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“They wanna be us”; PCSO performances, uniforms, and struggles for acceptance.

Police community support officers (PCSOs) in England and Wales have become an integral part of neighbourhood policing since their national roll-out in 2008. The research reported here is based on the first-hand accounts of PCSOs from a four-month ethnographic study in a northern police force. Using Erving Goffman’s theoretical framework and concept of *performances*, this paper argues that PCSOs still face ongoing pressures from inside the organisation to defend their position to police colleagues. PCSOs are still experiencing negative and bullying attitudes toward their existence and document the difficulties they face in being accepted. In response to this, some PCSOs have been known to conceal their status by modifying their uniform and using a current desire for increased visibility to enable presentational strategies in image management.

Keywords: Police community support officers (PCSOs); neighbourhood policing; uniform; police; visibility; Erving Goffman.

Introduction

In the latter part of the twentieth century, community policing was established from a perceived requirement to reconnect the public and the police due to the public’s increasingly diverse nature. Influenced by the ‘signal crimes’ perspective (Innes 2004, Innes 2007, Innes 2011, see also Bahn 1974), this would be achieved by partnership working, public engagement, and visible patrolling. Following some unsuccessful efforts to establish and prioritise community policing in the 1980s and 1990s (Fielding and Innes 2006), the Labour government introduced neighbourhood policing (NP) in all policing areas across England and Wales in 2008 to prioritise community engagement.

This modernisation agenda led to an emergence of ‘plural policing’; an assortment of visible uniformed patrols – using what Crawford and Lister (2004, and Crawford et al., 2005) named ‘public auxiliaries’. These are salaried members of support staff who provide increased visibility on patrol as part of Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) (Home Office 2001a, O’Neill 2017).

In 2002, the Home Office provided £41m for forces to employ PSCOs. The Metropolitan Police was first, employing 300 as a 'highly visible deterrent on the streets and in neighbourhoods' (Paskell 2007, p. 353, Merritt 2009). When PCSOs were first established, there was a great deal of confusion over their role (among the public and within policing circles) and there was uncertainty over how they would fit into the existing policing structure, both practically and culturally (Crawford and Lister 2004, Jason-Lloyd 2003, Crawford et al., 2005, Johnston 2005, 2006, 2007). The addition of PCSOs, under the Police Reform Act 2002, generated a new dynamic to policing in England and Wales, and compelled the police to address more actively the management of their visibility. Neighbourhood policing shares a great deal with previous community-orientated models of policing (Innes 2006) and these models encouraged PCs and PCSOs to participate in joint-action problem solving with other agencies, increase visibility (Higgins 2018), and to encourage engagement with the public to work together to help organise policing priorities (Merritt and Dingwall 2010). This style of policing embodies a significant divergence from established understandings of police culture and working practices and has led to NP being described as a softer, more feminine form of policing (Davies and Thomas 2008).

Despite the successful national launch, the landscape has changed dramatically in the last decade. In 2010 the Coalition Government (Conservative-Liberal Democrat) brought with it aggressive budget cuts which has led to dwindling front-line numbers, with PCSOs as civilian staff the 'easiest' to discard. Previously PCSOs made up approximately 75% of NPTs but with a 36% reduction between 2010 and 2016 on average (MoJ 2016), the whole premise of neighbourhood policing is under threat. Although exact numbers differ across forces, the Metropolitan Police, which covers one of the most densely populated areas in the UK, has shown the most significant

reduction in PCSOs from 70% to 15% over eight years, with a general rule of two PCs and one PCSO per electoral ward (Higgins 2018). With fewer PCs and PCSOs, remaining officers will struggle to provide the visibility and engagement that is crucial to neighbourhood policing. Norfolk Police announced in late 2017 that they are removing the PCSO role entirely, and following the Policing and Crime Act 2017, forces can now take on 'Community Support Volunteers' (CSVs) with some limited powers. Lincolnshire Police introduced a similar role of Voluntary Police Community Support Officers (VPCSOs) to complement existing salaried PCSOs (Strudwick et al. 2017). Alternatively, some forces have Police Support Volunteers (PSVs), who are citizen volunteers that perform tasks which complement PC and police staff duties. A recent study reported over 1,100 roles across forces nationally (Britton et al. 2018), and the differences in these roles can be vast and, at times, ill-defined. These changes have built on proposed reforms regarding volunteers within policing and are detailed in the Policing and Crime Bill (Home Office 2017) which provide Chief Officers with wider authority to designate powers to volunteers (Strudwick et al. 2017). Additionally, some forces have outlined proposals to build on initiatives that give communities the option to pay for extra PCSOs. These significant severances, the hiring of volunteers, and making PCSOs 'optional' for communities is arguably detrimental to their legitimacy, and 'gives a signal that the PCSO is expendable and not doing work of serious value' (O'Neill 2018).

The Police Federation publicly questions their value consistently, arguing that 'the public are being fooled... we are sending people out there who are dressed as police officers' (Moore 2007). But the persistence with NP, and the role of PCSOs, is not only vital for improving police legitimacy in general (Myhill and Quinton 2010, O'Neill, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c), but also allows PCSOs to cement their 'place' in policing,

something that they have fought for since their inception, not only in the eyes of the public, but police colleagues as well (O'Neill 2015, Merritt 2009, Merritt and Dingwall 2010). Public reactions and effectiveness-monitoring of neighbourhood policing and PCSOs are largely based on the increased levels of intelligence gathering and results are used to 'dramatize the *appearance* of control of crime and maintenance of social order' (Manning 1992, p. 139 – emphasis added) to generate the perception that an increased visible presence is the driver behind amplified communication. In the wake of recent terrorist atrocities, attention has turned to NP in encouraging interactions between the public and the police and producing community intelligence, and the NPCC (2017) argues that 'fewer officers and [PCSOs] will cut off the intelligence that is so crucial to preventing attacks'. The new Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget statement, released October 2018, revealed plans to provide £160m for counterterrorism, but nothing for other policing areas. This is damaging for the weakening of NP, as intelligence for counterterrorism 'depends entirely on local officers' (*The Independent* 2018).

The link between neighbourhood policing, visibility and the police uniform is an important one. The image of the police has changed, and increased visibility and the adoption of different uniforms for various roles has altered perceptions of the police. In modern policing, departments have very different roles, activities and expectations and thus have very different 'customers' and as a consequence policing staff generate significantly different impressions, feelings and reactions. For example, PCSOs and PCs have different, yet complementary functions. Clothing is a major component in the judgment of appearance and a vital index to status, power and authority, and individuals, who wear the same clothing as part of a uniform, express the corporate identity over that of their own personal identity (Soloman 1987). Uniforms convey

meanings in society that go far beyond the clothes themselves, performing, portraying and creating power relations between different people. Uniforms allow meaning to be communicated without speaking and are constructed and confirmed (or denied) through interactions with people and situations on a daily basis (see Goffman 1959).

The semiotics of uniforms lies in the 'meaning-compression principle' where meanings are observed and interpreted (Baldry and Thibault 2006, p. 19). That is, the highly-recognisable features of the police uniform should offer little confusion as to what the wearer's occupation is. In the case of police officers, 'clothes are not just body coverings and adornments... clothes literally *are authority*' (Cohn 1989, pp. 312-3, original emphasis). It is due to these understandings that the exploration of how policing staff wear their clothes and the meanings attached to these is important.

This article is structured around three themes. Firstly, the use of PCSOs as a visible presence is discussed with a particular focus on neighbourhood policing. In this context, the aim of the article is to discuss the establishment of the PCSO and the ongoing problems with acceptance by the wider police family. Secondly, how the use of the very similar uniforms of PCs and PCSOs has led to criticisms of duplicitous visibility tactics. And thirdly, the potential repercussions of trying to enhance legitimacy through imagery and presentation is reflected upon and the acceptance of PCSOs in a northern police force (anonymised in this paper as *BlueCorp*) is deliberated. This last consideration is especially important in the context of the potential phasing out of PCSOs, the introduction of new volunteering roles and making PCSOs 'optional' for communities. The implications for an understanding of PCSO performance and identity management, and the future of neighbourhood policing, are considered.

Methodology

The arrival of NP enabled a new position from which to analyse policing and this guided an ethnography that examined the practical and symbolic uses of police clothing. The cooperation of three neighbourhood policing teams was obtained within one mainly urban police force, one team was predominantly urban and the other two had largely rural populations. Non-participant observations were undertaken with eight PCs and 14 PCSOs in a northern police force over a period of four months in 2014, as part of a wider study. The PCSOs were made up of six women, eight men, of which two were BME. The PCs were made up of six men (one BME) and two women. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

A concern with closed institutions such as the police is that access is usually controlled by 'gatekeepers'; 'individuals or institutions who stand at the metaphorical 'gate' of a metaphorical enclosed compound, and allow, or not, the research in' (Crowhurst et al. 2013, p. 4). In this study, sergeants determined what access would be given and with whom. Gatekeepers have been known to strategically pair 'an observer with [an] officer least likely to discredit the unit' (Matrosfski et al. 1998, p. 6). I encountered similar experiences, one PCSO queried with me if he had '*done okay*' after our shift together. Confidentiality was assured and participants were candid with both positive and negative opinions. The research framework was designed to explore issues of public and police perceptions, uniforms, and visibility. This paper draws directly on the fieldnotes, conversations, pictures, and observations recorded throughout the study as a foundation on which to theorise about PCSO identity management and performance through the lens of the uniform. Although the sample is not intended to be

representative it provides valuable insights into the subjective understandings of a diverse range of participants.

Theoretical Framework

Using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, this paper suggests that identities are established through everyday mundane social interactions and examines how different roles, experiences, contexts, and working practices produce distinctive performances. In order to understand the way in which individuals construct their identity performances through the uniform, Goffman's sociology, particularly his earlier works, provide valuable analytical tools for exploring the relationships between PCSOs and their uniforms.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman explains how individuals, through everyday interactions with others, construct and sustain their identity. Goffman (1959) was the first modern sociologist to make central the idea of performance, employing the metaphor of the theatre to consider performances or presentations of the self and dramaturgy was his first and most influential method for doing so. He argued that there is no one 'true' self; instead, we all manage and organise several 'selves' and look for the best way to present the one an individual considers is the most appropriate for a situation and it is these performances more broadly that are discussed herewith.

An analysis of how PCSOs use the uniform within their identity *performances* with colleagues enables an insight into image management. Using quotes from staff, observations and images, this paper looks in detail at several of Goffman's dramaturgical concepts: *indicative display events* and *expressions 'given off'* within

performances more generally and how the uniform is used as a *sign vehicle* to help construct these presentations.

PCSOs As Visibility

'Reassurance policing' was first coined by American psychologist Charles Bahn in 1974 and it focused on the meanings people attached to seeing or meeting a police officer and was described as 'the feeling of security and safety that a citizen experiences when he sees a police officer or patrol car nearby' (1974, p. 340). Furthermore, a police officer acts as a 'control signal', that is, an indicator that the authorities are taking the problems of local people seriously (Innes 2004). These control signals 'recognise and seeks to harness the dramaturgical power of formal social control' (Innes 2007, p. 133, see also Innes 2004, Innes 2011). Bahn (1974) suggested that fixed-post officers, who would be allocated to a particular location where the public knew where to find them, would offer a function of high visibility, not dissimilar to how PCSOs are currently used. In the early 2000s a diverse range of 'quasi-police' were designed to undertake the many roles and functions of traditional officers (Home Office 2001a, 2001b, Jason-Lloyd 2003, Crawford et al. 2005), but public criticism that the appearance of 'hybrid' police may 'heighten anxiety in the community' quickly arose (Cooke 2005, p. 233).

The government promised that there would be a more visible police presence in response to the public's 'seemingly insatiable demand' for more patrolling officers (Crawford and Lister 2004, p.422) because 'seeing is believing' (Home Office 2004, Crawford et al. 2005). Increased visibility came in the form of PCSOs and NP generally, but the value of PCSOs was questioned as the public were aware that they do not hold the same powers as PCs. The press attacked the implementation of 'policing on the cheap', and repeated references to 'plastic police', (House of Commons

2008, p. 92) and 'pink and fluffy policing' (Davies and Thomas 2008, p. 633) inevitably reduced perceptions of their authority, both in the eyes of the public and within the police itself. It is not just the public that affects PCSO legitimacy but other policing staff as well. The success of PCSOs as an integral and accepted part of the police force is 'dependant' on the 'cooperation' and 'support' of wider society and colleagues (Home Office 2004, p. 48).

Due to budget cuts, policing areas have widened and staff numbers have reduced. The expansion of beat areas and frequently moving PCSOs around to 'fill gaps' means that they do not spend enough time in their designated 'patches' to develop the social capital that is vital to the entire purpose of their role (see also O'Neill 2014a). Dispersal across beat areas, while perhaps necessary in times of austerity, may cause every member of visible patrol staff to become 'anonymous ciphers' to the public: 'alike, unfamiliar, and unrecognisable' (Bahn 1974, p. 342). Interestingly, in early 2018, *BlueCorp* revealed plans to have more than 100 dedicated PSCO 'hubs', to get 'more feet on the beat'. These centres, whilst positively increasing visibility in the community (provided they keep PCSOs in the future) (see also Bahn 1974), may also serve to widen divides (both spatially and psychologically) between PCSOs and other front-line staff (see O'Neill 2005 for a discussion of 'teams').

Acceptance by the wider police family

The hostility toward PCSOs seems to stem from the Police Federation's long-standing public campaign to discount the idea of auxiliary staff. In an attempt to influence public opinion, in 2006 the Police Federation took out full-page advertisements in local London newspapers to demonstrate the threat to which PCSOs pose to traditional policing, with the caption 'Real officers are being replaced by the new breed', and

readers were invited to 'choose' between PCs and PCSOs (Caless 2007, p. 188). There have been considerable changes over the last few decades and the growth of private policing has led to profound transformations (Button 2002). The exponential rise of private security personnel (Wakefield 2003) has resulted in the public seeing many different types of uniformed patrol officers on UK streets (all with similar uniforms). PCSOs are able to retain an advantage over other auxiliaries however due to the 'sacred and symbolic reassurance value of the police uniform'; confidence vested in PCSOs is 'enhanced by the uniform and police identity' (Crawford et al. 2005, p. 20, 68). The PCSO however represents the biggest single change (within NP) to policing for decades and thus became the target for resentment, and in the workplace there lies an 'emotional aggression' towards them (Caless 2007, p. 188) which has not fully dissipated despite 16 years in service. Although most participants at *BlueCorp* appreciated the usefulness of PCSOs, there were still some negative attitudes about their value permeating the force:

If all the PCs decided to strike over the budget cuts tomorrow, who would do our job? There's literally no one. But if PCSOs decided to strike, police forces could cope. That should really tell them something. Like we don't really need them that much at all. And really if you think about it, if they wanna make all these cuts and stuff maybe they should think about getting rid of the force's 'fat' and employ more PCs.

(PC Mike)

[Some PCs] see them as just lackies that do the shit meaningless jobs and we take the piss behind their back, and sometimes to their face... but it's mostly banter of course.

(PC Karen)

A PCSO told me the other day that a few of them went for breakfast, which they seem to do every day on shift, and were sat there for two hours, being a 'visible presence'. [The PCSO] was laughing as he told me, and I laughed along with him, but I was seething inside – like we're run ragged and they're sat there for hours doing fuck all eating bacon barm.

(PC Joel)

Similarly, O'Neill's (2014a) PCSO respondents also viewed sitting in places 'having brews' as community engagement but there was still overt criticism of their own role, particularly focusing on what they were not able to do. It is important then, to the benefit of everyone, that PCSOs 'patrol with a purpose' combining visibility with engagement activities (Crawford et al. 2005, p. 56). There has been some debate over giving PCSOs more powers (and current powers vary from force to force), allowing PCSOs to take statements for example. Paskell (2007, p. 358) found that PCSOs were moving beyond their 'limited' policing role into 'broader forms of multifaceted work' and consequently undergo some recalibration of self-perception. The redefining of the 'softer' parts of their work results in more positive and prestigious features of police work (especially those that relish 'crime-fighting'), being prioritised. Additionally, PCSOs are keen to highlight 'useful' information gathered; consequently, PCSOs undertake 'dramatic realisation' (Goffman 1959) where they convey the type of performance that police officers value. According to Goffman (1959, p. 41), being a 'policeman' enables high levels of 'dramatic self-expression' and the wearing of the highly symbolic police uniform is already 'wonderfully adapted' for communication conveying the 'qualities and attributes' of the performer. Sign-equipment, so-called by Goffman (1959, pp. 45-6), and in this case, the uniform, 'can be used to embellish and illumine one's daily performances'. The enactments of these performances have to be constant in order to communicate to PCs 'that they are performing a believable role as valuable and supportive NPT members' (O'Neill 2014a, p. 7) The redefining of their role allows PCSOs to construct different performances, occasionally making their 'softer roles appear harder' (Davies and Thomas 2008, p. 633, see also Goffman 1959). Others disagreed:

I don't think the PCSOs are bothered about [helping us out], they probably prefer to be doing something more worthwhile by helping us out, injecting a bit of real police work into their day of hugging grandmas.

(PC Tom)

Completing tasks for PCs, presented as 'real' police work, allowed PCSOs to legitimise their role as 'proper' police officers, and were therefore accepted, to an extent, into the policing family. There is, of course, the danger of 'mission creep' where PCSOs are pulled grudgingly into work that requires more advanced skills and pushes them to the limits of their training and powers (Crawford et al. 2005, Merritt 2010, Higgins 2018). Nevertheless, initial treatment permeates:

[In the beginning] supervisors would treat you like lesser beings, they would avoid you and dismiss you if you went to them for direction.

(PCSO Marisa)

While there are still problems with acceptance and recognition as an integral part of neighbourhood policing (Johnston 2005, 2006, 2007, O'Neill 2014a, 2014b), it has taken a decade of PSCO existence to gain an (arguably) positive level of approval. Training has been standardised, PCSOs now have a defined role, and supervisors know where to place them in NPTs to increase their effectiveness within the wider policing family. Apart from a few PCs who disguise their reluctance to accept PCSOs as 'banter', gaining a level of acceptance, both internally and externally, has been a slow process, but not unlike the first police officers who were perceived by the public to be 'unproductive parasites' (Storch 1975, p. 71). PCSO Amy acknowledges that 'acceptance' is largely to do with other officers' age and length of service:

It only really got better as time went on because the old staff retired, and then the new people came in who didn't know any different; the new staff came in knowing PCSOs were part of it, so it was much more acceptable for them I suppose. I still don't speak to my sergeant now because of it. He's an absolute prick. We literally do not speak. At all. He used to leave me out of important

meetings until more PCSOs came in and he couldn't get away with it anymore and I used to say to him, 'can you tell me what's going on?' and he told me to keep my 'fucking beak out', called me a 'fucking bitch' and everything. I used to go home in tears.

When neighbourhood policing was first introduced, departments were described as being affected by a 'split force', where 'veterans, resistant to change' did not 'believe in departmental philosophy' (Miller 1999, p. 197). These changes were referred to as 'the break-up of the family', and led to further strain, at least for a time, exacerbating an 'us versus them' culture from inside police forces. O'Neill (2014b, p. 25) noted that 'one should not underestimate the damage those early experiences did and the legacy they have left for PCSOs.' Supporting the comments of the PCSOs in this study, O'Neill (2014b, pp. 25-6) suggested that length of service played a factor as veteran officers were more 'difficult to bring round to the idea of PCSOs'. These attitudes remain, and it seems that even 'one bad apple in a clean barrel' (Reiner 2010, p. 157) is problematic and does little to enhance PCSO confidence if these attitudes are left to pervade the culture. It is therefore important to consider how the uniform is used as a sign-vehicle in executing certain 'performances' to potentially enhance confidence and perceived legitimacy.

The uniform as a 'sign-vehicle'

While the execution of a performance is based on what a certain occupational culture expects, the culture of the police is not unchanging or immune to the pressure of expectations. Informal rules about role-playing are not clear-cut but are 'embedded in specific practices and nuanced, according to[...] the interactional processes of each encounter' (Reiner 1985, p. 86). Therefore, PCSOs must manage their own personal role-playing attempting to gauge whether this is the 'correct' presentation for each encounter and the uniform is a significant prop in these performances.

The body is always in performative action and Craik argued that uniforms wear the body and use it to produce certain performances (2005, p. 106). The body risks being 'devoid of its power without the uniform that covers it' (Hirtenfelder 2015, p. 6). In society the body is manipulated, fashioned, crafted and adorned with elements directly related to what the individual wants to portray; it is in communicative action that the body comes to 'be': 'A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute to a performed character, but imputation this is a product of a scene that comes off and is not a cause of it' (Goffman 1959, pp. 252-3).

Goffman (1959, p. 208) referred to an aspect of an individual's impression management which is at times, subconsciously uncontrollable: impressions 'given-off'. These behaviours are those that others take to be non-communicative on the part of the actor and consequently, unintentionally exposing their 'true character'. Goffman (1979, p. 1) also explored how humans 'display' themselves and argued that present in every culture are actors who engage in 'indicative display events' which are a 'distinctive range of indicative behaviour and appearance'. The communication to others of a particular self depends wholly on the cooperation of the actor and the audience, that is, affirmation and reciprocity of individuals reacting to each other's expressive display of social action. Thus attempts by the PCSO to control and define situations in the way that is intended, needs to have others accept and validate it through their response. While verbal clues may be more telling, socially sanctioned symbols (the uniform in this context) are more easily recognisable and accepted as the master status of that performance above nearly all others. By wearing a uniform, people expect PCSOs (and PCs) to 'look the part' and 'to look [and act] a particular way' (Craik 2005, p. 120).

There have been many studies about the power of uniforms, particularly those that embody authority. Durkin and Jeffery (2000) found that the more analogous to a police uniform, the more likely a child will correctly identify those uniforms. Recognising superficial aspects of appearance support the idea that it is the uniform itself that embodies authority, regardless of who is wearing it. Bickman (1974, pp. 48-50) argued that it is only particular uniforms that carry social power and reasoned that 'the [police] uniform symbolises authority' and 'uniformed persons acting outside their accustomed roles still have greater power than non-uniformed persons'.

Similarly, Cooke (2004, p. 44), undertook a student survey on police and police-like uniforms and found that the clothing that people wear, and the 'many symbols' that are used as 'identifiers', are 'strong cues' which resulted in nearly all of her respondents (99-100%) successfully recognising a British police officer. Even when 'symbols from the hat and utility belt were removed', recognisability remained remarkably high at 92%. Cooke's (2004, p. 243) empirical data was collected just one year prior to the widespread implementation of PCSOs and she acknowledged that the introduction of PCSOs may result in a 'disengaging' with the public by 'not having their own distinctive uniform'.

Indeed, PCSO uniforms are designed to look like they are part of the police but 'visibly distinct' from police officers (National Policing Programme 2007, p. 36) but there has been criticism that the police are trying to 'dupe' the public into a purposeful misperception about increased visibility, as Cooke (2004) had envisioned. Furthermore, the Police Federation argued that these are duplicitous tactics for visibility; 'how can the public tell the difference between the two and is this a

purposeful blurring of the lines to make the public think there are more police officers on the streets?’ (Police Federation 2009, p. 1).

Cooke (2004, p. 243) proposed that the use of very similar uniforms would ‘lead to confusion’ and wondered astutely whether the introduction of ‘police-like’ officers would be an ‘optical illusion’ (Home Office 2001a, p. xi). Although there was no nationally ‘agreed’ uniform, the trend was for ‘differing blue epaulettes, hat bands and signage bearing the words ‘Police Community Support Officer’ (National Policing Programme 2007, p. 36). According to the Police Federation, this was simply not enough. PCSOs still wear the same clothes as police officers, but the latter highlights *police* ‘in much larger letters’ (Police Federation 2009, p. 1, see also Crawford et al. 2005, Rowland and Coupe 2014) – [*Figure 1 near here*]. This ‘deliberate’ blurring of the distinction between the two is a clever ‘ploy to con the public’ and generates false expectations (Craig 2011, p. 4, Crawford et al. 2005):

Some community support officers can be indistinguishable from a police uniform at a distance. The public – and even some regulars – cannot tell them apart. It is a con to give the impression that there are more police officers than is the case.

(Police Federation 2009, p. 1)

In 2005, the Alberta Peace Officer Programme developed a policing role modelled closely on UK PCSOs (Merritt and Dingwall 2010). Understanding the importance of visibility and public perceptions, the uniform was designed to be visibly distinct from PCs and the programme promoted ‘brand awareness’ in a public campaign to dispel criticisms that similar uniform deceives the public about increased policing visibility in the form of warranted officers. This programme is an example of more recent trends seen in The Netherlands, France and New York (see generally Public Security Peace

Officer Programme Manual and Merritt and Dingwall 2010, p. 395, Merritt 2010, p. 747, Jones 2009).

Cooke (2004, p. 239) raised significant questions about whether the transfer of police insignia to other uniforms would 'diminish its power, authority and wider significance' and cause a 'watering down effect'. Writing one year later, Cooke (2005, p. 235) considered that 'the naming of these officers as "police" community support officers is very interesting... the introduction of PCSOs clearly blurs traditional established boundaries'.

Whilst there is variation across forces, all PCSOs are required to wear a royal blue zipped polo-shirt (black for PCs) and colour variation is the main distinguishing feature between roles in *BlueCorp*. Despite this, PCSOs bear a striking resemblance to PCs, especially in low light, when wearing high-visibility clothing, or from a distance – *[Figure 2 near here]*. These similarities were a cause of contention within *BlueCorp*:

Researcher: What's the difference between uniforms?

PCSOs have to wear the blue shirts to differentiate but it's a bit ridiculous when we are all wearing the high vis jackets over the top anyway, so you can't see it. Some of the younger PCSOs choose to wear the black tops to look like PCs.

Researcher: If that isn't part of their uniform, how are they getting hold of black tops?

Well they have the black tops, because they're their cycling tops, but they are choosing to wear them every day, it's 'coz they wanna look like us [laughs], one actually told me that. Said he got more respect if people thought he was a PC. Bless 'im.' Sometimes they even wear other [high-vis] jackets to cover up the mark[ing]s.

Researcher: Does management know?

Yeah, they obviously see them. Don't think they're bothered though.

(PC Joel)

Several officers agreed that it was 'common knowledge' and a 'running joke' that PCSOs often strived to disguise their PCSO status by actively 'going out of their way

to hide the markings on their uniforms to look more like us' (PC Mike). They had also been known to wear their black cycling tops, black fleeces or high-visibility jackets to do regular patrol work to make their uniform more similar to PCs – [*Figures 3 and 4 near here*]. Unlike PCs, the PCSO role is non-confrontational and they have no warranted authority, and it is this main distinguishing feature that gives weight to resulting 'banter' from colleagues. Powers of detention are discretionarily granted by chief constables and these (and other powers) can vary widely across forces despite previous standardisation attempts (Merritt 2009).

The jesting amongst other ranks, whilst dismissed as banter, had an underlying derogatory tone, cementing the PCSO status as 'lesser'. The uniform that officers wear is a 'sign vehicle' (Goffman 1959, p. 1) which are particular events or objects that act as signs to the audience. These vehicles contain physical markers which are always embodied within 'elastic' physiognomies; clothing in this case, is used by officers to 'give off' information to others. Goffman (1959, p. 40) argued that people saturate their performances with signs that 'dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts' which might otherwise not be clear to the observer. Within performances there is a distinction between expressions given and expressions given off. Expressions 'given' involves 'verbal symbols or their substitutes' and those that are 'given off' comprise non-verbal communication such as body language, facial expressions, gesticulation, and physical appearance (Goffman 1959, p. 2-4). In this case, PCSOs intentionally and unintentionally 'give' and 'give off' expressions and present their 'selves', but how far this is accepted by the audience is dependent on the performance; the way that the uniform is worn is an important part of this presentation. Thus the expressions 'given off' in these circumstances, that is, the modifications of uniforms, alters these performances. This is particularly intriguing because although their PC colleagues may

not accept the presentation, the *public may do*, meaning at least part of the intended audience accepts and validates their performance. When a PCSO uses their uniform as part of a deviant performance, they are:

‘implicitly request[ing their] observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possess the attributes he appears to possess... and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.’

(Goffman 1959, p. 28)

Goffman (1959, p. 81) argued that status is not palpable, but is a ‘pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished and well-articulated’. As it was perhaps obvious to the trained (policing) eye, it appears that the attempt to disguise the PCSO status was merely to deceive the public, albeit momentarily, into thinking they are PCs, perhaps to enhance their ‘questionable’ status. Undoubtedly, misidentification has likely deterrent benefits but can also serve to heighten public expectations, confuse the public, and even put PCSOs in danger (Cooper et al. 2006). Indeed, Crawford et al. (2005) recommended that the public should be made more aware of PCSO uniforms and powers to address problems of confusion and uncertainty of expectations. When questioned, PCSOs brushed off purposely misidentifying themselves as ‘banter’, and PCSO Adam justified that his *‘blue top was just in the wash that day and they haven’t let it drop since’*, it was a running joke amongst other colleagues that PCSOs *‘wanted to be PCs’*.

PCSO Amy, who was one of the first PCSOs at *BlueCorp* (and the only PCSO in her area for a while), reasoned that those who identify as PCs can cause problems (see also Ormerod and Roberts 2003):

It's all very well, 'cause I think the government wanna make it look like there are more PCs around anyway, which is why I don't think management are arsed but the trouble is if there is a fight in the street and a PC has to get involved and a PCSO is stood there in a black top and can't do anything then the public are gonna get pissed off and be like 'why isn't that copper doing something?' It won't look good.

PCSO Francis agreed:

If PCSOs aren't identifying themselves properly, or like if they're in the wrong clothes or something, [a civilian] can easily get away with assault because they just say in court that we didn't identify ourselves or weren't easily identifiable or whatever, or that they didn't know we were police.

PCSO Amy reasoned that the easiest way to tell if a PCSO wanted to be a PC by concealing their identity, albeit temporarily, was age. She deduced that there was a continuum of 'young' to 'old' with those more likely to enable deviant performances, willing to '*play silly beggars*' and align themselves with 'crime-fighting' orientations at one end (young), and those inclined (and happy) to stick to the more traditional, community-engagement type roles at the other (older). This reflects Merritt's (2010) PCSO continuum between engagement-style approaches (Bridge Builders) and enforcement-focused tactics ('Junior' Enforcer) - the latter of which are seen as assistant or 'surrogate cops' (Innes 2009, p. 25, 'frustrated' PCSOs – see Cosgrove 2015), which potentially negates the main purpose of the role. Merritt (2009) points out that if the government intended the PCSO as a Bridge-Builder, this perception is spoiled if PCSOs are constructed as junior 'cops'. Furthermore, there may be 'deliberate attempts' by the media to confuse the roles for 'journalistic reasons' (Merritt 2009: 390) which exacerbates the problem. Cooke (2004, p. 243) suggested that the existence of PCSOs could have 'detrimental effects on the relationship between the community and the police, unless better distinctions are made'.

Discussion

The literature demonstrates the envisioned problems of too-similar uniforms but the findings from this study clearly show that PCSOs themselves are involved with the public mistaking them for police officers, even if it was not hard to achieve with already close similarities. What could not be foreseen was the purposeful deception that some PCSOs would undertake, actively concealing their PCSO markings/insignia and wearing black tops. The actions of some of these officers (although it's not clear how many PCSOs do this), may, of course, be exceptional, but it does alert us to the fact that the legitimacy of their own role is consistently questioned and they undertake performance strategies to resist this. O'Neill (2014a, p. 11 – emphasis in original) found that some 'PCSOs can *imply*, or let members of the public *assume*, that they have more power and authority than they actually do'. This tactic is not new and has been employed by other ranks for decades (see Reiner 2010 'Ways and Means Act'). It can be argued however that what they do has the opposite effect of enhancing their legitimacy with colleagues when they are 'exposed' as 'imposters' (Goffman 1959, p. 206), i.e. when colleagues notice alterations to their uniform for example.

These findings support Young's (1991, pp. 72-3) observations that hierarchical binary pairs can emerge, particularly distinguishable between officers that are 'properly uniformed' versus 'variously (un)dressed'. I argue that the PCSOs who were identified (visually or hearsay) as altering their uniforms were attempting to categorise themselves as a 'positive' group member ('properly uniformed') instead of a 'negative' group member ('variously (un)dressed' and 'unreal policemen') using Young's typologies (1991, pp. 72-3), as they may be 'affronted by the lower status accorded to their role within the hierarchy of policing' (Crawford et al. 2005, p. 59). O'Neill (2014b, p. 19), reasoned in her 2014 recommendation report (for future policy and practice), that contrary to popular belief, 'not all PCSOs would like to be police officers' including

those who 'initially joined as a PCSO with a view to becoming a PC later' as the 'PC job is no longer appealing' in reality. While this may be the case for some PCSOs in this study, those who chose to alter their uniforms may not necessarily want to take on the practicalities of the role of a PC, but rather take action to enhance their legitimacy through imagery and presentation (Goffman 1959).

As previously discussed, Goffman (1959) described social interaction using theatrical stage metaphors. To ensure that performances and expressions 'given off' are believable, he considered how each actor manages their performance using things like clothing, equipment and body language. Considering this, the PCSOs who chose to modify their uniforms, struggled to put on a believable performance for their colleagues, particularly for PCs, whom they work most closely with. The consequences of this led to 'banter', general derogatory comments, and accusations that '*they wanna be [PCs]*'. The performance then suffers from 'inadequate dramaturgical direction', that is, the information *given off* may lead to colleagues treating the behaviour (such as modifying uniforms) as characteristic of a particular PCSO by them 'intentionally convey[ing] information... by deceit... and feigning' (Goffman 1959, pp. 60, 14).

Perhaps more notably this has led, sincerely or otherwise, to behaviours being labelled as symptomatic of all PCSOs as indicted by the word 'they'; '*they wanna be PCs*', i.e. 'all', based on the deviant performances of a few. Although it may be in the PCSOs 'interest' to 'convey an impression to others [the public]' of more warranted power, perceived legitimacy and authority in order to enhance self-worth and job value, the consequences of PC disparagement and mockery may weaken the performance (and in turn destroy positive temporary sentiments derived from said performances) 'spoiling' the overall aim of the presentation (Goffman 1959, p. 16). If the modification

of uniforms was indeed intentional, it is in the PCSO's best interest to 'act in a thoroughly calculating manner' by insisting that it was a one-off mistake or that they were 'only joking' (Goffman 1959, pp. 17, 228). When exposed as an 'imposter', the offender may 'throw himself... on their mercy' (by apologising or saying it was an accident for example) which acts as a 'plea' to the audience to accept them back into the team. But if and when this is rejected, through a 'lame excuse' for example, it results in 'humiliation' (Goffman 1959, pp. 206, 228). Goffman (1959, p. 228) contended that those who have more 'innocent excuse[s]' are ones that misrepresent physical appearance and he gave an interesting example of toupee wearers and argued that their presentation *cannot* be excused as it is too obvious a deception with little room for justification. Wearing the wrong (cycling) top, or covering markings for example can be more easily excused (donning high-vis jackets because its cold, or black tops because it's laundry day for example) but regardless of reasonable justifications, the PCs in this study were not exactly 'tactful about observed misrepresentation' (Goffman 1959, p. 228).

Conclusion

Reflecting on previous studies (Jason-Lloyd 2003, Crawford and Lister 2004, Crawford et al. 2005, Johnston 2005, 2006, 2007, O'Neill 2015, Merritt 2009, Merritt 2010, Merritt and Dingwall 2010), it is important to ruminate that the policing landscape has changed and will continue to change, along with perceptions of the police 'image'. Within a crowded policing space of pluralised actors, increased visibility is commonly tied up in auxiliaries and is embedded in notions of acceptance and what is means to be a 'real' police officer. Although this paper focused on PCSOs and their uniforms, problems of acceptance, legitimacy, performance and visibility transcends

the PCSO - whatever the future landscape looks like it will undoubtedly result in new actors on this stage dealing with similar problems of recognition, value and approval. Crawford et al. (2005, p. 58) argued that to be accepted, both by their colleagues and the public, PCSOs must conform to the 'highest possible standards of ethical and professional policing' with the way that they act and behave. Indeed, it is argued that the closer an 'imposter's' performance is to the real thing, the more 'threatened' the audience is by it when they are exposed; this behaviour is even more problematic when someone impersonates someone of 'higher' status, or in this case, with more warranted authority and perceived legitimacy (Goffman 1959, p. 67). Therefore, deviant PCSOs needed to be 'outed' to bring them back into alignment with the rest of the 'team'.

Goffman (1959, p. 85) referred to a group of actors involved in staging the same routine as a 'performance team' and O'Neill (2015) found that PCSOs work as a single performance team, separate from that of PCs. This study showed that while they may be part of the PCSO 'team', the 'new scenes' created from the deviant PCSOs who modified their uniforms results in a 'reshuffling and reapportioning of previous team members into two new teams' (Goffman 1959, p. 205). Public criticism, in the form of 'banter' and mockery then occurs (to the researcher for example) from other PCs *and* PCSOs because they do not tolerate 'inept performances' and they lack 'dramaturgical cooperation' from the deviant members of the team (Goffman 1959, p. 205).

Some of the PCSOs in this study demonstrate that in deviating from the performance 'norm', they effectively 'spoil' the routine by '[giving] the show away... or disrupt[ing] it by inappropriate conduct' (Goffman 1959, p. 88). Consequently, the deviant PCSOs are not accepted by policing colleagues, and their behaviours make them architects of their own struggles with acceptance. Performing the role of a PC, through the lens of

the uniform delegitimises their role and value and does little to dispel the negative attitudes that some colleagues have towards them. Goffman (1959) argued that the self is created by an individual's outward claims that they possess certain traits or characteristics, but these are wholly reliant on social structures for validation and this is key to these arguments. Therefore it is perhaps pertinent to consider whether legitimising their policing identities is more important from the perception of the public, or police colleagues and whether one audience (the public) accepting a performance (from a distance/temporarily/by accident) is satisfactory, even if another audience (PCs) do not. After all, the performances of which this paper speaks, are enabled only by 'audience segregation', that is, the PCSO 'plays the part' to one audience (the public), but another part to another audience (colleagues) (Goffman 1959, p. 57).

O'Neill (2017) contended that while it might be expected that separate teams naturally emerge because of the different roles and powers that PCs and PCSOs have, the extent to which PCSOs are accepted (within complementary or competitive teams) is not predetermined. Therefore NPTs should encourage a complementary working arrangement so PCSOs do not feel undermined by 'concern[ing themselves]... with how best to justify their existence to their colleagues' (O'Neill 2015, p. 16) and feeling the need, in some circumstances, to modify their uniforms. In practice, this may be even more difficult to develop as their role has been further undermined in recent years with discussions of replacements, an increase in volunteer roles and redundancies; after all, PCSOs have suffered cuts much more than any other part of the police workforce since 2010 (Isaac 2016). The result of these changes would be a useful area for further analysis, particularly with increasing cuts to policing budgets and the new Policing and Crime Act (2017) giving powers to volunteering roles

signalling to remaining PCSOs that they will continue to struggle legitimising their 'softer' policing role and will cement their position as 'expendable' (O'Neill 2014a). As O'Neill (2014c, p. 272) advised, PCSO numbers need to be maintained in order to bring 'long-term gains in legitimacy'.

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