

# **This is how it feels: activating lived experience in the penal voluntary sector**

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## **Abstract**

Increasing calls for ‘nothing about us without us’ envision marginalised people as valuable and necessary contributors to policies and practices affecting them. In this paper, we examine what this type of inclusion feels like for criminalised people who share their lived experiences in penal voluntary sector organisations. Focus groups conducted in England and Scotland illustrated how this work was experienced as both safe, inclusionary and rewarding *and* exclusionary, shame-provoking and precarious. We highlight how these tensions of ‘user involvement’ impact criminalised individuals and compound wider inequalities within this sector. The individual, emotional and structural implications of activating lived experience therefore require careful consideration. We consider how the penal voluntary sector might more meaningfully and supportively engage criminalised individuals in service design and delivery. These considerations are significant for broader criminal justice and social service provision seeking to meaningfully involve those with lived experience.

**Key Words:** Lived experience; User-Involvement; Voluntary sector; Participation; Emotion.

## **Introduction**

Across social services, voluntary sector and lived experience involvement are increasingly prominent. Drawing upon a case study at their intersection: criminalised individuals working in the penal voluntary sector, we advance existing involvement literature with a focus on the overlooked emotions of criminalised workers. In doing so, we highlight significant (inter)personal tensions in these contexts, including experiences of unbelonging, rejection and

humiliation *and* possible mediators, including collective support systems, trauma informed management and a shift in perspective among non-criminalised power holders. These messages are significant for criminal justice and social service provision seeking to meaningfully involve those who have used services.

The movement to position people with personal experiences of a social issue as a knowledge resource originated in disability activism in the 1990s (Charlton, 1998) but has since been mobilized by individuals and groups occupying a wide range of marginalised or stigmatised identities, including: women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous peoples, and criminalised individuals (Bakshi, 2021). The unifying thread across these domains is the push for policy initiatives that include people with lived experience and culturally specific understandings (Bakshi 2021:23). This type of engagement has gained traction with governments and policymakers in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Voronka, 2017) as a means of promoting individual empowerment and increasing the responsiveness of social services (Lewis 2012). As a result, ‘peer’ led support has ‘exploded around the globe’ in the last 20 years (Davidson et al. 2012:123). In a criminal justice context, this involves people employing their experiences of criminalisation and other shared life experiences to inspire, motivate and support their peers (Buck, 2020). Despite its prominence, few criminological studies have researched lived experience involvement in depth. This is an oversight given such developments could ‘breathe new life into the traditional classroom or research enterprise, making criminology more relevant, up to date and (indeed) defensible as an academic area of study’ (Maruna, 2017:16).

Terminology in this area is varied. We follow Sandhu (2017:5), who defines ‘lived experience’ as direct personal experience of a social issue/issues; ‘lived expertise’ as insights gathered through lived experience; and ‘experts by experience’ as change-makers who seek to

use their lived experience to inform the work of social purpose organisations or social change work. ‘Community/user-led’ are terms used to describe social change initiatives or social purpose organisations led by experts by experience (Sandhu, 2017).

Though marginalized people have long shared their lived experiences to shape services and campaign for social change (e.g., Davidson et al. 2012; LeBel, et al. 2015), recent policies have sought to include them in *more active, formalised* service delivery, planning, and strategy roles (Simmons et al. 2007). These developments span a wide range of social service domains of criminological relevance. For example, Voices of Experience (VOX) Scotland, is a national advocacy organisation which aims for the voices of people with lived experience of mental illness to actively shape Scotland’s laws, service design and delivery (VOX 2017). The Social Work England regulatory body requires that professional training courses are shaped by those ‘with lived experience of social work’ (Foden 2019). In terms of service delivery, involving ‘experts by experience’ to provide mental health services and support has become ‘best practice’ (Voronka 2017:334). Such experience-led service delivery is part of a broader ‘recovery paradigm’ and is increasingly common in the context of addiction (Best and Lubman, 2012), mental health (Barr et al., 2020) domestic violence and sexual assault (Gilbert, 2020), and young people affected by gang-associated violence (Buck et al., 2017).

There is a rich history of this type of inclusion in criminology and criminal justice. Indeed, the tradition of convict criminology elevates the perspectives of those with lived experience in the production of knowledge about the criminal justice system (Earle 2018). Convict criminologists argue that drawing from lived experience can sharpen the focus of criminological inquiry and extend the boundaries of the criminological imagination (Earle 2018). Similar arguments are advanced within criminal justice practice. For instance, the National Probation Service of England and Wales recently declared that they wish ‘to lead by example in demonstrating the value and importance of employing people with convictions’ by

creating ‘a system which fully integrates service user perspectives into all [they] do’ (HMPPS 2021: 2). Actualising such commitments often involves recruiting (former) service users as ‘peer mentors’ (Buck, 2020) or ‘wounded healers’ (LeBel et al. 2015). For example, The Samaritans Prison Listener Scheme seeks to reduce suicide and self-harm in prisons by training prisoners in peer-support roles across the UK (Perrin and Blagden, 2014). Those with lived experience are also sometimes recruited to contribute to the design of criminal justice policies and practices or sit on advisory boards for special topics (HMPPS 2021).

These types of engagement are especially common within the penal voluntary sector (PVS): the non-profit, non-statutory organisations working with criminalised individuals, families and victims through prison, community, and advocacy programmes (Tomczak and Buck, 2019). A recent report found that 67% of PVS organisations in England and Wales regularly consulted service users in the design and delivery of programs, 53% utilised service users as volunteers, and 29% employed service users as staff (Clinks 2019a). The scale of this engagement is important because of the PVS’s large size and prominent role in criminal justice service delivery in the UK (e.g., Tomczak and Buck, 2019) and other countries (e.g., Miller 2014 in the United States; Quirouette 2018 in Canada; Mills 2015 in New Zealand). For instance, in England and Wales, the PVS has a workforce of over 145,000 paid staff and 540,000 volunteers (Clinks, 2019a)—larger than the number of prison and probation staff in these regions combined (Tomczak and Buck, 2019). In Scotland, PVS organisations provide 30% of the government’s Directory of Services for Offenders and 22 voluntary organisations have partnership agreements with the Prison Service (CJVSF 2013). The *Community Justice (Scotland) Act 2016* also requires engagement with the voluntary sector in justice planning and outcome reports (Scottish Government 2016).

In recent years, the PVS has been held up by scholars, politicians, and policymakers as a site of rich potential for facilitating criminalised individuals’ social inclusion (e.g., Tomczak

and Buck, 2019), offering exemplary models of lived experience engagement (Clinks, 2019b). The benefits of service user engagement are claimed to be manifold:

People with lived experience often make resilient, highly motivated, empathetic and knowledgeable employees, managers and leaders who can effectively engage service users, make credible links with the communities [and] organisations are serving, and provide fresh thinking, ideas and solutions (Criminal Justice Alliance, 2019: 2).

Service user engagement is also claimed to offer ‘powerful and life changing experiences’ for the individuals occupying peer roles, ‘increas[ing] their positive self-identity, self-confidence and employability skills’ (HMPPS 2021: 6).

Despite powerful statements of inclusion and empowerment and promises of more effective and innovative service delivery, few scholars have examined *what it feels like for criminalised individuals to activate their lived experiences* in criminal justice work. Indeed, the emotional costs and ethical consequences of ‘service user’ involvement are too ‘often unproblematised’ (Brosnan 2019: 2). This is concerning because lived experience work is often conducted within spaces that are hostile, unequal, and contested (Evans and Moore 2015; Lewis 2012) and where there are significant risks of tokenization, performative inclusion, and exploitation (Yarbrough 2019). Although engaging lived experience within PVS practice holds tremendous potential, it can also reproduce problematic, exclusionary, and punitive practices (Carlton and Scraton 2017). The success of efforts to centre lived experiences in criminal justice, within and beyond the PVS, will require an equal commitment to safeguarding the emotional wellbeing of those asked to undertake this work.

In this paper we centre the emotional experiences of criminalised individuals working for PVS organisations in England and Scotland. We seek to understand what these forms of

inclusion feel like, what the benefits and risks are, and how collaborations could be refined. Our paper is structured as follows. First, we explain the (potential) implications of lived experience involvement in social services, including criminal justice. Next, we examine emotions evoked by (voluntary sector) practice that mobilises stigmatised identity statuses. We then outline our data and methods, which included focus groups with 32 PVS practitioners, including 10 practitioners with lived experience. Finally, we detail our empirical findings, illustrating that lived experience work in this sector can be experienced as safe, sustaining and inclusive *and* exclusionary, shame-provoking and precarious. Practitioners described their work as a *safety net* (feeling saved by lived experience work), as *unbelonging* (feeling dispossessed and excluded) and as a *precipice* (feeling limited and imperilled). We call for critically reflexive, collective allegiances across (non)criminalised workers, to foster individual and structural inclusion and collaborative goals and development. Our empirical focus is on the PVS, but our conclusions are relevant across the global contexts of voluntary and social services seeking to meet human needs.

### **Involving lived experience: the pitfalls and promise**

Interdisciplinary scholarship has considered the implications of lived experience primarily *at systems level*, highlighting tensions—between ‘consumerist’ approaches prioritising user involvement to promote market ‘efficiency, economy and effectiveness’ and ‘democratic’ approaches foregrounding meaningful inclusion, elevating user voices, civil rights and collective action (Beresford 2002: 97). Carey (2009: 179) proposed that user involvement can serve ‘government, affiliated organizations... [and] the disparate needs generated by the neo-liberal-inspired social care market’, noting potential for ‘participation’ to increase social inequalities by justifying and promoting hegemonic agendas. Cowden and Singh (2007: 20) explained how the ‘user movement’ in social services can produce service user incorporation

into a system ‘driven by managerial, rather than democratizing imperatives’. Voronka (2017: 333, 336) highlighted that ‘inclusion does little to disrupt structural violence, and rather allows psy powers to proceed’, as peer support workers can ‘help orient service users toward feelings and emotions that actually cooperate with psy regimes of governance’. ‘Psy regimes’ refer to psychiatric systems which prioritise biomedical approaches (Voronka, 2017).

Criminal justice interventions undertaken by workers with lived experience are often praised for reducing recidivism rates, producing an outcome prized by funders. St Giles Trust’s evaluations claim that peer-support correlates with reconviction rates 9–40% lower than the national average (Frontier Economics 2009:15; Social Innovation Partnership 2012:5). For Perrin (2017) and Nixon (2019), peer support in prison improves operational functioning. Perrin (2017) positions prisoner mentors as ‘unexploited resources’ which can support prisons in austerity. However, peer support in prison introduces ‘the very real possibility that these services will be complicit in perpetuating the regulation of [women] prisoners’ (Pollack 2004:704). Lived experience practice is often restricted and shaped in professionally palatable ways and ‘peer’ contributions are only endorsed if they act as cheaper (or unpaid) versions of existing criminal justice work, doing little to disrupt the status quo (Buck, 2019).

Regarding the *individual implications* of activating lived experience, Beresford (2010) argues that user involvement can be limited by power imbalances and ‘bullying’ between workers and service users. Brosnan (2019) details microaggressions that mental health service users face when contributing to profession-led meetings, including slights, snubs and insults; and hostile, derogatory, or negative messages based upon marginalized group membership (e.g., ‘schitzo, lunatic, crazy, psycho’). There is also potential for feelings of guilt and complicity when experiencing professional privilege (Voronka 2019), and ‘consultation fatigue’ wherein (marginalised) people are continually consulted, but little changes (Beresford 2013).

Individual implications in criminal justice have attracted some attention. Buck (2020) argued that peer mentors can inspire a renewed sense of self-direction in mentees and mediate the terror and practical difficulties of leaving crime behind. Pollack (2004) found that peer mentees experienced decreased feelings of isolation and increased self-worth and autonomy. Perrin and Blagden (2014:902) found that prisoner peer supporters experience ‘shifts in self-identity and gain meaning and purpose from prison’, which could counter negative prison emotions. Nixon (2019) concurs that peer helping can support a pro-social self-concept, but also notes potential for exploitation, particularly during austerity, when peer workers may be called upon to complete duties previously undertaken by paid prison employees.

This scholarship demonstrates that *the individual, structural and emotional implications of activating lived experience require careful consideration*. Activating lived experience in social services can be experienced as empowering and therapeutic, but also exploitative, limited and limiting. Examining emotional experiences could provide a route to meaningfully engage lived experiences. Voronka (2019:578) calls for reconceptualising lived experience work—disrupting the harmful notion that ‘people deemed disabled, marginalized, dispossessed, or degenerate should be grateful for workplace inclusion’—by facilitating participation that does not require peer workers to leave their ‘disability pride, activism, systemic advocacy, and resistance strategies at the door’. We now turn to the emotional elements of this work.

### **Lived experience and emotion in the penal voluntary sector**

Voluntary organisations are increasingly involved in penal policy and practice across jurisdictions, but it can be hard to discern whether they are including or excluding criminalised people and/or shoring up or breaking down penal power (Tomczak and Thompson, 2019). Emotions can provide key insights into the ambivalent humanitarian/exclusionary consequences of peer/user involvement. Extensive literature describes the potential emotional



impacts of ‘helping’ (e.g., Merhav et al. 2018). Within helping relationships, the ‘help’ provided ‘depends as much on the helper’s understanding of his/[her] own feelings and of the milieu in which [s]he operates as on a detailed knowledge of the problems confronting [service users]’ (Addison 1980:342). Practitioners can experience secondary traumatisation from helping and burnout (emotional and mental exhaustion brought on by prolonged stress) (Corcoran 2012). Criminalised people have generally experienced trauma and inequality in higher proportions than the general population (Karatzias et al. 2018; Zelechowski 2016). They can also encounter stigma, judgement and tangible barriers whilst seeking to change their lives (Schnittker and Bacak 2013), which can lead to hopelessness, resistance or relapse (Gålnander 2019; Maruna et al. 2004). A focus on practitioner emotion is therefore necessary. Throughout this paper we define emotions as both ‘cognitive processes’ (perception, attention and evaluation) and ‘bodily events’ (arousal, behaviour and expressions) (Ahmed 2004; Colombetti and Thompson 2007). This approach avoids the oft-reproduced mind/body dichotomy and theoretical tendencies to consider cognitive and bodily events as separate constituents of emotion.

When working in a field which perpetuates their own and their peers’ subjection (Buck, 2019; Carey 2009), practitioners face potential (re)traumatisation whilst navigating their own experiences of marginalization. Analyses of emotion in lived experience work must therefore consider the emotional context of stigma. Merely being identified as a ‘user’ participant or ‘peer’ practitioner in criminal justice is emotive. When managing a stigmatised identity (e.g., ‘ex-offender’), disclosure is an emotional event (Berkley et al. 2019): ‘a criminal conviction—no matter how trivial or how long ago it occurred—scars one for life’ (Petersilia 2003:19). Sacrifice results: ‘among his own, the stigmatized individual can use his disadvantage as a basis for organizing life, but he must assign himself to a half-world to do so’ (Goffman 1963:132).

Whilst user involvement and peer-led practice may enable criminalised people to belong and find purpose, it can also feel restricting. Peer work can be a ‘liminal occupation’, a state of

being ‘in-between’ two identities, creating unease as people are drawn in two directions at once (Scott et al. 2011:188), and requiring ‘bridge work’ across being ‘street authentic enough’ to represent, yet ‘professional enough’ to stay employed (Voronka 2019:577). These tensions of liminality are explored in our analysis, as participants describe working relationships with colleagues.

## **Data and Methods**

This article draws on a qualitative, interpretivist study of the PVS. The study explored three research questions with paid, volunteer and ‘peer’ practitioners holding strategic, senior management and frontline PVS roles: (i) what do you do and why? (ii) what does it feel like to practice in this sector? and (iii) what power do you have in your role? Focus group methodology was selected, to place multiple perspectives and emotional processes in dialogue (Gibbs 1997); enabling participants to engage with diverse views, ask questions of each other, and perhaps reconsider their own perspectives through discussion (Gosling 2018). Focus groups can encourage critical and transformative praxis, offering reflective value for practitioners (Kamberelis and Dimitradis 2013:55) and potentially a forum for change (Race et al. 1994), generating interactive, in-depth, complex discussions, potentially providing collective power to marginalised people (Liamputtong 2011). Inversely, discussing experiences of criminalisation and past trauma within a group can cause distress/emotional harm (Liamputtong 2011). To mitigate this risk, ground rules were agreed around confidentiality and care for self and others and a list of support services were offered. The study received University ethics approval, participants gave informed consent, and pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Six focus groups were undertaken (2019–2020), including a total of 32 PVS practitioners from England and Scotland, holding diverse roles (i.e., strategic leaders, frontline

workers, volunteers, lived experience leaders and activists)<sup>1</sup>. Sampling was purposive (Denscombe 2014). Participants were invited through internet searches, networking, and advertising on *Twitter*. They were also invited to recruit others who they knew. Focus groups were themed by role (i.e., strategic leaders, frontline, activists, lived experience) and geography (i.e., England and Scotland), enabling networking between participants, although many participants could have joined multiple groups (e.g., some ‘strategic leaders’ were also ‘activists’). Primary data analysis revealed how supporting marginalised people amid chronic resource shortages can create difficult emotions. Voluntary sector practitioners undertake *emotion work* to mitigate experiences of anger, frustration, overwhelm, sadness, and disappointment, enabling them to support criminalised people (Quinn et al., forthcoming). It was also evident that specific emotions impacted workers with lived experiences. This article therefore focuses upon the perspectives of the ten practitioners who activated lived experience of criminalisation in their work.

Data were analysed thematically (King and Horrocks 2010), through ‘descriptive’ coding of transcripts, interpretation, and construction of ‘overarching’ themes. For example, focus group transcripts were coded based on prominent themes (e.g., feeling (un)safe). Codes were grouped into themes (e.g., ‘safe/unsafe’ became part of a wider theme of ‘the safety net’). Themes were further interrogated using lyrics from the song that inspired our title (Inspirational Carpets, 1990). For example, the lyric *This is how it feels to be small*, represented feelings of being unsafe, unsupported and unaccepted that were present in ‘the safety net’, prompting us to interrogate the data for times when participants *did* talk about ‘taking up (safe) space’.

Our participants entered their roles via different routes, as illustrated in quotations below (e.g., most applied for advertised roles, some carved spaces for themselves within

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<sup>1</sup> Three of these focus groups took place face to face. The remaining three were conducted online due to Covid19 stay-at-home restrictions. To accommodate 1 participant, we interviewed them separately.

existing education/leadership positions). Our findings offer a snapshot of practice in parts of England and Scotland but are not representative given the small sample size. Indeed, a ‘generalizable’ representation of lived experience involvement may prove unattainable, given the huge diversity of practices and shifting contexts in which people work (Buck, 2020). Our paper therefore offers a useful conceptual exposition, illustrating the needs of experts by experience and inviting further scholarship.

## **Findings**

We now explore themes that emerged from workers activating their lived experiences of criminalisation, focussing on *the safety net* (feeling safe or saved by lived experience work), *unbelonging* (an aggravated sense of dispossession, longing and resentment of insurmountable exclusion) and *the precipice* (feeling limited, imperilled and hampered by working in these contexts). We close with participants’ reflections for future possibilities.

### **The safety net**

There were numerous references to user involvement roles saving people from traumatic contexts and easing distressing emotions. The safety net therefore represents a sense that the PVS can rescue (ex)service users from dangerous pasts and presents blighted by anxiety and isolation. Connor, for example, volunteers to support criminalised people in temporary accommodation in England. He explained how his work saved him from a life of violence:

I am an ex con myself...I decided to work with the charity who [rehoused me]...I basically have to stay in this sector because if *I step out of it, I won't survive*...I had about sixty or seventy physical confrontations over the years...so the only way to stop it and survive and not kill anyone by mistake or kill myself is to stay within this sector

now and...obviously I can contribute to things as well (Connor, lived experience group, England, emphasis added).

He went on to explain:

there is no pressure at all, I mean I am in a non-paid position at the moment, so they are going to ease me in...I feel safe within there...I don't have no anxiety around things I say, I can be completely myself...I don't have to hide my scars, my [prison] tattoos, my past, my crimes, anything that has happened to me.

The pains of imprisonment are often inscribed on the body (Chamberlen 2016), yet Connor explained that the voluntary organisation he works for offered a safety net, providing a protective container around his embodied traumas. This was significantly different from his experience of the broader employment market (Smith and Broege 2020):

before a job interview, I would grow a beard because I have a big scar...I would literally change my whole demeanour...I used to hide [prison tattoos]...I don't know how many times I have had jobs where there would be one person nagging me because my demeanour was so messed up and I was so nervous...I am anxious and have PTSD...[if] something went missing then I would be freaked out of my head...[that] I will get blamed [and] I just leave.

Connor's nerves and anxiety connected to a past that he saw as written on his body. He verbalised emotions connected to the 'embodied experience of prison time and the way in which this impacts on life after release' (Moran 2012), marking people out as ex inmates (Zaitzow

2011). Connor's discomfort alerted him to a reality that criminalised people are often perceived to be untrustworthy (Graffam et al. 2008), and that he must navigate the judgements of others who do not believe people can change (Buck, 2020). Yet, for Connor, the voluntary sector represented something different, a place where he could 'be himself', feel valued and safe. It was a place where he felt a sense of belonging and was buttressed against a broader context of othering.

Finlay, who runs a user involvement forum in England, echoed Connor's experiences when he quoted a fellow forum member:

'when I'm with you guys, when I'm here', he said, 'I don't have that feeling in my stomach,' and he was describing anxiety, you know that horrible feeling that *I don't fit anywhere in the world* and what he was saying was 'when I'm right in the middle of the network, the peer support group, I don't have that anxiety' (Finlay, lived experience group, England).

Finlay's colleague perceived himself as an outsider, yet the peer support from his user involvement work assuaged the resulting anxiety. Isaac, an ex-prisoner who works for a user-led organisation in England, training service users to evaluate criminal justice services, explained how the sector offered a potentially life-saving sense of hope for someone he recruited:

I have had volunteers actually break down in tears because I have said 'we will take you on', and they have gone, 'but you have just heard my background', 'yes so what?'... I had a female volunteer, about a week after the interview, say 'when I came to you, what

you didn't know because I didn't tell you, was every day for the last 12 months I have been suicidal...you interviewed me, and you gave me hope.' Since the day she came to us she has been out of the house every day and has not had one suicidal thought (Isaac, lived experience group, England).

In these examples, the voluntary sector was constructed as an inclusive, protective and even lifesaving space for practitioners with lived experience. Connor, Finlay and Isaac's narratives depicted the deep emotional tolls of criminalisation, and the value of places, organisations and roles which enable people to utilise traumatic pasts in generative ways. Yet their perspectives simultaneously illustrate the significant social exclusion that criminalised people still face. In terms of employment, only 27% of people leaving UK prisons secured paid employment on release (MOJ 2015), and 50% of 1,849 UK employers surveyed *would not consider* employing an ex-offender (YouGov 2016). Whilst user involvement/peer led work can offer a (partial) antidote to this, most peer led work is voluntary and unpaid (Gough 2017). It may 'rescue' people from social exclusion to a degree, but criminalised people still face hugely limited opportunities. This is a reality we will revisit later in the paper.

### **'Unbelonging'**

*We work with people who want to belong, you have got to remember we want to belong as well, we all want to belong to something (James, Volunteer Manager, strategic leaders' group, Scotland).*

Whilst the practitioners above described their experiences in positive terms, deeply problematic reflections were also shared. Some participants described a deep gulf between themselves and

voluntary sector colleagues, indicating that apparently ‘safe’, or therapeutic spaces can be significantly more punitive than they appear (Hannah-Moffat 2005). In fact, *the safety net* can be precarious, unstable and liable to revocation, leading people to feel they do not fully belong.

In her 1985 novel *Unbelonging*, Joan Riley’s teenage migrant heroine discovers she does not belong in her past or current home and so experiences an ‘aggravated sense of dispossession’ (Maes-Jelinek and Ledent 2001:182). *Unbelonging* has also been described as a poignant mixture of longing and resentment of insurmountable exclusion (Ryan-Fazilleau 2007:121). It is therefore a useful concept for exploring the *liminal* nature of peer work (Scott, Doughty and Kahi 2011). Dispossession and exclusion featured strongly for Susan, who volunteered in an English prison’s ‘resettlement block’ whilst imprisoned herself. She explained:

One of the screws [officers] came to me: ‘have you used the staff toilet?’ I went ‘yes’, she goes ‘do you think in future you could not...we had a discussion, and the women are not very comfortable with you using the staff toilet, so could you go back to the [cell] block in future, although the men have decided that they don’t mind if you use theirs’ [...] What was that about? My piss can’t even go in your toilet, my shit can’t go in your toilet, yet I am there working in the resettlement block for free...I did all of the work, all of the reports...that is just one of multiple examples of the power that they want to put on your bodily fluids... (Susan, lived experience group, England).

Susan’s pained words conveyed shame, rage and a bitter sense of injustice having been subject to segregation and humiliation—emotions largely overlooked in more favourable evaluations of user involvement. Her rage also indicates that the expectations and limitations placed upon stigmatised workers have impactful emotional consequences. Tomczak and Quinn (2020)



illustrate how the weight of support work, meeting reduced reoffending targets *and* the emotional burdens of helping, are downloaded onto peer and volunteer practitioners. Susan's narrative indicates how *criminalised* volunteers receive these burdens, potentially 'doing all of the work' whilst being subjected to ongoing rituals of punishment and/or humiliation. The prison continues to punish bodies (Moore and Scraton 2013) even as they deliver resettlement services on its behalf. This experience was not isolated to prison, and Susan described similarly distressing emotions whilst working as a lived experience advocate in a community-based charity post prison:

It was just so stressful because I was the only person with lived experience in the team...the woman was...horrible to me like demeaning, like privileged authoritarian, autocratic...I was scared of her, she undermined me, and I could never be myself in the space because I felt really vulnerable, I felt like at any minute if I cause a...bit of tension it is going to look like I have a track record isn't it? I need a job, so it is like horrible.

Being the only person with lived experience left Susan feeling stressed, isolated, fearful, demeaned and exposed. She felt she could not be herself around her colleagues, which was possibly amplified by her experiences of shaming and exclusion in prison. 'Clients' who come into contact with social services are often viewed as 'a peculiar sub-species' (Carey 2009) and peer support work can require [stigmatised people] to work within the pre-existing tight boundaries of 'psy' professional workplaces (Voronka 2017:335). Susan's narrative demonstrates that such degradation and domination can have highly emotional consequences. The pains of imprisonment (Sykes 1958) are well documented, as increasingly are the pains of other penal interventions (Durnescu 2011; Hayes 2015), but what we uncover here are some of the pains of lived experience involvement. Susan is painfully aware of her 'marginalised status'

whereby '(ex)offenders may play a part in the justice system, but only if they are suitably grateful and conformist' (Buck, 2019:361) and this, in turn, resulted in self-censorship, discomfort and a sense she does not belong.

Mike uses his lived experience of criminal justice to advocate for change at strategic and commissioning levels in England. He also reflected on the pains of exclusion:

[a drug worker colleague] said to me 'we used to think that you were like any other smackhead when you were on probation, but look at you now', and they thought that I would take this as a massive compliment...I was just horrified, I said 'so that is how you think of most people that are on your caseloads? Like *any other smackhead*, that is what you think of them?' And this was people that managed DRR's<sup>2</sup>... her face dropped a bit, they realised 'oh shit, that has actually come out in a way that is really honest, but I probably didn't mean to give that level of honesty' (Mike, lived experience group, England).

Mike was 'horrified' by the derogatory perceptions of himself and his peers, creating an immediate emotional effect and a secondary realisation that his past interactions as a 'service user' and colleague may have been inauthentic, underpinned by stigmatization and outcast labelling such as 'criminal' or 'junkie' (Ahmed et al. 2001:39), rather than respectful understanding. Ahmed et al. (2001:40) suggest that 'when persons are stigmatised... criminal subcultures supply a collective solution to the status problem of people who have been similarly outcast. They define an oppositional value system that enables outcasts to reject their rejectors'.

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<sup>2</sup> The Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR), comprising structured treatment and regular drug testing, is available to courts as a sentencing option (NOMS, 2014).

This explains why so many participants spoke in ‘us and them’ terms about their non-criminalised colleagues:

because we come from a service user background, they [service users] open up to us more than they would to any member of the probation staff and we use their experiences to try and help break down the barriers to try and get rid of the *us and them* authority which still exists and is still rife right throughout the system, there are elements of it changing but there are only elements of it, the bigger picture is yet to come (Isaac, lived experience group, England).

Isaac named the *us and them* division that Susan and Mike so painfully felt, yet he retained an optimistic perception that user involvement could incrementally break this down. Buck (2020: 182-3) found that peer workers can shape professional colleagues’ perceptions, instilling a belief in change and recovery by their visibility, yet doing this work as a criminalised worker serves as a constant reminder of a shameful past. There is therefore a distinctive ‘intense, lived emotionality to this work’ (Buck, 2020:184). Susan, Mike and Isaac outlined a working environment that excluded in its practices, language and culture, and which (c)overtly reminded people of their stigmatised pasts and marginalised presents. ‘Unbelonging’ usefully highlights the emotional effects of dispossession and exclusion that can result. Next, we consider how it feels to practice in contexts which can feel both safe and encouraging, and exclusionary, shame provoking and limiting.

### **The precipice**

As a theme, ‘the precipice’ describes the precarious uncertainty that many criminalised workers navigated. The precipice is multi-faceted. On one level it describes a setting which *prevented*

*people from progress*, resulting in them feeling stuck in lower-level voluntary sector roles—an interesting counterpoint to the *saving* features expressed earlier. On another level the precipice represents *precarious* success, wherein people felt little was needed to topple perceptions of ‘progress/rehabilitation’. The precipice also denotes an *edge*, a liminal space where people had to perform as both ‘peers’ and ‘conventional employees’, which entails particular burdens. Finally, the precipice is *hazardous* ground where it was very easy to be discredited and subjected to forms of punishment/exclusion.

James, a leader of a community justice mentoring service in Scotland, articulated that, as an ‘expert by experience’, opportunities to progress beyond frontline roles were limited:

I can’t easily migrate to other organisations or other parts of the third sector because they are not wanting to take a chance on you (James, strategic leaders’ group, Scotland).

Ryan volunteered as a community justice mentor in England. He concurred that the criminal justice system does not support the progression of people with convictions and provides a block. In fact, this was one of his motivations for becoming a volunteer:

I deliberately made a conscious choice to move away from it all [crime], but [...] you can’t move away from it, you’re not allowed to move away from it, so I have now come back into it to challenge it to change (Ryan, lived experience group, England).

Laura, who previously volunteered as a peer mentor in England, initially shared Ryan’s motivation and optimism, but felt she has changed from ‘a puppy chasing pigeons [who] was going to help everyone’ to ‘the old dog in the corner that that’s a bit cynical’:

You are forever in the system, you never leave it, you just occupy a different position. You're criminalised, you get a job in the third sector, you go be an academic, you never exit the penal field...you're up on a bit of a pedestal that's getting narrower and narrower and narrower the higher you go. What happens if you wobble? What happens if you're maybe not the role model that people wanted you to be? Particularly in a lived experience environment, there's such a pressure to just be *better than best, gooder than good*...imagine if I got convicted of not paying my council tax or something? It would be like a fall from grace...because I'm supposed to be this desisting, better than thou woman, and that's an awful lot of pressure. I think that's something that in our lived experience groups we have to support each other with (Laura, activists' group, England).

Whilst James and Ryan felt blocked from progression, Laura described progress, but only toward a narrowing precipice (Dennison and Demuth 2018). Her position felt precarious because she was subject to the high expectations of others and to surveillance which she perceived to be unforgiving of human error. Laura's fears may well have been magnified, given that 'women are, or are expected to be, exemplary self-governing citizens and highly self-surveilling with respect to various norms of "femininity"' (Corcoran 2006:191). Indeed, a similarly intense pressure to perform such identity work (Simi and Futrell 2009) and display an ideal version of oneself was described by Susan, although her concerns went beyond gendered high standards:

My boss is a lovely man...he went to University, he was in the civil service...he has never known what it is like to have the police kick off the door...my husband was brought up in care, I have got one brother-in-law who...is a street drinker...one brother

who died of agoraphobia...a sister who is a sex worker and a crack user. This is my life, I am not ashamed of it...these are what the inequalities that people who are Black, growing up in inner city life, this is the outcome and the manifestation of lack of care and trauma...that is not unusual in our community [...] My [boss] doesn't...have to field those calls at work and nip out quickly [then] go back to the normal stuff (Susan, lived experience group, England).

Susan perceived her lived reality—even with crime behind her—as vastly different from her manager's and felt that being open about the extent of their differences might fracture the imagined picture of her rehabilitated self and have negative consequences for her work:

I don't know what language people use about me, but I suppose they would believe me to be competent, trustworthy and dedicated...I might disturb that picture...I wonder if he would be as clear in his commitment to my development as he is today.

The precipice Susan experienced was the edge between the realities of marginalised lives and the privilege held by those facilitating lived experience inclusion. She feared that to bring the former into the latter would leave her in an unsafe position professionally. Indeed, there were direct examples of individuals having their platform suddenly, forcibly removed. David worked for a charity in England supporting (ex)prisoners. He explained:

I'm banned from [prison X]...I was invited to help set up some peer mentoring groups, [...like] I've set up in other prisons successfully...When I arrived there they said 'sorry you can't come in because security's done a check on you and said that you're not welcome'...They let me come into a probation building...but when I go to prisons they

for some reason try and tell me that I'm going to try and steal the keys and let all the prisoners out, so therefore they make it difficult for me to get in. Now what that does to you as an ex-offender is it pisses you off. It doesn't piss me off to the point that I feel sad. It doesn't piss me off to the point I feel disempowered, it pisses me off to the point that I stand up and say you're not going to do that...I think the motivation behind what I do helps us to overcome some of those barriers that are put in our way (David, activists' group, England).

David's anger at the multiple exclusions he faced provided motivation to keep working for change, but anger can also demotivate (Shanaah 2020). Laura reflected on a recent experience of stigmatising exclusion. In her role as a university lecturer, she was visiting a prison with a group of students to convene some joint learning with serving prisoners:

[The prison] had me in on gate passes before, but as soon as they found out about my criminal history, their attitude towards me changed, and they actually barred me from delivering the course. [They] told me *in front of the students* that I couldn't come in because of my criminal record...I'd done all the academic stuff that you're supposed to do, I'd done all that professional stuff that you're supposed to do, and I feel even as a person, like my growth as a person, it should all be enough, and what it just reminded me of was that no matter what you do, and no matter what you think that you can do, and whatever place that you've earned, there's always some dickhead in power that can just take you right back (Laura, activists' group, England).

David and Laura experienced the precipice of lived experience involvement as hazardous ground where it was easy to be discredited and (publicly) subjected to continuing forms of

exclusion long after formal punishment was served, revealing a continuing ‘culture and mentality [in criminal justice] of ingrained resistance to the concept of offenders [and] former offenders... as experts’ (Martin et al. 2016:37).

Collectively the experiences of *unbelonging* and *existing precariously* within workplaces indicate that much change is required if (ex)service user involvement is to achieve its aims of democratisation, empowerment, and inclusion. The next and final section will therefore consider what actions may be needed as we move forward.

### **Towards critically reflexive, collective allegiances**

Data presentation can often be too impersonal to be easily consumed (Furman et al. 2006:24), but artistic forms can facilitate enjoyable understanding of complex social issues (Kranke et al. 2020). This is especially relevant for projects aiming to widen participation, given how inaccessible sociological theory and research can be to the general public (Seidman 2016). As we consider ways to move forward, based on the recommendations of focus group members, we utilise song lyrics to engage readers and creatively structure possibilities (Furman et al. 2006). The title of this paper borrows from the Inspiral Carpets (1990) song *This is How it Feels*, which includes the lyrics:

*So this is how it feels to be lonely*

*This is how it feels to be small*

*This is how it feels when your word means nothing at all*

Like our paper, this song centres emotion. Like our participants, this song relates vivid experiences of exclusion, belittlement and disregard. We now utilise these lyrics to ask questions of our data and structure some possibilities of involvement/lived experience work if we took account of these feelings, i.e., what would practice feel like if settings avoided



loneliness, and fostered belonging? What would it feel like for traumatised and stigmatised people to take up (safe) space? What would it feel like if stigmatised people's voices were not disregarded, but meant something? Participants provided answers to these questions.

### *Fostering belonging: connecting collectively*

You can only do it together, you can't do it alone...[we] have a WhatsApp group and we offload to each other...for us it's all coming from a lived experience point of view, but different bits of lived experience, we've not all got the same. I learn so much off [lived experience colleague], like she really challenges me to think beyond my experience... she can really push me in ways that don't feel critical because the supports there as well, and vice versa (Laura, activists' group, England).

Purposefully creating nurturing spaces, where people can 'offload' and critically reflect on/resist experiences of marginalisation could foster belonging. These could include peer support networks as Laura described, and/or commitment to greater representation of workers with lived experience, avoiding tokenistic, isolating recruitment. Empowerment processes are contingent on interpersonal relationships and 'relational empowerment' includes the ability to exercise collective agency (Christens 2012:121-2). Moreover, 'communities of coping' may mitigate the pressures of increased public demand and reduced resources (Lumsden and Black 2018) that voluntary organisations face.

### *Taking up (safe) space*

What we could do with, from the employers' perspective, is to be more comprehending of the realities of the 'mess' that they are working with [e.g. police kicking off the door, being brought up in care, alcohol and drug use] and what we do sometimes is we are frightened to really show them, because if you show them they get worried and they go 'oh I wonder if she is as together [as she presents]'...(Susan, lived experience group, England).

Enabling people to take up safe space is twofold. Firstly, we must comprehend that many people who have cycled through the criminal justice system have themselves experienced trauma—or 'mess'— (HMIP 2017; Jacobson et al. 2010), which can leave people fearful and floundering in roles requiring a stable, detached presentation:

the swan glides along very regally looking like it has got it all together and underneath those legs are kicking away frantically, and that could be the image that you transfer subconsciously to us because you see us having got through it...but those legs are still going frantically underneath the surface (Isaac, lived experience group, England).

Secondly, we must acknowledge the weight of secondary trauma that this work often creates:

Twelve human beings [died in my temporary accommodation...] due to neglect...there was no information in these places, no signposting for mental health, nothing to direct people to services that would help them to stay alive...people have died because people take the maximum amount of money and invest nothing back in, they don't even hire cleaners, they don't care about the people in there...and the government allow it to

happen...still nobody cares, when we bring it up at these groups, they just want the money that is all (Connor, lived experience group, England).

Whilst witnessing the avoidable deaths of peers is itself traumatic enough, to be involved through participatory processes and speak out, *yet still see no change* can render their contributions meaningless. 'Participation' in this form papers over the cracks and downloads the burden of absent services onto those who have experienced their lack. *Inviting such voices to speak creates an ethical responsibility to respond to them*, and to provide therapeutic support to process accompanying (re)traumatisation.

*Equal voices: the need for reflective system change*

Change is going to require us getting our voices heard at all parts of the system...where is our voice in the big bucks? The big decisions are in government, in philanthropy, in the grant funding streams, and those people have no idea, and I mean *no idea*...I am just banging my head against a brick wall, and nothing is really happening...why am I listening to this dominant narrative that I have got to change? I am telling you it is the system that has got to change, not me (Susan, lived experience group, England).

What I have a problem with is the powers-that-be that think that they can dictate to me all of the time...talking about fixing things; a lot of a society, socioeconomic stuff in society needs to be fixed, which would keep people as we all know out of the criminal justice system, rather than actually trying to fix people when they are the outcome of somebody else's mistake (Ryan, lived experience group, England).

The ivory tower doesn't always listen to the ground floor and makes decisions without having that knowledge or without asking those questions...the criminal justice system is not about changing people's lives it is about deconstructing people and then reconstructing them in the image that the system sees [as the best] outcome...the system looks at people as if they are broken...we need to listen to people...let's listen to what they are saying (Isaac, lived experience group, England).

Isaac powerfully called for an alternative to 'therapeutic governance' (Ecclestone and Brunila, 2015:494), which seeks to create *ideal* individuals who are healthy, autonomous, entrepreneurial, AND resilient enough to take responsibility for the emotional damages that marketisation causes. He advocated instead for the voices of people caught in the system to be heard. Collectively, these speakers argued for more than just collective allegiances and empathetic workplaces, they also highlighted the need for systemic change, for 'reparative criminal justice based upon principles of inclusive citizenship and socio-economic reparation applicable across all classes' (Carlen 2012:1). To achieve this, they advocated 'honest reflections from service deliverers and policy makers on the power they hold and how much they are (not) prepared to share' (Buck et al., 2020). Processes must be found to enlighten professionals about the deep structures of power underpinning oppressive micro dynamics and encourage epistemic justice through critical and reflexive listening (Brosnan 2019:11). Listening is therefore a necessary precursor to understanding and power sharing, but insufficient: we need to move beyond existing power holders deigning to listen, and toward 'facilitating others' empowerment' (Christens 2012:212). Facilitating involves relinquishing or delegating control and decision-making, positioning others to take on new challenges, and working to guide them in their development as leaders.

## **Conclusion**

This article has uncovered some of the emotional experiences of those activating their lived experience within the PVS. Our analysis revealed that ‘user involvement’ work in this sector can be experienced as safe and inclusive *and* excluding, shame-provoking, and precarious.

Whilst the existing involvement literature highlights systems level tensions between ‘consumerist’ and ‘democratic’ drivers, and benefits and difficulties for individual workers, our focus on the overlooked emotions of criminalised workers highlighted significant tensions at the (inter)personal level that can limit people’s ability to undertake work and progress. The PVS can feel like a haven as people leave pasts blighted by crime, anxiety, and isolation, but simultaneously criminalised workers can face ongoing (insurmountable) exclusions, career limitations and a pressure to continually perform flawlessness within contexts that can feel hostile. We have outlined potential responses, as suggested by participants themselves. These include collective allegiances, which can foster a sense of belonging and provide personal support and development; trauma informed management strategies, which account for how past trauma can manifest and additional supports that traumatised and marginalised workers may require; and a substantial project of consciousness raising with non-criminalised power holders, to highlight how stigma can be reduced and allyship developed. These messages are significant for the PVS, which has actively sought to recruit people with lived experience, but also for broader criminal justice, social service and social justice provision seeking to meaningfully involve those who have used services.

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