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**Police Community Support Officers in England: A dramaturgical analysis (SP)**

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## Police Community Support Officers in England: A dramaturgical analysis<sup>1</sup> (SP)

### Abstract

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) have become an integral part of Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) in England and Wales since the national roll-out of Neighbourhood Policing in 2008. Most research on PCSOs examines their outward-facing role, such as in the extent to which these police staff have become community engagement or enforcement-orientated. While this is important to consider, what is also important is the manner in which PCSOs have been accepted by the police organisation internally. This can have a bearing on the degree to which PCSOs are able to fulfil their roles in Neighbourhood Policing. The research reported here is based on a six-month observational study of PCSOs in England. Using Goffman's *dramaturgical* framework and concept of *performance teams*, this article argues that PCSOs and police officers (PCs) comprise separate performance teams within each NPT group, although the degree of separation between PC and PCSO teams varied from one NPT to another. One element of this relationship which was generally consistent was that police officers and supervisors tended to value more highly PCSO work which was enforcement-orientated. This challenges PCSOs to enhance this side of their performances in spite of their limited statutory powers. Some PCSOs experienced this as a daily pressure to justify their existence to police colleagues, leaving them as disillusioned and unsatisfied staff. This was clearly expressed in the use of space in these police stations in that PCSOs sought out spaces where they could relax in their own exclusive 'backstage' areas, away from police colleagues.

### Key words

Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), police, Neighbourhood Policing, Erving Goffman, dramaturgy

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## Introduction

The role of Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) was created through the Police Reform Act 2002 (England and Wales). They are a type of policing auxiliary: salaried members of support staff without the warranted power of arrest<sup>2</sup>, but who provide a visible patrol presence as part of Neighbourhood Policing Teams (Home Office 2001, ACPO 2007). They are loosely based on the 'police patroller' model of the Netherlands, which is part of the formal police rank structure in a tier below that of a full constable. While police patrollers do have the warranted power of arrest and carry handcuffs and a baton, their main tasks are to patrol neighbourhoods on foot, respond to questions from the public and maintain order (Hofstra and Shapland 1997, Hauber et al 1996). PCSOs in England and Wales are intended to focus on community engagement and reassurance, with limited powers to enable them to address anti-social behaviour and low-level crime. In several police forces this includes the ability to detain a person for up to half an hour while awaiting the arrival of a police officer. In the main, however, the role of a PCSO is focused on visible foot patrol, community engagement and attending to nuisance issues. (Cooper et al. 2006, ACPO 2007).

PCSOs represent the most recent effort in England and Wales to meet the public's insatiable demand for 'more Bobbies on the beat' (Hanson 2010, Utley 2010, Barrett 2013). As Loader and Mulcahy (2003) discovered in their research, not only is the mythical local Bobby held as the epitome of policing *par excellence* world-wide, it has even come to represent for many an 'exemplar of English nationhood' itself (2003: 83), such is the prominence of the figure as a embodiment of security, morality and community. The perceived loss of the Bobby signifies for many not only a loss of what was 'good' and 'right' about policing generally, but also the loss of an important feature of local community cohesion (Loader and Mulcahy 2003). In contrast, there also exists a long research

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<sup>2</sup> As with any member of the public, PCSOs have the citizen's power of arrest and the use of reasonable force as stipulated by sections 2 and 3 of the Criminal Law Act 1967. However, in the course of the research to be discussed here, it was found that supervisors discouraged PCSOs from using these powers as it would unduly confuse the boundaries between them and police constables, for both themselves and members of the public.

history into the occupational culture of policing, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, which depicts the extent to which community policing was regarded as the lowest form of police work. This was the job to which police officers were sent as a punishment or when on the eve of retirement as it is perceived to lack the potential for action, danger and excitement more prevalent in response policing, which police officers tend to value (Reiner 1978, Van Maanen 1978, Holdaway 1983, Smith and Gray 1985, Marks 2005, Loftus 2009). Closely linked to the value placed on danger and excitement in police work is the cultural emphasis on the masculine nature of policing, also documented in many studies (Martin 1980, Smith and Gray 1985, Hunt 1990, Fielding 1994, Martin 1996, Brown and Heidensohn 2000, Silvestri 2003, Westmarland 2001). In these conceptualisations, women police officers are ill-equipped to handle 'real' policing and will often find themselves in 'softer' roles, such as family liaison work or domestic violence cases, and experience difficulty in gaining entry to specialisms such as firearms, detective work or public order units (Bryant et al 1985, Fielding and Fielding 1992, Brown et al 1993). More recent research suggests that this may be changing to a degree (Westmarland 2001). There are now more women in policing as well as more women in senior roles. However, Silvestri (2003) argues that this has not resulted in a clear change in the occupational culture as hard work is still valued as the main route to success placing women at a disadvantage, as they are more likely to have had periods away from work or difficulty in accessing the range of policing experiences open to men.

While police officers in many of the earlier studies of occupational culture were not found to value community policing and other types of 'soft' policing methods often assigned to female officers (such as partnership work, see McCarthy 2014), it is this method which was to revolutionise policing in England and Wales in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Home Office 2004, Home Office 2005, Foster and Jones 2010). Despite a few failed attempts at community policing in the 1980s and 1990s (Fielding and Innes 2006), 'neighbourhood policing' (as it is now known in England and Wales) gained renewed focus and significant funding from 2004 onwards, with every 'neighbourhood' area having its own

dedicated neighbourhood policing team in place by 2008. This reflects a concern that while crime rates were falling, lack of confidence in the police and concerns about 'quality of life' issues were rising among the public (Herrington and Millie 2006). Although community and neighbourhood policing can be difficult to define (Tilley 2008, O'Neill 2010), common elements include: police focusing their operations at local levels, addressing issues unique to communities, community consensus guiding the police, policing being locally accountable and police using their discretion to improve public confidence in policing (Brogden and Nijhar 2005). It is in this type of policing method that PCSOs found their niche as the modern-day 'Bobby on the beat' (Caless 2007, Greig-Midlane 2014).

When PCSOs were first introduced in 2002 (before the introduction of neighbourhood policing), there was a great deal of confusion over what they were meant to do, both externally among the public and internally within police forces, and how they would fit into the police service, both practically and culturally. While their uniforms are deliberately similar to their police officer counterparts to enhance their legitimacy in the minds of the public (Cooke 2005), this also can cause confusion as to their purpose and level of authority. Johnston (2005, 2006, 2007) explored the experiences of PCSOs in London in the early days of their implementation. He found that training for PCSOs was insufficient in preparing them for the role and their supervision arrangements were unclear. Sergeants and Inspectors had little guidance on assimilating PCSOs into existing operational and managerial structures. It is unsurprising that PCSOs in Johnston's research did not feel they were part of the police 'family' and that many were on disciplinary charges due to lack of guidance and support as to what was expected of them as employees. PCSOs do, however, tend to be a more diverse group than their police officer counterparts in terms of ethnicity and gender, as Johnston (2005) also noted.

Other than Johnston's early research, most studies of PCSOs have tended to focus on their work and relationships in the wider community. For example, Merritt (2009, 2010) has examined the outward facing role of PCSOs, and whether they are adopting a community engagement-style approach (what he calls 'bridge builders'), or tend more towards an enforcement-focused 'junior' police officer role. He finds that PCSOs fall somewhere on a continuum between the two, but are tending more towards the 'junior enforcer' side. There are differing opinions within the police as to how confrontational and enforcement orientated PCSOs should be. Some feel this would hinder their ability to be links with the community (Paskell 2007) while others, including some PCSOs, feel that a degree of enforcement power is important in the community so that they can effectively address low-level disorder (Merritt 2010). Cosgrove and Ramshaw (2013) have found that although PCSOs have great potential to improve police relationships with the community, they tend to be used in (and are encouraged to adopt) a crime-control capacity in contrast to the general community-engagement intention behind their role. Using a survey of shopping centre customers, Rowland and Coupe (2013) have found that while PCSOs engender more feelings of safety in the public than do security guards, they do not score as highly in this regard as police officers.

While these studies of the operational focus and effect of PCSOs are insightful, they provide only a partial understanding of the role and its integration into policing structures. A detailed analysis of how PCSOs present themselves to and interact with their police colleagues, their place within the occupational groups and their use of the shared space in police stations will enable deeper insights into the degree of internal assimilation PCSOs have achieved in Neighbourhood Policing Teams. In order to facilitate such an analysis, this article will examine data from an in-depth observational study of PCSOs, utilising the work of Erving Goffman for the theoretical framework. This qualitative study will provide an assessment of the day-to-day interactions of PCSOs and their police colleagues, something difficult to accurately convey in exclusively interview-based research. As to be discussed next, Goffman's work on dramaturgy is a useful analytical tool for describing and conceptualising

face-to-face interactions. The article will then look in detail at: i) PCSO 'performances', ii) their place in interaction 'teams' and iii) their use of space, or 'regions', in interactions with police colleagues while at work. The article will conclude with a discussion of how an in-depth understanding of PCSO and police officer relationships can be utilised to enhance the contribution of PCSOs to policing in England and Wales. As these members of staff are meant to broaden the capacity of Neighbourhood Policing as well as conduct intelligence gathering (Cooper et al 2006), shortcomings in their relationships with police officers carry the risk of undermining the purpose of the PCSO role, in addition to overlooking a significant strategic tool for policing in England and Wales. This analysis and discussion will add to existing literature a much needed insight into the place of PCSOs within the police organisation, deepening understanding of the totality of their occupational experiences beyond that of their work with the public. While an understanding of service delivery for the public from PCSOs is also important to consider, this research was restricted to interactions between PCSOs and between them and their police officers colleagues. Their impact generally on the public was not a topic of investigation here.

### **Theoretical framework**

Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor (which uses the image of the theatrical stage to describe social interaction) provides a useful analytical tool for examining the relationships between PCSOs and their police colleagues in the Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) which were studied.

Dramaturgy, as first discussed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), is one of Goffman's most well-known contributions to sociology and which emerges in varying degrees of prominence throughout his work from the mid-1950s onwards (Smith 2013). According to Branaman (1997: xlv), 'Erving Goffman is the quintessential sociologist of everyday social life.' Instead of investigating the eventful and unusual aspects of existence, Goffman concerns himself primarily with the ways people keep direct encounters with others smooth and relaxed, organising their interpersonal conduct to produce the 'interaction order' (Smith 2013: 58). By this he is referring to the unwritten rules of



social order, 'the structure of face-to-face interaction, and the nuances of the interaction process' (Birrell 1978: 16). Dramaturgy was his first and most influential method for doing this. As the routine and mundane is the context in which PCSOs most often encounter their police officer counterparts, a dramaturgical analysis of their interactions is warranted.

For Goffman, the self is utterly a social construct, with there being no one, 'true' self, waiting for expression. Instead, we all juggle multiple selves and seek the best way to present the most applicable one in any situation (Smith 2013), based on the resources available and the likelihood of conveying a believable performance (Branaman 1997). In dramaturgy, Goffman uses the metaphor of the stage to describe this process. For him, we are all actors on a stage when we engage in a face-to-face encounter with another person (our audience). We are at pains to present the best side of ourselves to this audience, and hide or rehearse those aspects which are weaker when we are out of sight of the audience. There are a variety of tools we employ in order to do this, according to Goffman (1959). He discusses these through the dramaturgical themes of 'performances', 'teamwork' and the use of space, referred to as 'regions' (to be defined and discussed in more detail below). Goffman also examines threats to our performances and the techniques we use to prevent the performance from going wrong (such as tripping and falling or revealing we are not as adept at as task as we had implied). These threats are referred to as 'discrepant roles', 'communication out of character' and the techniques employed to manage these are the 'arts of impression management' (Goffman 1959, Smith 2013). All of these have relevance for the PCSOs observed in police stations and on the beat when interacting with their police colleagues. This article will examine in detail the *performances*, *teamwork* and *regions* of PCSOs in their interactions with police colleagues, and how this reflects the place of PCSOs in Neighbourhood Policing. A look at threats to PCSO performances and their coping strategies will be included within these themes where appropriate. A dramaturgical analysis is best achieved through the qualitative methods of observation and in-depth interviewing, which is the format for the research informing this article.

## Methods

The research discussed here is developed from an in-depth observational study of the experiences of PCSOs in two northern English police forces. PCSOs from six Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs, three teams from each force) were observed in the station and on patrol (foot, cycle and occasionally in cars) for 350 hours over a period of six months (October 2012 to March 2013). These staff were also interviewed, as were a selection of their police officer colleagues, for a total of 33 interviews. Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed using MaxQDA software. The Neighbourhood Policing Teams were chosen using a stratified random sampling method with a view to observing one urban, one suburban and one rural area team from each police force (a *variable* sampling fraction, see Bryman 2001, Crow and Semmens 2008). Police force areas are sub-divided into area units or 'neighbourhoods'. These were compiled into the three categories (urban, suburban and rural) for each force and a random number generator used to select which neighbourhood area was observed from each category for that force. This was done to ensure exposure to a variety of neighbourhood policing conditions (see Cain 1971). The choice of which PCSOs to observe within those units was a combination of shift pattern, willingness to participate and an effort to achieve a spread of age, experience, gender and ethnicity. Of the 21 PCSOs who were directly observed, seven were women and three were from a minority ethnic group. From the 33 officers and staff who were interviewed, 15 were police constables (PCs). Of these, 3 were women and there were no minority ethnic police officers interviewed. This was due to lack of BME police officers in the areas researched and the availability of officers for interview. Three of the observed PCSOs were not subsequently interviewed. PCSOs and police officers quoted from the interviews and or mentioned in field notes are identified by the use of a pseudonym to ensure anonymity, along with his or her rank.

While six Neighbourhood Policing Teams were studied over the course of the research, two will be discussed in depth here to better illustrate the interactional patterns which were observed. These two teams represent the extremes of PCSO and PC relationships, in that the officers and staff worked quite closely in one and barely worked together in the other. The other four fall at various points on a continuum between the two. The NPTs which were observed are Fallhill<sup>3</sup> (suburban, medium-sized community station), Marshton (urban, large station with multiple policing teams present) and Starrybridge (rural, small-sized community station) in the Northport Police Force. The NPTs observed in the Aldhamshire Police Force were Hedgebourne (suburban, large station with multiple police teams present), Wellspring (rural, small community station) and Fayhaven (urban, medium-sized community station). For the following analysis, I will focus on the relationships and interactions between PCSOs and police officers from the Starrybridge NPT and the Fayhaven NPT.

Starrybridge is a small community station located in a rural town, with regular public transport connections to a large urban area nearby within the Northport Police Force. The team is located in a purpose-built building in the heart of the High Street, with about six PCSOs and four police officers on duty during the day. The building has three floors, two of which house the offices which PCSOs and PCs share while the sub-ground level includes staff lockers and a storage area. There is a large common room in the top floor with a kitchen, which both PCs and PCSOs use for their breaks and meal times. There is also a front desk which used to be open to the public but was closed at the time of the research for cost-saving purposes. In the main, the PCSOs and the PCs in this station worked very well together. Officers and staff would often attend calls together and PCSOs were encouraged and supported in developing their own initiatives in the community (to address things like anti-social behaviour or to deter shoplifting). The team operated as a well-integrated unit, with each member having a specific and valued role to play. If an intervention was needed in an on-going issue or

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<sup>3</sup> As with the participant's names, all place names are also pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

incident in the community, the PCs and PCSOs would discuss together the course of action to take and freely share with each other the information they had about the event or suspects.

In contrast, the Fayhaven NPT is housed in a very small station in a densely populated area of a large city in the Aldhamshire Police Force. Like the local area, the police station itself is also densely populated, with both PCs and PCSOs based there in close quarters. There is a large open-plan office which PCSOs and PCs share, as well as several smaller offices usually occupied by managers and a small kitchen on the ground floor. The sub-ground level houses the staff's lockers and the toilets. There is one conference room which also doubles as a break room during meal times. During the day there are about seven PCSOs and about six to seven police officers on duty at any one time. The PCSOs and PCs here did not often work together. While relationships in the station were polite, the PCSOs usually worked separately from the PCs. There was not a great deal of open sharing of intelligence and communal planning of police work. The two groups largely operated independently of each other.

These two contrasting NPTs will be used to explore in depth the *performances*, *teams* and *regions* utilised in PCSO interactions with their police officer colleagues. At times, the overall patterns of interaction observed are better illustrated through quotes from PCSOs and PCs from one the other four stations, but these are used only as examples. Starrybridge and Fayhaven will be our main guides through a dramaturgical analysis of neighbourhood policing teams.

### **Performances**

As mentioned above, Erving Goffman has described all social interaction using a theatrical stage metaphor, with each person in an interaction alternating between the roles of performer and audience. In order to ensure that our performances are believable, that the interaction at hand runs smoothly and that our audiences are comfortable with us and the situation, Goffman (1959)

discusses how we carefully manage our performance 'front'. These include things like the setting, our clothing, equipment, hair, bodily gestures, etc. Aspects of ourselves which are more difficult to control also feature as part of our 'front', such as sex, age and ethnicity. Goffman argues that we regularly endeavour to present coherence between the setting, our appearance (how we look) and our manner (how we behave).

For PCSOs in the company of their police officer colleagues, conveying a believable performance to police officers that PCSOs are equal and competent members of the team is an ongoing and daily effort. Many PCSOs reported that the initial scepticism (and sometimes open hostility) which followed the development of the PCSO role (e.g. BBC 2006, see also Caless 2007) has never entirely disappeared from the police service in England and Wales. Although PCSOs from all six NPTs reported this experience, it was a more regular occurrence for the Fayhaven PCSOs than for the Starraybridge PCSOs. The main focus of a PCSO's performance was therefore to demonstrate to PCs their usefulness and ability in their role, even if the PCSO in question had by this point become disillusioned with it due to the lack of promotion and often routine nature of the work (a more 'cynical' performer – see Cosgrove 2011). The research revealed that some Neighbourhood Policing Teams had a greater level of acceptance and integration of PCSOs than others. As PCSOs in Starraybridge enjoyed amicable relationships with the police officers in their teams, the art of managing their performance front was easier. Convincing their audience (PCs) that they are competent and worthy colleagues was not as difficult as it was for those who did not have close relationships with police officers in the NPT, such as was the case for the Fayhaven PCSOs. For example, the following PCSO describes how over time, many police officers have become more accepting of PCSOs, especially when they can demonstrate their usefulness to officers:

**Interviewer: So do you feel like you get along with your police officer colleagues here?**

I do here, no problem. I socialise, we are friends, we socialise with families. Some of them will tell you straight, they don't believe in the role of a PCSO, but it's the person as well who makes the role [...] but on the same sheet, my neighbourhood manager (NM) is Ethan and he's told me that sometimes he will come in to do a job and there's nothing left for him to do because we have done it, so that gives him the opportunity then to either spend a bit more time on an investigation or just go and do what an NM does which is again, is along the role of a PCSO where you can get into the schools and stuff like that. (PCSO Tom, Starrybridge)

This, however, is not always the experience of PCSOs, such as Jeffery from Fayhaven (below). In his experience, PCs are less supportive here than in Starrybridge, even with PCSOs being well established in the NPT. He uses the example of unsolicited assistance to demonstrate:

Sometimes they'll drive past you and offer you a lift somewhere, but that's probably as much as it goes. Unless you go and specifically ask them for some support or advice or something, they'll not necessarily freely give it to you, if you like, they'll not approach you and say "do you need any help", they'll wait for you to go to them and say "can you help me with this". (PCSO Jeffery, Fayhaven)

As PCSOs have a shorter training period and a lack of enforcement power compared to police constables, they must constantly strive to convey to police officers that they are performing a believable role as valuable and supportive NPT members. This aspect of their performance 'front', that of being a PCSO, will compromise their performances to varying degrees, depending on the NPT in which they work. Starrybridge PCSOs did not find this to be as much of a constant challenge as did the Fayhaven PCSOs who were not fully accepted by police officer colleagues.

For many PCSOs, the most direct way to successfully convey a performance of equal competence to other members of the NPT, is to demonstrate their usefulness in criminal investigation through gathering information on residents in the local area of interest to the police. Being adept at communicating with, engaging with and reassuring community members, the main focus of the

PCSO role (ACPO 2007), is not sufficient for demonstrating a believable performance when interacting with some police officers in the NPT, as this PC from Marshton demonstrates:

**Interviewer: So what makes for a bad PCSO?**

PC Stuart: Bad PCSOs will not know what's going on in their area, don't know who people are, will spend a lot of time signing in problems, will spend a lot of time sat in places having brews and not actually doing work. They never stop people and ask what they're doing, customer account forms, that kind of stuff. They very rarely see people, not doing what they're getting paid to do. They get away with as much as they can, I think. And like I said people that work really hard are getting tarnished with that brush which is unfair. (PC Stuart, Marshton)

For this and many other police constables, a 'good' PCSO is one who can gather a great deal of reliable information on the local area, or 'intelligence', which is brought back to the station and passed on to police colleagues to assist in criminal investigations, an activity traditionally valued by police officers (Reiner 2010). Some PCSOs reported to me that for them, being 'sat in places having brews' was viewed as community engagement (if those brews were had in public places – developed below when discussing 'regions') as they were making themselves available to members of the community for an informal chat and generally being visible. This, however, is clearly not an effective way to convey a definition of the situation where they are active and competent members of the NPT to police colleagues, especially in areas like Fayhaven and Marshton where relationships between PCs and PCSOs were sometimes difficult.

To counter this effect, PCSOs may attend to 'dramatic realization' (Goffman 1959), whereby they highlight aspects of their work which are more acceptable to police colleagues and convey the type of performance which police officers value. This will entail actions such as widely disseminating information internally on a key suspect from the local area which they have gathered, talking with colleagues in the break room or kitchen about a dramatic encounter which they had while on patrol

(which they dealt with themselves), or more generally going beyond their role, such as setting up a rural crime watch scheme. This mirrors the tendency of police officers to engage in storytelling, as found by earlier police culture researchers (see for example Waddington 1999), to highlight the more dramatic aspects of their work. For the PCSOs in Starrybridge, this technique was generally successful as their police officer colleagues were more willing to believe these performances due to their close working relationships. See the following example of dramatic realisation in Starrybridge:

PCSO Tom came into the common room with a load of Post Office bags and enthusiastically told us all the story (me, PCSO Charlie and two PCs). An offender seems to have stolen a bag of large post items from a Royal Mail van at the local post office. He then went inside the post office and asked for some carrier bags. He took the contents of post bags, put them in the carrier bags and left the post bags at the scene. PCSO Tom responded to get a statement and collected the post bags. It is a 'negative lines' (no solid evidence and no suspects) crime now, but that might change. Tom is chasing up council CCTV and bus CCTV, following up leads from the post office and the dentist (the offender had been at the dentist before going to the post office). The PCs in the room were intrigued by the story and offered suggestions for other ways to obtain possible evidence. (**Fieldnote 12/12**, Starrybridge)

The PCSOs in Fayhaven, however, were starting from a lower point of integration in the team and thus dramatic realisation was more difficult to achieve, often because PCs and PCSOs in this station tended to avoid being in the station at the same time (see section below on *regions*). Thus there were few opportunities to regale success stories or verbally share intelligence which PCSOs had gathered. Even if there were such opportunities, the PCSOs and PCs usually worked separately and tended not to explore ways to collaborate very often.

Successfully conveying performances of competence, usefulness and value to police colleagues is a craft which PCSOs undertake daily through a variety of strategies, such as gathering useful information on the community, being able to look after themselves in physical confrontations and



assisting in arrests. All of these relate to enforcement work, which was intended to be a lesser part of the PCSO role, but which the research suggests is more highly valued by police officers, and fits with the cultural preference for action among police officers (Holdaway 1983). While regularly maintaining these types of performances can take significant effort, PCSOs do not do this in isolation from each other. As will be discussed next, Goffman conceives of performances as the work of a 'team' even when a person is performing in that moment on his or her own. Every PCSO, to some degree, represents the totality of PCSOs in that Neighbourhood Policing Team.

### **Teamwork**

Goffman (1959) refers to any group of people who collaborate in staging the same performance (presenting the same definition of the situation) as a 'performance team', or just 'team'. He argues that '(w)hether the members of a team stage similar individual performances or stage dissimilar performances which fit together into a whole, an emergent team impression arises which can conveniently be treated as a fact in its own right [...]' (1990: 85). During the course of the observational research presented here, it became clear that PCSOs work as a single performance team, separate from that of PCs. This can be evidenced through the following four elements to be discussed below: i) PCSO training, ii) how PCSOs avoid spoiling the team performance and iii) their relationships with PCs.

### *Training*

In order to learn the details of the performance which PCSOs will be conveying, it is important for new recruits to the PCSO role to have an opportunity to observe their teammates before they attempt it on their own. While many PCSOs felt it was helpful to observe police constables as well, they did not get a full sense of their role as a PCSO until they had observed a fellow PCSO. For example, PCSO Deborah describes her early experiences:

**Interviewer: So you didn't shadow an existing PCSO?**

No, it was a police officer. So you did feel safe and then we all got sent onto our teams [...] I got put onto my new team then, and then Jessica (a PCSO) took me under her wing, and she was like "come on, I'll show you how it's done". So I was quite fortunate really because I shadowed her for a couple of weeks and then gained more confidence and then I was fine going out eventually. But people do need to be in company with someone for quite a while I think, because some days you can come across nothing, which you've probably experienced. And then other days it can be absolutely mental and overwhelming. So yes, I think you do need to be with someone for a while, definitely.

**Interviewer: So she wasn't tasked to mentor you, she just did it on her own?**

No. Yes, she was nice to enough to say "come on, I'll take you out", so that was nice really, and that made me feel welcomed when I went onto the group. (PCSO Deborah, Marshton)

This PCSO did not feel fully ready for the role and integrated into the team until she had an opportunity to be mentored by an existing and experienced PCSO. Careful supervision by a PC, trained to tutor PCSOs (as Deborah's was), is not sufficient to learn fully the PCSO performance, which suggests PCs are not members of their performance team.

*Spoiling a performance*

As Goffman has argued, only true teammates have the power to 'give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct' (1990: 88). Careful attention to detail is needed to convey the best performance possible. The following fieldnote describes a scene where a less experienced PCSO is learning some of this detail.

PCSO Trudy is not as familiar with the smartphones or the radio yet. She works part time and so doesn't get as much practice in as the other staff. She was teased recently about not using the phonetic alphabet on the radio. Today when we were in the car, PCSO Alfie was advising her on how to close off the job on the smartphone. Earlier during the meal break with other PCSOs when she

wasn't there, Alfie joked about her and said she has one day on and 12 days off. (**Fieldnote 7/03, Fayhaven**)

This fieldnote is interesting on two levels. For the first, we can see one PCSO helping another, less experienced PCSO, to learn the mechanics of the equipment in private, away from the public or police officers. This was especially important in Fayhaven where relationships with police officers were not as amicable as they were in Starrybridge. This gives her a safe environment to perfect her performance and appear competent in front of PCs. The second level relates to the way this PCSO was teased when she was not present (although she was also teased directly). This sends out a clear message to other PCSOs about the approved way to conduct the PCSO performance, i.e., full time, with complete competence (as was discussed in the earlier section on *Performances*). As was usual for meal breaks in Fayhaven, no PCs were present, thus the overall PCSO performance was not compromised with this teasing (more on this below). Other PCSOs spoke more explicitly of how fellow PCSOs can let the team down by their behaviour.

What affects me most in this job, what I don't like, and it's very bitter this but I don't like the fact of other people's sick leave records [...] With this job you've got a lot of other people that can do your job, but you still hold your own responsibilities and I feel that some people do take the mick out of their sick leave, and I don't like the fact that they're off for months at a time [...] That really upsets me [...] I can walk round the streets and the public can say to me "why haven't I seen such a body", and some people don't even know some PCSOs that cover their area. (PCSO Charlie, Starrybridge)

For Charlie, chronically absent colleagues are disruptive not so much because of the increased workload for other PCSOs, but because it conveys a bad impression to outsiders. In Goffman's analysis, only performance team-members can have this sort of impact. Were his other PCSO colleagues not a part of Charlie's performance team, their absence would not be as significant for him.

Correcting the performances of teammates in private is another key example of how PCSOs are part of the same performance team. I observed on several occasions how PCSOs working in pairs would support each other's decisions in front of outsiders, but then challenge or chastise each other when in private so as to preserve the outward performance, as the following fieldnote from Wellspring demonstrates:

We then encountered a van going the wrong way up a one way road. PCSO Henry flashed the head lights but the van went past us. We turned round, Henry flashed the lights again and the van stopped. The PCSOs got the driver's details and checked him out on their smartphones while chatting to him. They gave him a warning: 'You are lucky tonight because I'm on my way home,' said Henry. The implication was that otherwise the sanction would have been worse, which isn't really true. Back in the car, PCSO Neive asked, 'what would you have done if he'd challenged you? We can't ticket for that.' Henry said, 'Antisocial use of motor vehicle.' Neive said, 'That's shaky ground!' Henry: 'I've done it before!' This was all said in a friendly, teasing sort of way. (**Fieldnote 18/02, Wellspring**)

PCSO Neive was careful to not openly challenge her colleague in front of someone who is outside of their performance team, as this would spoil their collective performance. As Goffman (1959) discusses, correcting a mistake a performer has made in front of an audience only serves to deepen the performer's transgression, as it lets the audience into knowledge usually reserved for team-mates. Normally, team-mates avoid doing this in public and save these sorts of conversations for private moments. This is part of what Goffman refers to as 'audience segregation' (Goffman 1990: 137): keeping control of which performance an audience sees. In all of the cases above, PCs are conspicuous by their absence. The nature of direct interaction between PCSOs and PCs is discussed next.

### *Relationships with PCs*

A final demonstration of how PCSOs are part of the same performance team and that PCs are outside of this team can be achieved by examining relationships between PCs and PCSOs in front of members of the public. There were several occasions where PCSOs conveyed experiences of being ignored or ridiculed by police officers when away from the public, such as in the police station. As discussed above, some PCSOs do still struggle at times to be accepted by police officers. However, to be openly chastised by a police officer in public is a clear demonstration that the PC and the PCSO are not part of the same performance team, as this fieldnote demonstrates:

PCSO Henry drove me to a bus stop closer to my home in his own car at the end of the shift. On the way he told me a story about a PC in the office where he used to work who acts like a law unto himself. This PC once complained about PCSOs in front of Henry and in front of a member of the public. Henry told him off in private later. He would never say such things about PCs to a member of the public. **(Fieldnote 25/02, Wellspring)**

As we can see, being publicly chastised is out with the boundaries of the performance team. Team-mates do not do this, even when a colleague has let them down in some way. Earlier quotes from PCSOs in Fayhaven and Starrybridge discuss how PCSOs can put in a poor performance, but these grievances are not aired in front of outsiders in order to preserve the overall team performance of competence and usefulness. The PC above was clearly not worried about his performance as a police officer being put at risk with a member of the public having a poor impression of his PCSO colleague.

PCs have access to some inside information on PCSOs and their performances, which can spoil the PCSO performance when in public, as demonstrated in the quote above. This does not, however, mean they are part of the same performance team. As Goffman argues, 'the individuals who are on the staff of an establishment are not members of a team by virtue of their staff status, but only by virtue of the cooperation which they maintain in order to sustain a given definition of the situation'

(1990: 108). PCSOs work together to present themselves as competent and valuable members of a performance team, which is a part of the overall Neighbourhood Policing Team. However, other members of the NPT and other police officers (members of the police 'group' in Goffman's terms) are not co-performers with PCSOs but one of the audiences to whom they perform. While PCs do have the power to discredit the PCSO performance when out in public as they have a good deal of internal group information, they are not themselves members of the PCSO performance team. Criticism from police officers when *inside* the police station, while upsetting, is not very damaging as it is not coming from within the PCSO team. It in fact has the tendency to bind PCSOs closer together as a performance team as it is one of the definitions of the situation which they regularly work against in their performances and which perpetuates the 'us versus them' (i.e., us within the team against those outside it) atmosphere which several described during the course of the research, especially in areas like Fayhaven. How PCSOs are trained when on the beat, learning the team's performances and skills and relationships with PCs as discussed in this section on *Teamwork*, all point towards PCSOs and PCs occupying separate performance teams. This will be further developed in next section on *Regions*.

## **Regions**

This last analytical section will examine the physical spaces that the PCSO performance teams use, which will further demonstrate their separate team status from that of their police officer colleagues, as well as highlight the nature of their relationships with police officers. The section above mentioned a few examples from the fieldwork where PCSOs corrected each other's performances in private spaces, away from the gaze of those not a part of that performance, such as in the car or in the break room in Fayhaven. Goffman (1959) has discussed the use of space in detail, and what it reveals about performance teams. His use of the dramaturgic metaphor continues here, in that he refers to the area where performances are delivered for an audience the 'front region' and the areas where performances (including one's appearance) are rehearsed or contradicted the 'back

region' or 'back stage'. Generally, audience members are restricted to front regions (or the 'front stage') so that they are not able to see behaviour from a performance team which might contradict the definition of the situation that team is trying to project (Goffman 1959). Back regions are also usually the places where a performance team will relax and speak to each other in a more informal way than they would do in front of audience members. For PCSOs, many of these elements of the front and back stages as described by Goffman hold true. As was discussed above, PCSOs in Fayhaven and Wellspring used the police car (one of their usual back stages) to demonstrate to each other how to use the radios and smartphones or to challenge each other's behaviour from when they previously had been in front of outsiders to the team (such as the public or PCs). The back regions for PCSOs also include certain spaces in the police station. This back stage will be discussed in more detail below, mainly with reference to fieldnotes taken when with PCSOs in these spaces.

The police station is a complex back stage. Some elements of it are open to the public (mainly the front desk), some elements are back stages for both police officers and PCSOs and some elements are back stages for PCSOs alone, away from all other police officers. How PCSOs navigate these complex arrangements for relaxing and perfecting their performance is illustrative of the nature of their relationships with police officers. As with the examples given above about the police car being a back stage where performances could be perfected, so too is the Neighbourhood Policing Team's office. This was the case for both Starrybridge and Fayhaven. This is the space where PCs and PCSOs use shared computers to do their online paperwork and emails, and is usually where the radio chargers are located and the team's telephones (both landline and chargers for the mobiles). Even though there is often a locker room nearby, many members of the NPT will put on their policing gear (besides the uniform) in this communal area: vests, radio, equipment belts, coats, etc. There were several occasions of PCSOs asking each other to check that they had done this correctly, and to adjust anything that was out of place. PCs will also conduct these final performance perfecting tasks

in the office area, thus both performance teams (PCs and PCSOs) will use this space for the same, 'back stage', purpose.

Although many of the back stages are shared between PCs and PCSOs, a clear difference occurs in the break room where PCs and PCSOs take their meals. In Starrybridge, the break room was a large space with sofas and a television, along with a table, chairs and a kitchen. PCs and PCSOs would use this room together and clearly enjoyed each other's company while taking their meal breaks. This suggests that PCSOs could relax in this shared backstage area, even with PCs present. The situation was very different in Fayhaven. The kitchen was a small, galley-style space with no room for a table or chairs. The one large conference room in the station also doubled as a break room. However, PCSOs and PCs tended to use this space at different times, with PCSOs often co-ordinating their meal breaks to all eat together, without PCs present. There seemed to be an unspoken arrangement where if the break room was being used by PCSOs, the PCs would come back later or take their meals elsewhere. The PCSOs thereby created a space where they could be at ease, away from PCs. This clearly signified who was a part of this performance team and who was not – PCs serve as an audience for the PCSO performance team in Fayhaven and so are kept away from this back region during breaks as much as possible (Goffman 1959).

Even in stations such as Starrybridge where PCs and PCSOs are able to relax together in the back stage areas, there is still an important difference between these teams in terms of the degree to which each can relax. PCSOs as members of staff are allowed to take a certain amount of uninterrupted time each day for unpaid tea breaks and meals. During these periods, they radio into the control room that they will be unavailable. This is not the case for PCs who can be called to 'jobs' at any time and must respond, even if taking one of their paid breaks. Some PCSOs (although not all) turn their radios off during breaks. This is never an option to PCs who are always 'on duty', even at meal times. Thus, the backstage for PCs is far less permanent or certain as it is for PCSOs.



Outside of break times, some PCSOs find it difficult to be completely at ease in the police station whenever police officers are around. In Marshton, a NPT similar to Fayhaven in terms of internal relationships, most of the NPT is located in two, large, open plan offices. One of these offices holds a large computer display screen on one wall, which shows the location of every PCSO and PC on the team, by using a tracking signal through their radios. This sent a clear message to PCSO Steve:

That's our mapping system so they can see where everybody is. So when we were told to go to [Area C] yesterday, if I would have said "ah there's loads there, sod it, we will go back to [Area A]", they would see that I hadn't been there. You can probably get in a bit more trouble. (PCSO Steve, Marshton)

This tracking system makes it clear that even when they are out on their beats, PCSOs are still being tracked for compliance with supervisors' instructions. Even potential back stages are compromised in this method if too many PCSOs are tracked in the same location for an extended period.

Whenever possible, PCSOs in Marshton would congregate in a small office down the corridor from the large ones which held a computer and a desk. This seemed to be an area reserved for PCSOs and they could hold private conversations there out of earshot of PCs or supervisors. This seemed to be the space in which they could be most relaxed when in the station.

By considering the use of space, specifically the front and back regions of interaction used by PCSOs and PCs, we can achieve a clear sense of the boundaries between these two performance teams. In cases where PCs and PCSOs are on good terms and will eat and socialise together, such as in Starrybridge, there is still a difference in relation to how permanent a back stage the break room is for each team. PCSOs can be completely off duty at these times whereas PCs cannot. In those NPTs where PCSOs and PCs do not get along well, such as in Fayhaven or Marshton, this is reflected in their

use of space in the station: PCSOs taking separate meal breaks or finding quiet, PC-free zones in which to congregate with other PCSOs. Although PCs and PCSOs comprise separate performance teams, as has been demonstrated in the section above on *Teamwork* and this section on *Regions*, the extent to which these teams are willing to work together to give a consistent performance to members of the public (an audience for both of them, outside of their organisation) will vary and is taken up in the following discussion along with what can be developed from this for dramaturgical analysis. The conclusion will examine what can be learned for policing practice generally and areas of future research.

## **Discussion**

As discussed in the section on *Teamwork*, while Goffman did acknowledge that staff members of a particular organisation may have insider knowledge of each other's performances, this does not by itself mean that they are members of the same performance team (Goffman 1959), only that they are part of the same occupational 'group'. This group will be comprised of several performance teams, although this may not be apparent to those outside of the organisation (such as members of the public). I would like to develop Goffman's discussion of groups further. In the case of PCs and PCSOs, some NPTs (the 'group') had performance teams which worked well together - what I will call *complementary teams*. These were NPTs like Starrybridge. In other NPTs, PCSOs and PCs worked less closely, and in one case, hardly at all. In these groups, the performance teams are what I will call *competitive teams*. These would be NPTs like Fayhaven. In the main, PCSOs in NPTs with complementary performance teams appeared to be more satisfied with their work, PCs and PCSOs shared information about people and incidents with each other freely and shared the NPT resources willingly. In the NPTs with competitive teams, PCSOs seemed less satisfied in their work, could feel defensive around PCs and did not often collaborate with PCs or other police colleagues. These teams related to each other in a competitive way in that the resources of the NPT were not willingly shared (such as computers, the break room, the patrol car), intelligence from PCSOs may not be

passed on as fully as it could have been (e.g. only via the database but without direct discussion or collaboration with the PC concerned) and, as there is finite funding for NP, some PCs would regard PCSOs as competition for wages, i.e., that there are fewer PCs than there could be if PCSOs did not exist (see for example Muir 2010). In the complementary teams, this was not much of an issue as the work of PCSOs was generally valued. While this demarcation of the performance teams into complementary and competitive is similar to that of Bott's (1957) analysis of 'joint' and 'segregated' conjugal teams, the element of competition here is a marked difference.

## **Conclusion**

By employing Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor in a study of six Neighbourhood Policing Teams, this article has analysed the internal relationships between PCSOs and PCs through the examples of two main case study sites: Starrybridge and Fayhaven. While they may be configured as one team in the operational sense, this analysis has shown that PCSOs and PCs comprise two separate teams in the dramaturgical sense. PCSOs in particular work together to present a unified definition of the situation (that of being competent and useful members of the NPT), do not challenge each other in front of their audiences and use the back regions to perfect their appearances and to relax – often away from police officers as was the case in Fayhaven. These can be regarded as *competitive* performance teams. In some cases, the community police officers have good relationships with PCSOs and the boundaries between these two performance teams will be much less pronounced, such as in Starrybridge. These PCs and PCSOs will eat and socialise together, will support each other when in public and in general work together throughout the day to convey a generalised police 'front' to local residents. These two performance teams are *complementary*.

To a degree it may be inevitable that PCSOs and PCs will comprise separate performance teams as their roles within policing, their training and their powers are different. These are elements which are not under the control of operational officers and staff. However, the extent to which these

performance teams are complementary or competitive is not predetermined. This arises from particular working and management practices within each NPT, which can be changed to develop more complementary arrangements. Operationally speaking, this is to be encouraged as performance teams within the police group which work together well and support each other, tend to have better outcomes in terms of staff morale and a freer sharing of information and resources, as was the case in Starrybridge. The observational research reported here found that if PCSOs feel supported in their work, they are more likely to take an active interest in it, to look for areas of creativity in their interactions with the community and to actively gather and pass on highly valued 'intelligence', thus potentially enhancing the service the public receives as well as furthering crime-control priorities<sup>4</sup>. PCSOs can be an important strategic tool in policing in England and Wales (O'Neill 2014, Crawford et al 2005), but this will be undermined if PCSO performance teams are concerned throughout their shifts with how best to justify their existence to their colleagues, as was often the case in NPTs with competitive performance teams, such as Fayhaven. This is not only a waste of effort for these staff, but undermines the purpose of the PCSO role. These staff members are not as inclined to work collaboratively with police colleagues and will become quickly disillusioned with the job itself as they will not have the time or resources necessary to fully embrace their role in communities.

Due to limitations on space, the role of supervisors in these performance teams was not discussed in detail here. This would be a useful area for further analysis, especially in relation to the extent of the influence supervisors can have on whether performance teams are competitive or complementary. A second area for future research is to explore the impact of competitive and complementary NPTs on service delivery to the public. This could not be explored here as members of the public were not a focus of this research. A final area to explore further in future research is the nature of the

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, however, the exact impact on service delivery from the different performance teams of PCSOs was not directly assessed in this study. This would be a welcome area for future research.

occupational culture of PCSOs. There were several instances mentioned above where PCSOs demonstrated traits highlighted in previous literature on police culture (such as Tom telling a gripping story, Henry implying he had more authority than he actually did or Alfie joking about the part-time hours of his colleague – see Waddington 1999, Loftus 2009, Silvestri 2003). However, there were also clear differences, such as Deborah needing to feel ‘safe’ when new to her beat or Tom and Charlie valuing their work in communities. These go against the grain of the ‘classic’ police culture traits (Reiner 2010) and are worthy of further exploration.

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