizens who give their time freely to perform tasks that complement the duties of police officers and staff – are a relatively new addition to a long and established history of volunteers in policing. However, despite featuring in every police service in England and Wales, little is known about the individuals who volunteer or their experiences while doing so. This article draws on interviews with 20 PSVs and five volunteer managers in a large urban police service in England. Findings point to the importance of volunteers being recognised and valued for their contribution, the ways in which this is communicated by paid members of the workforce, and the meaning that PSVs attach to feeling recognised and valued in terms of their satisfaction and intention to continue to give their time. The article frames the significance of PSV experiences through role identity theory – the aspects of an individual's self-image that they derive from the social categories to which they perceive themselves belonging – which has been shown to be influential on the development of organisational commitment, volunteer satisfaction, and the subsequent sustained volunteering behaviour that this can bring about. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of embedding volunteer recognition throughout the police organisation, rather than relying on the tenacity of individual officers and staff members. It also acknowledges the opportunities that a role identity perspective brings to a currently under-theorised field, helping to make sense of PSVs' experiences as a volunteer in policing.

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Introduction

Citizen volunteers are an established and familiar presence in UK policing, pre-dating the development of organised law enforcement. Volunteer roles span a range of areas including those managed within the police service (e.g. Special Constables, volunteer police cadets), partnered and supported by the police service (e.g. Neighbourhood Watch, citizen patrols), and which act to hold the police service to account (e.g. Independent Advisory Groups, community monitoring networks) (Bullock 2014, Millie 2019). Emerging in forces from the early 1990s onwards, the non-warranted and (usually) non-uniformed Police Support Volunteer (PSV) – citizens who give their time freely to perform tasks that complement the duties of police officers and staff – is a relatively new addition to this long history of volunteers in policing.

Until recently systematically recorded data on the number of PSVs was sparse; however, the Home Office started to collect PSV data as part of their Police Workforce Returns for the first time

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in 2018. Data to September 2020 places the number of PSVs in England and Wales at 7891, with the figure remaining broadly similar compared to the previous year (Home Office 2021). PSVs undertake a range of tasks from administration and front counter duties, to community engagement activities, operational functions including traffic speed checks and viewing CCTV footage, and specialist skill or interest roles such as scientific support, gardening, puppy walking, equine assistance, and mountain rescue, with the nature of volunteering varying by force location environment. A 2018 benchmarking survey highlighted over 1100 PSV role profiles across forces in England and Wales, reflecting the diversity of the PSV contribution (Britton *et al.* 2018).

Despite featuring in every police service in England and Wales, research exploring the involvement of PSVs in policing remains scarce. Little is known about the individuals who choose to volunteer, their motivations to take part, the tasks they undertake, the contributions they make, or their experiences within the police service. Furthermore, a theoretical framework to underpin the role of volunteers in policing remains almost entirely absent. This article contributes to the currently scant evidence base around PSVs, presenting findings from interviews conducted with 20 serving PSVs and five volunteer managers in a large urban police service in England in 2017. More specifically, the article offers a theoretical perspective to this field, framing the significance of PSV experiences within the police service through role identity theory – the aspects of an individual's self-image that they derive from the social categories to which they perceive themselves belonging (Tajfel and Turner 1979, Van Ingen and Wilson 2017). The article begins with a review of the limited literature around PSV contributions and experiences, and the opportunities and challenges presented by volunteers in policing, and introduces concepts of role identity as an approach to theorising volunteer experiences. It then presents study methods before moving on to findings organised within three key headings: being recognised and feeling valued; 'earning' recognition and value; and 'demoralised amateurs'. It considers these findings alongside concepts of role identity, using this as a theoretical framework to help make sense of their meaning for volunteers in policing. The study concludes with a reflection on the potential of role identity to offer new directions for a currently under-theorised field. Indeed, considering findings through the lens of role identity adds to a much-underdeveloped aspect of the evidence base, both within policing and broader volunteer fields, yielding new insights for police leaders, policy makers, and volunteer managers looking to develop and retain the volunteer contribution.

Involving volunteers in policing: opportunities and challenges

The emergence and development of the PSV role over the past 25 years or so reflects broader movements in the policing landscape: growing diversity of those who 'do policing', stretching beyond the uniformed constable; significant reductions in police budgets alongside an expectation to deliver the same (or sometimes enhanced) levels of service; and an acknowledgement that the police cannot tackle crime and disorder alone (Reisig and Giacomazzi 1998, Crawford 2008, Callender *et al.* 2018a). This has taken place alongside a 'recalibration of the relationship between the citizen and state' (Bullock 2017, p. 343), with messages of localism, active citizenship, and personal responsibility featuring heavily throughout political ideology (Millie 2013, 2014, Hucklesby and Corcoran 2016). Indeed, Van Steden and Mehlbaum (2019, p. 422) suggest that police volunteerism 'fits the ambitious political goal of 'responsibilising' people as socially active citizens in the security domain'. Police volunteers have been recognised as a source of labour, skills, and expertise, a tool for empowering, engaging, and communicating with communities, and a method to expand and innovate current policing forms (Pepper and Wolf 2015, Callender *et al.* 2018b, Wells and Millings 2019). Coupled with a broader recognition that the growing complexity of policing requires a response beyond traditional state organisations, this has arguably resulted in a fruitful environment for volunteers in policing (Frederickson and Levin 2004, Bayley 2016, Cosgrove 2016).

The limited pool of studies exploring police volunteers – both PSVs and volunteer officers – point to their contributions of time, skills, and additional resources. Comments made by officer and PSV respondents to Wilkins' (2008) survey indicated that PSVs help to reduce pressure on frontline

officers, freeing up their time, and carrying out tasks that otherwise might not be done. Similarly, in their study of police volunteers in Sweden, Uhnöo and Löfstrand (2018) refer to volunteers carrying out tasks that the police no longer had time to, 'unburdening' the paid workforce and allowing them to focus on areas of greater need that required their skills and experience. Larson *et al.*'s (2011) US-based study also commented on the scope of police volunteers to bring additional capacity, allowing officers to attend to more pressing tasks suited to their training and powers. Studies have highlighted the capacity of the police volunteer contribution to go beyond alleviating the workload burden on paid staff, to bringing a range of wider skills and experiences that can enhance service provision and allow space for innovation and creativity. In their study of volunteer reserve officers in the US, Wolf *et al.* (2016) outlined the benefits that law enforcement agencies can garner from the experiences that volunteers bring from other areas of their life including medics, accountants, and former experienced officers who have returned to volunteer after retirement. Dobrin and Wolf (2016, p. 22) argue that volunteer police officers can be a link between the police service and the communities they serve, 'peeling back the blue curtain' and providing individuals with a sense of connection to their own government services which, according to Wolf *et al.* (2016, p. 451), allows them to become 'part of the process and not simply a bystander judging police tactics and operations from the sidelines'. However, the extent to which individuals actually become 'part of the process' remains uncertain, as does the impact of volunteers' ability to engage with the community on a different level to formal, paid members of the police service (Uhnöo and Löfstrand 2018). As Bullock (2017, p. 355) suggests, whether aspirations that police volunteers will form a bridge between police and communities can be realised 'is at best unclear'.

A number of studies have referred to police volunteers in the context of cost saving in a climate of reducing budgets (Wolf and Bryer 2019). Phillips (2013) argues that economic conditions may require police agencies to use volunteers to support different tasks and functions, while Ren *et al.* (2006) and Zhao *et al.* (2012) also commented on the possibility of citizen participation in volunteer activities being considered as an effective means of compensating for scarcity of police financial and workforce resources. Gravelle and Rogers (2009a, 2009b) used the Volunteer Investment Value Audit (VIVA) to explore the economic impact of volunteer schemes in Lancashire Police, pointing to savings of over £320,000 per year, while a similar assessment of a community volunteer scheme in Wales found that for every pound invested into the scheme, the police service had a return of more than one pound, without factoring in the other associated benefits such as improved community cohesion or public confidence. As such, the authors argue that during periods of economic uncertainty the advantages of police volunteers need to be seriously considered. It should be stated that the cost saving contribution of PSVs is a controversial issue, with a 2014 report by the public services union Unison (p. 3, 8) referring to 'volunteer mission creep' and expressing concern that some roles 'look remarkably like established police staff posts' with PSVs being 'quietly recruited' to replace job cuts. Indeed, Bullock (2017) argues that, while volunteers should bring additionality to police services, rather than being central to or supplementing them, the lines between roles conducted by paid staff and volunteers are becoming blurred in places. Furthermore, although an attractive option during times of fiscal restraint, delivering effective volunteering programmes is not cost-free, requiring considerable infrastructure investment for dedicated volunteer management and support (Hucklesby and Corcoran 2016, Wolf *et al.* 2016).

The experiences that volunteers have within the organisation in which they choose to give their time – particularly those which communicate a sense of recognition and value – are highly influential in terms of the contribution they feel able to make, their performance, and their intention to continue to volunteer. A number of police volunteer studies have highlighted the importance of opportunities for volunteer engagement and positive interaction alongside the paid workforce, with Van Steden and Mehlbaum (2019) reporting the positive influence of 'belonging to' and 'being part of' the police team on police volunteers' satisfaction in their role. Increased exposure of police volunteers to the paid workforce allows them to demonstrate their contribution 'first hand', which has been shown to encourage better understanding, improve likelihood of acceptance, and reduce

the perceived threat that they are sometimes seen to pose, with officers coming to see volunteers as a conventional part of the work environment over time (although often dependent on the volume and type of tasks that they undertake) (Paoline *et al.* 2000, Gravelle and Rogers 2009a, Phillips and Terrell-Orr 2013, Bullock 2014, 2017).

However, studies of police volunteering have reported varied findings in terms of feelings of belonging and being part of the police service. While some PSV respondents in Bullock's (2017) study spoke of managers claiming not to differentiate between their paid and unpaid workforce, others referred to situations where PSVs were ignored, viewed as 'only temps', or a fluid resource that were not worth taking the time to get to know or value. This poses questions around the extent to which PSVs are integrated and accepted within the paid workforce, together with the 'poor harmonisation between PSVs and other actors and teams within the organisation and confusion about their roles and position' (Bullock 2017, p. 353). The divide between volunteers and police officers was less apparent than anticipated in Millie's (2018) study, with a sense from some PSVs that they worked *with* rather than *for* the organisation; however, as a rule, they still viewed themselves as supportive – in some cases, subservient – to officers. These studies point to diversity within police volunteer experiences. Clearly, some feel valued and recognised for the contribution they make, while others lack the opportunities for positive interaction and engagement that are shown to contribute to feelings of connection, attachment, and a sense of belonging within the volunteer role (Laverie and McDonald 2007, Van Ingen and Wilson 2017).

However, from an organisational point of view, it may not be straightforward to incorporate volunteers in policing, or value and recognise them for the contribution they make. Involving volunteers in policing can pose practical challenges (e.g. sourcing appropriate tasks, adequate infrastructure to support and develop volunteers) and may be misaligned culturally in an organisation that has traditionally separated itself from 'outsiders' (Paoline 2003, Cosgrove 2016). Members of the community – including the volunteer – may not be regarded as natural partners with the police (Myhill and Bradford 2013). Van Steden *et al.* (2011, p. 446) suggest that police officers 'tend to try to keep their distance from citizens' and, even where the public are involved, police are often sceptical about what they can achieve, doubtful about motivations for wanting to undertake the role for free, and frustrated with issues prioritised which may not fit with traditional policing roles (Millie and Bullock 2012, Bullock and Leeney 2013). As such, police volunteering has lacked strategic leadership, and citizens who engage are often viewed as 'troublesome' (Neuberger 2009, Reiner 2010, Morgan 2012, Myhill and Bradford 2013). Indeed, difficulties associated with recognising and valuing 'others' has been highlighted in studies of Special Constables (Gaston and Alexander 2001, Bullock and Leeney 2014, Whittle 2014) and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in both a paid (Cosgrove 2016, O'Neill and Fyfe 2017) and unpaid (Strudwick *et al.* 2017) context.

Understanding volunteer experiences through role identity theory

Role identity – the aspects of an individual's self-image that they derive from the social categories to which they perceive themselves belonging – is an important source of self-identity, alongside that drawn from other sources, such as gender, age, or ethnicity (Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 40, Van Ingen and Wilson 2017). Charng *et al.* (1988, p. 304) argue that role identity is a set of characteristics or expectations that simultaneously is defined by an individual's social position in an organisation or the community and becomes a dimension of their sense of self. Indeed, Marta *et al.* (2014, p. 200) refer to role identity as 'the self-definitions that individuals apply to their identities as a consequence of the structural role position they have'. Identities formed can be positive or negative depending on the evaluations of those groups that contribute to an individual's self-identity (Laverie and McDonald 2007).

Callero (1985, p. 203) argues that role identity forms a critical feature in sociological theorising, 'providing a conceptual bridge linking the individual to the larger social structure'. Themes within

role identity theory echo elements of Bourdieu's concept of habitus – a system of predispositions and modes of conduct that people become habituated to through everyday practice interacting with social, cultural, and economic capitals – which has also been used as a framework for understanding volunteering behaviour (Bourdieu 1977, Dean 2016, Dallimore *et al.* 2018).

Applied to the field of volunteering, identifying with the role they carry out can help individuals define themselves in relation to the organisation in which they give their time. The more an individual conceives themselves in terms of their membership to a group, the more likely they are to act in accordance with group beliefs, norms, and values (Van Knippenberg 2000). People begin to think of themselves as 'the kind of person who volunteers', acknowledging volunteering and the behaviours associated with it as an important part of who they are and integrating it within their self-concept (Callero 1985, Charng *et al.* 1988, Chambre and Einhoff 2011). As identification develops, a sense of belonging to that organisation is formed: people start to see themselves as 'integral to the collective and their fates intertwined' which can lead to increased pro-social behaviours (Tidwell 2005, p. 451). The relative importance – or salience – of one's given role identity has been linked to a range of factors including the degree to which significant others identify the individual with the role identity, the support they receive within their role identity, and the relative size of the social network linked to the role identity. The more salient the role identity, the more likely the individual is to behave consistently with that identity (Charng *et al.* 1988, p. 304). The role of others is a central feature of role identity, with the construction, commitment to, and relevance of identity closely linked to the relationships that individuals hold depending on the individual having a particular identity (Randel *et al.* 2005). Again, the work of Bourdieu (1977) chimes here, with habitus stemming from the internalisation of experiences within a volunteering organisation and alongside those who work there (Dean 2016). As Janoski *et al.* (1998, p. 498) assert, people acquire the habit of volunteering when they are placed in situations and form relationships where the skills and dispositions towards volunteering are developed.

Role identification has been highlighted as an antecedent to organisational identification and commitment – an important factor in ongoing volunteering behaviour. As organisational identification increases, satisfaction with the organisation increases and individuals are more likely to continue to give their time (Tidwell 2005). According to Penner (2002, p. 463), role identity is 'the direct and proximal cause' of sustained volunteerism, even after the initial commitment ends because the individual has assimilated the role of volunteer into their sense of self (Chacón *et al.* 2007, Chambre and Einhoff 2011). Callero (1985) found that individuals with high blood donor role identity donated more often, while in their research with volunteers in the American Cancer Society, Grube and Piliavin (2000) found that role identity predicted hours worked, with those high in role identity giving the most time. Other studies (e.g. Thoits and Hewitt 2001, Grönlund 2011, Marta *et al.* 2014) have pointed to the connection between volunteering role identity, performance, commitment to the role and/or organisation, and intention to continue volunteering. Indeed, Laverie and McDonald (2007, p. 278) referred to role identity as 'the single most important predictor of repeated behaviour'.

Role identity isn't an instant process, taking time to develop; however, once established, can be a critical feature in maintaining long-term volunteer activity (Penner and Finkelstein 1998). While motivations – and fulfilment of these – can form an important factor in initial volunteering, this can take on lesser importance as the volunteering journey progresses, with organisational commitment and role identity taking precedence in the medium and longer term (Davis *et al.* 2003, Chacón *et al.* 2007, Laverie and McDonald 2007). As Clark and Wilson (1961, p. 131) state:

at first, members may derive satisfaction from coming together for the purpose of achieving a stated end; later, they may derive equal or greater satisfaction from simply maintaining an organisation that provides them with office, prestige, power, sociability, income, or a sense of identity.

Understanding both initial and ongoing volunteering requires a framework that recognises, responds to, and fulfils volunteer motivations, but also acknowledges the influence of experiences and identity formed throughout the process of volunteering (Penner and Finkelstein 1998,

Chacón *et al.* 2007). While role identity theory does not offer an all-encompassing or unified theory of volunteering, the focus on individuals' sources of self-identity, the organisational commitment and satisfaction that this can generate, and the influence of volunteers' experiences within the organisation on its development, offers a useful theoretical lens to help make sense of the experiences of PSVs in this study, and implications for involving volunteers in policing more broadly (Tajfel and Turner 1979, Grube and Piliavin 2000, Penner 2002, Tidwell 2005).

Methods

This article is based on interviews conducted with 20 PSVs and five volunteer managers in a large urban police service in England in 2017. PSVs have been formally involved in the work of this police service since 2001 (with some smaller discrete projects incorporating volunteers on an informal basis prior to this) and there were 1,047 PSVs in the force at the time of fieldwork. Interviews were face-to-face and largely conducted in the place that the volunteering (or paid work, in the case of volunteer managers) took place – usually a police station. Participant selection for both PSV and volunteer manager interviews adopted a stratified random sampling approach. For PSVs this was based on three PSV role types identified earlier in the study: administration; community engagement/focused (e.g. front counter/reception services, quality of service calls to victims); and roles with a more operational focus (e.g. cadet leader, viewing CCTV footage). PSVs were identified through a combination of survey data collected earlier in the study, the force Human Resources (HR) records, and targeted selection via the force volunteer programme manager. Volunteer managers were randomly selected from force HR records to represent an even geographical spread throughout the force area.

PSV interviewee ages ranged from the 22 to 24-year age bracket to over 85 years. Over half ($n = 12/20$) were female and the majority ($n = 15/20$) defined their ethnic group as White British ($n = 10$) or other white background ($n = 5$). Length of volunteer service ranged from six months to 31 years, with almost two-thirds ($n = 13/20$) volunteering with the police service for three years or more. Almost half ($n = 9$) of PSV interviewees were in community engagement/focused roles, followed by operational ($n = 7$), and administration ($n = 4$). Three volunteer manager interviewees were female, with the remaining male. All were aged between 35 and 64 years. Three defined their ethnicity as White British with the remaining two Black British (Caribbean and 'any other black background'). Their service in the force ranged between six and 27 years, with some performing a number of roles within the force in this time – not only their current volunteer manager position. Although requirements set out in the university's research ethics checklist at the time of fieldwork indicated that it did not meet the threshold to necessitate formal approval by the ethics board, the study adhered to the university's research ethics procedures throughout. Written consent to participate in the research was secured from all interviewees, with consent forms concisely outlining details of the study, why the individual had been contacted, what their involvement would entail, and how data would be used, together with a clear explanation of the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw consent (and have data destroyed) at any time. All interviewees were designated pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Formal agreement to conduct the research was granted by the police force within which study participants volunteered via a research protocol, information sharing agreement, and senior staff member sponsor.

An interview schedule was prepared for each interview cohort (PSVs and volunteer managers), with topics arranged thematically under a selection of broad headings. The PSV interview schedule explored: motivations for volunteering; role and contribution¹; experiences of supervision and support; relationships with others (officers, staff) and views on policing; satisfaction with role; and the PSVs' plans for the future in relation to volunteering. The volunteer manager interview schedule covered the following areas: understanding the place of PSVs in the organisation (role, tasks, contribution, support/infrastructure available); relationships between PSVs and officers and staff; external issues (unions, impact of austerity); and final points around factors that need to be in place in order

to involve volunteers, successes and challenges for PSV programmes, and looking to the future. The interview schedule was worded as a specific set of clear questions to minimise the risk of misunderstanding or misdirection; however, was approached flexibly with questions used as prompts, rather than an exact script, to encourage a responsive and active interview style (Arthur and Nazroo 2003, Holstein and Gubrium 2004). Interviews were transcribed in a Word document and transferred to NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software package for thematic coding. This was approached from a grounded theory stance, allowing categories and themes to emerge and guide the analysis, so that research participants – PSVs and volunteer managers – held a pivotal role in ‘setting the agenda’ of the study (Patton 2002).

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in a single force area in England which presents limitations in terms of generalisability of findings, most notably within an international context. Furthermore, the sample comprised a small number of interviews with PSVs ($n = 20$), particularly when compared to the total number of PSVs in the force at the time of fieldwork ($n = 1047$). However, Romney *et al.* (1986 in Guest *et al.* 2006) found that small samples can be sufficient in qualitative research if participants possess a degree of expertise about the domain of inquiry. This allows the researcher to achieve a point of saturation or diminishing returns where additional interviewees could not contribute further information. Indeed, in his study of PSVs in Lancashire Constabulary, Millie (2018) acknowledged the low volume of interviewees; however, highlighted the valuable insights these provided into the lived experiences of being a volunteer. While it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which the single force sample in this study was representative of broader PSV experiences (nor, of course, PSV ‘leavers’ which may differ considerably from those who have chosen to remain), the data presents useful insights into the experiences of *some* PSVs – an important addition to a currently under researched space.

Findings

This section presents findings from interviews conducted with PSVs and volunteer managers. Drawing on themes of role identity, the section is organised under three key headings: being recognised and feeling valued; ‘earning’ recognition and value; and ‘demoralised amateurs’.

Being recognised and feeling valued

Being recognised and feeling valued for their contribution was important to PSVs in this study. For those who experienced such recognition and value within their volunteering role, this was closely linked with colleagues who they worked alongside and their efforts to acknowledge the PSV contribution. For PSV Jodie who volunteered in an administration role, this recognition came in the form of being treated equally to paid members of the workforce: ‘They [officers and staff] don’t treat us any different ... you could easily go somewhere and they’ll think ‘oh you’re a volunteer’ but, hands on heart, they are brilliant’. Recognition for their voluntary contribution exceeded what some PSVs felt they had received in their current or former paid positions. PSV Alan, a volunteer who viewed CCTV footage to support officers working in visual identifications and detections, and an IT professional in a paid capacity stated: ‘In my working life ... I don’t think I ever got any appreciation because I was dealing with the problem ... whereas here virtually every job I’ve done I have got a note of thanks and I’ve never got that as a paid person’. PSV Verity, a front counter and project support volunteer who was a senior manager in a global communications company prior to early retirement made a similar comment, underlining the importance of recognition to a PSVs’ feelings about their role:

‘It’s lovely to know that you’re valued, that you’re making a bit of a difference and that it’s worth your while. I’ve probably had more recognition as a volunteer than I’ve ever had in my professional career! Because it’s expected of you, because you’re paid, it is a different requirement’.

Being asked for their input or receiving feedback was central for PSVs in terms of being recognised and feeling valued, often serving as ‘markers’ of being involved and part of a team. PSV Salma, an administrator volunteer, commented:

I feel very much I am a part of their team. I’ve been involved in conversations about how we should do a certain thing or structure a certain thing, and ‘what do you think about this?’ My opinions are sought and I am part of the conversation.

PSV Verity reflected on these themes of being involved and valued within what she termed the ‘professional’ volunteer environment of the police service, contrasting this with experiences as part of wholly voluntary organisations:

... it’s a different attitude. If you’re a volunteer working with professionals, everybody is really grateful for anything you do and that’s really nice actually ... ‘oh thank you so much for helping us’. Whereas if everybody is a volunteer, everyone is like ‘well I’ve done this and you haven’t done as much as me’ and there’s all that business ... That’s the thing – it’s amateur, rather than professional, and I like to be in a professional environment.

For PSV Fred, a front counter volunteer, a sense of being part of a team was signalled by being able to chat informally and joke with officers and staff: ‘When they pull your leg, you know you’re one of them’. Although in a slightly different strand to the positive feelings that PSV Verity derived from being in a professional volunteer environment, for PSV Fred being part of the general camaraderie in the police station was an important marker of being recognised and feeling valued in his volunteer role.

A common theme throughout PSVs’ positive experiences of being recognised and valued – perhaps rather unsurprisingly – was being told and shown that they were through tangible and non-tangible symbols of recognition. PSVs mentioned officers and staff buying cakes to share in the office or other tokens to express their appreciation. PSV Alan spoke about a number of occasions where officers had brought small gifts to thank him for his contribution: ‘I just did a bit of work for [officer name] and he bought me a bottle of wine and I did find that rather embarrassing. It was appreciated but not expected’. Some PSVs also spoke about force-wide and national awards that they or their teams had been nominated for (and, very often, won). Again, PSV Alan made reference to this formal recognition of volunteer efforts: ‘our little unit, we’ve got 14 commendations, the Lord Ferrers Award which is a national award, and then several letters of appreciation ... nobody has ever said we didn’t do excellent work’. Volunteer managers also spoke about organised methods to show appreciation to volunteers including breakfast with senior officers or a subsidised Christmas meal – some of which they were no longer able to provide due to budget restrictions.

However, PSVs seemed to attach no greater value to these tangible, more resource intensive symbols of recognition, than informal emails or verbal notes of thanks for their contributions. PSV Eliza, a volunteer who provided CCTV viewing support and had recently secured a paid position in the force, stated:

‘We were very valued. Every now and again you would get an email from the Detective Inspector, you know, thanking you for your work. Little things like that, you know, people commenting about us ... it’s kind of nice when you’re appreciated, when you know that you are volunteering your free time’.

PSV Verity also highlighted the impact of small gestures on a volunteer’s sense of feeling involved and valued such as being included in social events: ‘I’ve been invited to [colleagues] leaving drinks and things. I think they think of me as part of the team’. Indeed, these small, but personal and meaningful acknowledgments served as powerful markers of recognition and value to the PSVs in this study.

‘Earning’ recognition and value

There was a sense from some interviewees – both volunteer managers and volunteers themselves – that PSVs needed to ‘prove themselves’ in order to be recognised and valued by officers and paid

staff. Vehicles for ‘proving oneself’ seemed to be primarily through time (demonstrating commitment to the role), and skills or knowledge (those identified as valuable – by and for the organisation itself).

Volunteer managers highlighted the time commitment which seemed to ‘earn’ some volunteers a sense of recognition and value:

I don’t know if it’s time that the officers need to see that they are fully committed, that they’re not time wasters, that they can be relied upon before they invest in a volunteer. Because they do have quite shallow views of volunteers (Marsha, volunteer manager interviewee)

To a certain extent the volunteer has to prove themselves to demonstrate they’re not a waste of time and they can actually give something and they’re doing something helpful. And as that builds up so you’re getting a better sort of interaction (Derek, volunteer manager interviewee)

Volunteers themselves also acknowledged the importance that was attached to earning recognition and value through time given, with PSV Jeremy, a front counter volunteer, relaying comments they overheard from an officer who felt that PSVs were ‘only here for a couple of weeks or months and they’re gone so it really wasn’t worth the effort’. PSV Verity shared a more positive experience; however, one that reflected this sense of ‘long service’ recognition: ‘Five years in I know what I can do and I know what I can’t do, and I think the officers I’ve worked with before trust me and the ones who don’t hopefully quickly realise’.

Skills or knowledge were also viewed as an avenue for recognition. PSV Max presented an interesting and somewhat unique experience, one that was atypical of the PSV sample in this study. Max had volunteered with the police force in a range of capacities for over 30 years and spoke in great detail about his extensive contacts within the service and beyond, and considerable efforts by senior officers to involve him heavily in the work of the local area and organisation as a whole. Max took on a leadership role in his field, frequently directing the work of warranted officers and staff. His contribution had been recognised with local and national awards, and he seemed embedded across the force area and, indeed, within some wider forces and partner organisations.

An officer was present during PSV Max’s interview (the only one throughout fieldwork) and offered some interesting reflections on his position: ‘I don’t think the Special Constable vs. PSV role makes a difference but credibility, knowledge and contacts definitely does ... Police officers, a lot of them I’ll be honest with you, won’t give them [PSVs] the time of day’. The officer went on to develop his explanation further, equating Max’s level of knowledge to a police rank:

That’s different with Max because of the amount of knowledge and the time and respect that he’s got ... with that level of knowledge you’re looking at sort of Chief Inspector level, although he’s a volunteer. But that’s because of the amount of time that he’s been doing it and the respect and credibility that he’s built up over time.

The officer commented on the volunteers (including PSV Max) recognised at a recent force-wide commendation event, giving an insight in to skills and knowledge that were valued in the organisation:

The other volunteers that were there – there were three volunteers put forward for the award – and all of them had some specialist knowledge that they’d been using ... it seems to be that if you’re looking at that high level ... and who’s giving the most back to the force, it’s the people who have got expert knowledge.

This issue of ‘bringing value’ to the organisation also emerged during the interview with PSV Verity who commented earlier on the trust that officers and staff bestowed in her as a result of her long service in the organisation. Verity held strong views regarding the position of the volunteer within the police service:

People have got to be very clear – this isn’t our playpen. There’s a real organisation with real objectives, and we’ve got to contribute to you, not the other way round. You don’t exist to entertain me. I exist to add value to you.

PSV Verity attached great importance to demonstrating her commitment and contribution to the organisation. Indeed, findings suggest that a certain type of volunteer – high contributors in

terms of hours and skills – was more likely to receive the recognition and value that has been demonstrated to be meaningful to PSVs.

Demoralised ‘amateurs’

The experiences of PSVs within this study were not homogenous. Feelings of being undervalued or lacking recognition for their contribution – although less common – were present, and, for some, were linked to limited opportunities to ‘earn’ such recognition through interaction alongside paid members of the workforce. Themes of volunteer ‘hierarchy’, threats to paid staff by ‘amateurs’, and ‘othering’ within the police service emerged here, with implications for PSVs’ feelings of being valued and their intentions to continue to give their time to policing. PSV Harley, who viewed CCTV to support officers working in visual identifications and detections, felt that volunteers were ‘looked upon as amateurs’ and spoke about hostility he had experienced from some paid members of staff and officers, making reference to his employment-focused motivations for volunteering with the police service as a possible driver of this: ‘I feel that it was almost a case of feeling threatened ... I don’t blame those members of staff not making volunteers part of it because you need to be protective of your own interests’. For some PSV interviewees, relationships with paid officers and staff weren’t necessarily poor – they simply did not exist at all, with much of the interaction throughout their volunteering shifts solely with other volunteers and their volunteer manager. For PSV Frances, an administrative volunteer, this lack of integration with officers and staff impacted on his morale within the volunteer role, and the sense of contribution that he felt able to make: ‘The supervising officers (sergeants and inspectors) took too little interest in what I was doing ... my efforts have not been as useful as I had thought. That’s demoralising’. While PSV Isobelle spoke enthusiastically about her volunteer project management role throughout her interview, she had little to add when asked about relationships with officers and staff:

The only dealings I really have are with my volunteer manager, and occasionally the officer who is in charge of [project name] ... So other than that I don’t have any other dealings with the officers, other than pass them in the corridor and being polite.

In interviews with volunteer managers, the importance of the relationship between volunteers and the paid workforce, and of officers and staff valuing PSVs and recognising the contribution they make, was a prevalent theme. Indeed, even when other factors identified as important to volunteers (e.g. being appropriately tasked, inducted, and developed) are in place, a sense of being undervalued – or not recognised at all – can still have a considerable negative impact on the PSV experience and a volunteers’ intention to remain in their role:

Volunteer satisfaction is also being treated with some element of respect by their colleagues. There’s nothing worse for a volunteer’s motivation and satisfaction than if they feel they’re just being used and abused and not shown the love. I’ve had a lot of people come through the door who don’t feel appreciated. Although they’ve got work to do and tasks to be getting on with, they don’t feel appreciated so don’t want to stay in that particular role (Colby, volunteer manager interviewee)

Ultimately, it’s a two-way thing, isn’t it? ... I think it’s very much feeling valued and feeling that you are contributing, and not walking out after a shift and thinking ‘well actually why did I bother coming in because nobody talked to me, nobody wanted me to do anything’ and that’s not what you want really (Derek, volunteer manager interviewee)

Volunteer manager Marsha referred to a sense of hierarchy in policing, which she felt impacted on both the paid and unpaid workforce: ‘It’s the same though, isn’t it? ... It’s a two tier – police officers first, police staff second. Special Constable volunteers first, PSVs second’. Perceptions of hierarchy can feed a sense of ‘othering’, a theme developed by volunteer manager Beth who made reference to the slow ‘filtering’ process required to move established members of the workforce towards acceptance of newer ones:

There's always been volunteers so I think that change of attitude is gradually filtering through, but it's still going to take a long, long time to come about because there are still some police officers who don't accept police staff for example (Beth, volunteer manager interviewee)

This has clear implications for how those towards the bottom of this perceived hierarchy are viewed and valued by the police service. Indeed, volunteer manager Colby reflected on the continuing 'reluctance to celebrate staff and volunteers', going on to add: 'I think they need to be celebrated and promoted across the organisation'.

Discussion

Data presented in this article points to the importance of PSVs' experiences as volunteers within the police service and the meaning that they attach to these. PSVs in this study often reported positive experiences within their volunteer role: of being part of a team alongside officers, staff, and other volunteers who they considered to be – and considered *them* to be – colleagues; of being asked for their input and receiving feedback within a professional setting; and of being recognised and feeling valued for their contribution, with interviewees often making reference to both tangible and non-tangible symbols of recognition from police officers and staff that communicated this. These encounters were shared by PSVs with great pride, pointing to their influence on positive feelings about their volunteering role. The PSVs who spoke of feeling involved, valued, and part of a team were amongst the most satisfied of the interview cohort and expressed intentions to continue in their volunteering roles. Amongst PSVs who reported less positive experiences within their roles was a feeling that their volunteer efforts were not recognised. These PSVs spoke about being made to feel that their contribution was 'amateur', that members of the paid workforce were threatened by their presence, and of a lack of interest amongst officers and staff which impacted on their morale and ability to contribute as they hoped. Although small in volume in this study, these PSVs were considerably more likely to feel unsure about their future as a volunteer in policing and spoke of lower levels of satisfaction in their roles, compared to those PSVs who felt recognised and valued for their contribution. Volunteer manager interviewees also acknowledged this, highlighting the damaging effects of volunteers feeling undervalued, underappreciated, and not involved in team work.

The importance that PSVs in this study attached to being recognised and feeling valued by officers and staff in their roles echoed themes that have been highlighted as significant to the development of role identity – the aspects of an individual's self-image that they derive from the social categories to which they perceive themselves belonging (Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 40). Volunteers' interactions alongside others in the organisation, in particular sharing information, involving volunteers in decision making, recognising and valuing their contribution, and making them feel part of the organisation have been recognised as instrumental to the formation of role identity (Randel *et al.* 2005, Grönlund 2011). In their research with volunteers at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Fairley *et al.* (2014) found that shared experiences, interaction, and teamwork were influential in the development of role identity. Young adult volunteers in Marta *et al.*'s (2014) study also reflected on the importance of seeing their contribution as consistent with the wishes of significant others within the organisation. When the value of their contribution was communicated to them – through feedback and recognition for the time and skills they gave – they were more likely to think of themselves as a volunteer which, the authors argue, was directly associated with their intentions to continue volunteering, predicting likely continuation (or not) up to three years in the future (Marta *et al.* 2014)).

The way in which PSVs in this study often understood and identified with their role, and experienced their contribution being recognised and valued was through interactions with others, particularly members of the paid workforce. This was also evident in comments from interviewees who pointed to ways in which PSVs 'earned' recognition or value – through commitment of time and desirable skills or knowledge to their volunteer role – which, again, relied on exposure to and interaction with members of the paid workforce. Recognition for PSV efforts was sometimes conveyed

through tangible symbols of recognition (e.g. token gifts, cakes to share in the office), but more often, non-tangible items – an email acknowledging and appreciating their contribution, an invite to a colleagues' leaving drinks or other team social events – that communicated to them that they were valued and considered to be part of the team. Across volunteering arenas more broadly these small, but personal and meaningful, extrinsic rewards – saying thank you, opportunities for social interaction, recognition of efforts – are often deemed more important than larger, generic financial gestures, communicating a sense of being valued, appreciated, and supported and seen as representative of symbolic payment for volunteers (Alfes *et al.* 2017). Indeed, in the absence of financial remuneration, these informal interactions – the 'supportive pat on the back from supervisors and recognition for a job well done' (Fallon and Rice 2015, p. 496) – take on added importance in determining their ongoing relationship with the organisation, a trend also noted in research with Special Constables (Bullock and Leeney 2013). These symbols of appreciation serve to remind volunteers of their role in the mission and success of the organisation and can help to foster role identity (Tidwell 2005, Laverie and McDonald 2007). Indeed, according to Van Ingen and Wilson (2017), it is the reflected appraisal and recognition from others in the organisation that is influential on identity related behaviour.

Opportunities for volunteers to engage and positively interact with other volunteers, the paid workforce, and members of the community are influential factors in the development of role identity. A sense of 'joining', 'belonging' and 'connecting' with the police service was important to PSVs in this study, and it was alongside officers and staff within the organisation that this was most keenly felt (or not) (Wisner *et al.* 2005). Analysis of national PSV survey data by Callender *et al.* (2019) identified an association between PSV morale and a range of factors relating to their connection and contribution within the policing organisation, including feeling appreciated for the time they give and impact they made, and that their efforts as a volunteer were recognised. Van Steden and Mehlbaum (2019, p. 430) also highlighted the value that police volunteers attach to feelings of 'belonging to' and 'being part of' the team, suggesting that receiving confirmation from paid colleagues for their contribution 'fuels their [volunteers'] passion for police work'. These encounters with members of the paid workforce provide cues to the volunteer about how they are performing and expose them to validation for their role from significant others. This contributes to optimism, pride, and feeling an emotional connection to the cause of the organisation, helping to form role identity. The greater the connection and attachment, the more important the role identity becomes to the volunteers' sense of self (Laverie and McDonald 2007, Van Ingen and Wilson 2017).

Developing a sense of role identity for PSVs through experiences alongside officers and staff that communicate that they are valued and recognised for their contribution offers practical benefits to the police service in terms of improved volunteer performance, and their commitment and longevity of service (Grönlund 2011, Fairley *et al.* 2014, Marta *et al.* 2014). Indeed, the development of role identity has been shown to be influential on volunteer satisfaction, organisational commitment, and the subsequent sustained volunteering behaviour that this can bring about (Penner 2002, Tidwell 2005, Alfes *et al.* 2017). Conversely, poorly developed (or, indeed, non-existent) role identity can result in lowered performance and counter-productive norms, particularly where there is conflict with management, or the organisation is seen to exploit staff (Van Knippenberg 2000). Failing to show volunteers that they are valued and their contribution recognised can impact considerably on their performance, levels of satisfaction, and intention to continue to give their time (Marta *et al.* 2014, Bullock 2017, Callender *et al.* 2019).

The standout feature of PSVs' experiences presented in this study was less those who reported negative experiences of feeling valued and recognised – and more those who *did not*. However, this recognition was frequently related to the efforts of *individual* officers and staff – emails of thanks, small tokens of appreciation, or the tenacity of supervising officers or volunteer managers to nominate volunteers for awards, or arrange outings or events – rather than an approach to valuing volunteers that was embedded throughout the organisation. This demarcation between volunteers' experiences of feeling valued by individuals, and by the organisation as a whole has been

noted in other studies, particularly in relation to Special Constables (Gaston and Alexander 2001, Bullock and Leeney 2013, Institute of Public Safety, Crime and Justice (IPSCJ) 2016) and volunteer PCSOs (Strudwick *et al.* 2017). This points to the importance of an institutional approach to recognising and valuing volunteers, rather than precarious arrangements that rely on individual officers and staff members. However, a reluctance to embrace volunteers in policing has a long history, with Seth (1961, in Bullock and Leeney, 2013, p. 495) highlighting the majority view of regular officers at the start of the First World War that Special Constables were 'more of a liability than an asset'. These themes have continued with 'others' in policing, including the PCSO role – both paid and, more recently, voluntary – being met with scepticism and resistance, occupying 'outsider status' (Cosgrove 2016, p. 132), and facing an 'ongoing struggle' to be accepted, requiring them to engage in a continuing 'process of negotiating and proving their professional identity' (O'Neill and Fyfe 2017, p. 2).

It could be argued that some of the challenges surrounding volunteer acceptance and integration in policing are linked to occupational culture – 'a complex set of values and attitudes that define the normative social world of police' – characterised by uncertainty, danger, suspicion, social isolation and group loyalty (Reiner 2010, Campeau 2015, p. 671). These themes, often communicated through on-the-job socialisation, have been shown to exert considerable influence over the way officers think about and interact with the public – including volunteers (Loftus 2010). Citizens who do intervene in policing – including those that do so through volunteering – are often dismissed as 'simple-minded or politically motivated', 'know nothings' and naive 'civvies' who do not understand the world of policing, the hostile and dangerous occupational environment that officers are routinely presented with, and who carry out tasks that run counter to the crime fighter image that police culture has long depicted and holds tightly to (Waddington 1999, p. 299, Herbert 2006, p. 492, Phillips 2013).

However, PSVs in this study rarely reported incidences of deliberate exclusion or 'othering' that have featured in some wider policing literature (e.g. Herbert 2001, Loftus 2010). Indeed, some PSVs perhaps pointed to an alternative narrative, giving their time alongside officers and staff who welcomed those who can add value and help them 'get the job done'. In their research on police partnerships, O'Neill and McCarthy (2014, p. 2, 11) found less marked suspicion of 'outsiders' than some previous studies suggested, with partnership work frequently welcomed and valued. The authors related this to a 'traditional police orientation to pragmatism' suggesting that greater acceptance of others is 'because of police culture, not in spite of it'. Experiences of partnership working, the authors (O'Neill and McCarthy 2014) argued, were usually more effective with individuals or agencies that the police had grown to see as reliable, and with whom they had gained familiarity and trust. Indeed, a number of studies have shown that increased exposure to members of the wider policing family – including volunteers – improves officer and staff views and likelihood of acceptance, socialising them into new ways of working, seeing them as part of the conventional work environment, and reducing the perceived threat they may be seen to pose (Paoline *et al.* 2000, Gravelle and Rogers 2009b, Phillips 2013, Phillips and Terrell-Orr 2013).

This underlines the importance of opportunities for PSVs to interact with members of the paid workforce, and for the workforce to experience the benefits that volunteers have the potential to bring, as part of an embedded organisational approach that routinely involves and values volunteers in the work of the police service. Such an approach would create space for volunteers to engage and positively interact with other volunteers, the paid workforce, and members of the community, exposing them to validation and recognition for their role from significant others and developing connections to the cause of the organisation (Laverie and McDonald 2007, Van Ingen and Wilson 2017). Embedding this throughout the organisation requires a two-pronged approach: dedicated volunteer management 'on the ground' – a paid member of staff who can understand and support individual volunteers; and strategic vision to set the agenda for volunteers in policing. Indeed, the appetite and motivation of police leaders to engage with volunteers and involve them in the delivery of policing has been recognised as indicative of the 'future prospects for the meaningful integration of volunteers within contemporary policing' (Wells and Millings 2019, p. 377). With a turnover of volunteers costly – both financially and in terms of internal morale and external reputation – failing to consider

the importance of volunteer experiences and their effects on the development of volunteer role identity has the potential to be damaging both for the PSV and the police service.

Policing operates 'under conditions of fast-paced and multidimensional change' (Higgins *et al.* 2017, p. 5), with cuts in public sector spending, shifting concerns around threat, harm, and risk, and an increasingly complex and globalised police workload, which stretches beyond traditional policing approaches, a permanent feature in recent years and showing few signs of abating. Indeed, this has been compounded by the uncertainty and blurring of boundaries around policing tasks in the Covid-19 global pandemic (Farrow 2020). Under these conditions, police services are required to regularly examine the shape of policing, rethinking and reappraising tasks to consider those who may be better suited to carry them out in order to most effectively meet demand (Millie 2013). This opens up new opportunities to involve volunteers, enabled by legislative changes in the Policing and Crime Act 2017 that allow chief officers to confer a range of powers to volunteers, excluding those in a core list reserved for warranted officers. Maximising opportunities for the police service and community to capitalise on the benefits that volunteers can offer – engagement, communication, innovation, and a source of labour, skills, and expertise – requires a more developed understanding of the role of volunteers in policing. This includes themes raised within this study – of PSVs feeling recognised, valued, and acknowledged for their contribution – that are shown to be important to volunteer satisfaction and longevity of service.

As the evidence base around police volunteers develops, thinking needs to shift to the theoretical underpinnings of emerging debates. Role identity – the aspects of an individual's self-image that they derive from the social categories to which they perceive themselves belonging – is shown to hold considerable influence over an individual's performance in their volunteer role, their feelings of satisfaction while carrying it out, and their intention to continue to give their time (Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 40, Thoits and Hewitt 2001, Grönlund 2011, Marta *et al.* 2014). This points to a theoretical position to begin to contextualise and develop thinking, offering fresh opportunities to consider and make sense of the meaning that PSVs attach to being a volunteer in policing.

Note

1. For a full discussion of the motivations and contributions of PSVs in this study please see Pepper (2021) and Pepper *et al.* (2020).

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