‘How you keep going’: Voluntary sector practitioners’ story-lines as emotion work

Abstract

The voluntary sector acts as the last line of defense for some of the most marginalised people in societies around the world, yet its capacities are significantly reduced by chronic resource shortages and dynamic political obstacles. Existing research has scarcely examined what it is like for voluntary sector practitioners working amidst these conditions. In this paper, we explore how penal voluntary sector practitioners across England and Scotland marshalled their personal and professional resources to ‘keep going’ amidst significant challenges. Our analysis combines symbolic interactionism and Hajer’s (1997) concept of *story-lines*. We illuminate the narratives that practitioners mobilised to understand and motivate their efforts amidst the significant barriers, chronic limitations, and difficult emotions brought forth by their work. We position practitioners’ story-lines as a form of *emotion work* that mitigated their experiences of anger, frustration, overwhelm, sadness, and disappointment, enabling them to move forward and continue to support criminalised individuals. Our analysis details three story-lines—strategy, resignation, and refuge—and examines their consequences for practitioners and their capacity to intervene in wicked social problems.

Introduction

At the core of the sociological discipline are a series of 'big issues' (Head, 2008:107): including poverty, inequality, homelessness, crime, and violence. These problems are considered so intractable and complex that scholars conceptualise them as *wicked*. Despite extensive research documenting the difficulties of solving wicked problems (e.g. Ritchey, 2013), a rhetoric of solutions pervades the voluntary sector's inclusion in social service delivery. Over the last twenty years, voluntary organisations have gained an 'almost mythical conception…as problem solvers' (Villadsen, 2009:217). The UK government has argued that it cannot solve social problems alone, calling for the voluntary sector's help in ameliorating 'a range of burning injustices and entrenched social challenges' including criminal justice, social care, and housing (HM Government, 2018:18). The voluntary sector has been championed across public policy for its apparent 'ability' to '[fill] the cracks that the public services are simply unable to reach' (Home Office, 2007:46) *and* do so 'for the most competitive price' (Cabinet Office, 2010:6).

However, voluntary organisations in the UK (and other countries) find themselves precariously positioned at the sharp end of social, economic and political changes (Clayton et al., 2015). The voluntary sector now acts as the last line of defense for many of the most marginalised, yet chronic resource shortages and political obstacles significantly reduce the sector's capacity to support vulnerable individuals (Dagdeviren et al., 2019). These concerns have been amplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK, voluntary organisations across social service domains have had to take on 'more than ever' amidst skyrocketing need, devastating cuts, and layoffs which have left remaining staff to do 'the work of two or three people' (Cooney, 2020: no pagination).

Arguments about the changing role and significance of the voluntary sector in contexts of austerity are well-rehearsed in the sociological and social policy literatures (e.g., Lim and Laurence, 2015; Custers et al., 2019), but we know far less about what it is like for voluntary sector

practitioners working amidst these challenging conditions. In this paper, we examine the experiences of a variety of volunteer and paid voluntary sector practitioners across England and Scotland in the criminal justice domain—collectively, the *penal voluntary sector* (PVS) (Author, 2016). Our investigation spans PVS practitioners' efforts to address the social problems implicated in criminalisation (e.g. poverty, racism, mental health) and combat criminalisation as a social problem in and of itself. PVS practitioners are tasked with tackling urgent needs at the confluence of structural inequalities (see Figure 1). Yet, like the voluntary sector more broadly, the PVS is chronically overburdened and underfunded (Clinks, 2019).

[Figure 1]

Following the emotional turn in sociology, we position PVS practitioners' emotions as integral to understanding how they act upon the suffering with which they are presented (see: Doidge and Sandri, 2019). We seek to understand the interpretive and emotion work PVS practitioners rely on to 'keep going'[1] amidst the contradictions of their work at the intersection of wicked social problems. That is, how they continued to work for causes that were deeply important to them whilst reckoning with the reality that the problems they sought to ameliorate were too numerous, too complex, and too systemic—and their work too poorly and inconsistently funded—for their efforts to make the kind of difference that they wished. In contrast to studies of emotional labour, we did not find substantial evidence to suggest that PVS practitioners were primarily engaging in *deep acting* or *surface acting* to comply with organisational display rules or that they were necessarily alienated from their 'authentic emotions' (Hochschild, 1983).[2] Instead, study participants

[1] This phrase, here and in this paper's title, is from one of our participants, Natalie. The context of this statement is detailed in our analysis.
[2] But see Authors (2020b) for how some PVS volunteers and practitioners mobilized deep and surface acting within their relationships with service users and in their negotiations with prison staff.

appeared to be emotionally reflexive workers who were aware of their feelings and intentionally mobilizing different story-lines to attenuate challenging emotions so they could move forward.

Next, we provide contextual details about the PVSs in England and Scotland. We problematise the absence of emotion research in this domain and situate our contribution within the sociology of emotions literature. We then introduce our theoretical framework, providing an original combination of symbolic interactionism and Hajer's (1997) *story-lines*. We then describe our focus group data and how we analysed it. Our analysis explores three story-lines that PVS practitioners mobilised to mitigate the difficult emotions evoked by their work, centering resignation, strategy, and refuge. Our conclusion summarises these insights and details their implications for the (penal) voluntary sector's capacity to intervene in a variety of wicked problems.

Our Empirical Case

The PVS encompasses non-profit, non-statutory agencies working with criminalised individuals, their families, and victims, through prison, community, and advocacy programs (Author, 2016). PVS organisations undertake a variety of 'social incorporation' functions with criminalised individuals (Kaufman, 2015), including housing support, employment counselling, and 'soft' skills programming. Nuanced analyses have explored the diverse practices undertaken by PVS practitioners (e.g. Author, 2019; Salole, 2019) and the nature of PVS relationships with the state (e.g. Corcoran et al., 2018). Scholars are increasingly examining the PVS in jurisdictions around the world (e.g., Kaufman, 2015 in the US; Quirouette, 2021 in Canada).

Reflecting rhetoric about the voluntary sector more broadly, the UK government has framed the PVS as providing 'skilled,' 'holistic,' 'meaningful,' 'accessible' (Home Office, 2007); 'locally responsive' (Ministry of Justice, 2013); and 'innovative' (Ministry of Justice, 2010) solutions to criminal justice problems. In England and Wales, this workforce spans over 145,000 paid staff and

540,000 volunteers (Clinks, 2019). Its importance is widely acknowledged: 'there can hardly be a prison in the country that could continue to work as it does if there was a large-scale collapse of voluntary, community and social enterprise services for people in custody' (Martin, 2013: no pagination). In Scotland, the PVS provides 30% of services listed in the Government's *Directory of Services for Offenders* (Audit Scotland, 2012) and the *Community Justice (Scotland) Act 2016* requires engagement with the voluntary sector in community justice plans and performance reports (Scottish Government, 2016).

PVS organisations are funded by a variety of statutory and non-statutory organisations whose priorities (e.g. justice, health, housing, education) are continually in flux (Author, 2016). These dynamic external factors shape the PVS and its activities. For instance, in England and Wales, in response to the 2007 *Corston Report,* the Ministry of Justice allocated £12m to provide diversionary community support for women, but in 2010 this budget was reduced to just £1m (Author, 2016). Under the 2013 *Transforming Rehabilitation* policy, the government sought to expand the provision of penal services by the PVS. Yet not one charity was successful in their bids to own and run Community Rehabilitation Companies (Author, 2016). Small and medium sized charities were impacted by declining grant spending and local government spending cuts, embedding precarity and uncertainty amidst increased service user need (Corcoran et al, 2018). Amidst these conditions, the emotions of practitioners form a substantial omission across PVS research (Burke et al., 2020; Authors, 2020).

The Sociology of Emotions

The emotional turn in sociology has sought to re-orient mainstream sociology towards a recognition that 'in all social phenomena, without exception, emotions are present and play a fundamental role' (Bericat, 2016:496). Emotions are not merely biological impulses but are shaped

by social contexts (e.g. culture, norms) and human capacities to reflect upon feelings (Joas and Knobl, 2009). Individuals can therefore work on and even change their emotions—as emotional labour scholarship has documented (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Doidge and Sandri, 2019).

Emotional labour refers to the process by which individuals regulate and align their behaviour and/or feelings with organisational and institutional goals (Hochschild, 1983). Emotion management is typically accomplished by adherence to organisational feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). Extending this literature, Parkhill et al. (2011) differentiate *emotion work* from emotional labour by referencing the former's private function. Whilst emotional labour is a performance to meet employer expectations, emotion work is a private pursuit wherein individuals seek to desensitise themselves from particular emotions. Parkhill et al. (2011) conceptualise such efforts as a thermostat, offering individuals a mechanism to 'turn down' the intensity of certain emotions and live *with* the struggles presented by their realities. Emotion work is helpful for our investigation of how PVS practitioners kept going because they were principally responding to their own needs rather than organisational display rules.

Within criminal justice, emotions and emotion work have been studied in domains including: criminal justice social work, the legal professions, prison work, and probation (for summary see: Authors, 2020). However, the emotions and emotion work of PVS practitioners have received very limited attention (Burke et al., 2020; Authors, 2020). It is our contention that exploring emotions in the PVS may offer a means to enrich thinking, action, service delivery, and outcomes for the benefit of both practitioners and service users.

Symbolic Interactionism and Story-lines

Symbolic interactionism is an interpretive perspective illustrating how social realities and social structures are created from the 'bottom up' within micro-level interactions (Joas and Knobl,

2009). Neither the PVS nor its individual organisations exist as reified structures but are instead the 'ongoing accomplishment' (Dennis and Martin, 2005:208) of interactions between frontline workers, policymakers, activists, and criminalised individuals. (Inter)action within these spaces unfolds through processes of interpretation. A priority within symbolic interactionism has therefore been uncovering how individuals interpret their social realities, such that they can (inter)act within them (Becker, 1953). Emotions are key to this interpretive process, providing individuals with 'a sense of who and where they are in the world' (Fields et al., 2006:160; Davidson, 2019).

We also draw on Hajer's (1997) concept of *story-lines,* which provide individuals with a path for action as they navigate the disconcerting variety of elements implicated in complex social problems. Reflecting the symbolic interactionist tradition, the creation of story-lines relies on active and agentic processes of interpretation, wherein actors 'punctuat[e] and encod[e] situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action' with particular meanings and shades of importance (Snow and Benford, 1988:198). Thus, story-lines act to fuel particular lines of action whilst inhibiting others.

There is some resonance between our use of story-lines and Hochschild's (2016) *deep stories.* For the Tea party members in Hochschild's research, their deep story helped them describe the real and painful 'structural squeeze' that was occurring around them. It offered them a way to channel their anger and sadness about the disappearance of the American Dream into blame towards those they perceived to be cutting ahead of them in line—'a story that *fe[lt] as if* it were true' (Hochschild, 2016: 135). Story-lines offer a different perspective on the importance of stories in emotion management. Unlike deep stories, our goal is not primarily to give PVS practitioners' emotions narrative form. In this paper, we are less interested in why they feel the way they do, than in *what they do* with how they feel: how they keep going amidst the complexities, contradictions, and limitations of their work.

Methods[3]

In this study, we combined perspectives from PVS practitioners across diverse organisations, roles, and two jurisdictions: England and Scotland.[4] This combination of contexts and bridging across national domains is a 'strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth' to our analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:6). We do not, however, claim to offer a multiple case study with strictly replicable findings nor a representative account of the heterogenous PVS organisations in either jurisdiction.[5] Our data and research agenda center practitioners' emotions and interpretations over the intricacies of either jurisdiction—the details of which are available elsewhere (see: Author, 2016 for England and Helminen, 2019 for Scotland). The presence of shared themes across diverse geographies, organisational roles, and compensation amplified our confidence in our approach.[6]

Mobilising the symbolic interactionist contention that social life is best studied in (inter)action (Blumer, 1969), we gathered data through focus groups, which place multiple perspectives and emotional processes in dialogue. This strategy enabled participants to engage with diverse views, ask questions of each other, and perhaps reconsider their own perspectives through discussion. Through these *cuing phenomenon* (Morgan and Krueger, 1993:17), focus groups elicit more (and more diverse) information than other approaches—a significant benefit for this exploratory study.

In 2019-2020, we conducted six focus groups (three in person, three virtually) with 32 PVS practitioners from England (*n*=24) and Scotland (*n*=8) (Table 1)[7]. Focus groups were themed by

[3] This project received ethics approval, participants gave informed consent, and pseudonyms have been used throughout.
[4] Scotland was included as an accessible, convenient additional location.
[5] For instance, it is possible that practitioners in England undertook a greater degree of emotion work to keep going, due to austerity measures in combination with *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms, although we did not test this.
[6] But see Author(s) 2019, 2021 for examples of how and when organisational roles or compensation might matter for PVS practitioners' views about their work.
[7] To accommodate 1 participant, we interviewed them separately.

identity and role (i.e. strategic leaders, frontline workers, activists, lived experience of incarceration) and geography (i.e. England and Scotland). They were guided by three main questions: What do you do and why? What does it feel like? What power do you have? Supplementary questions included: What do you enjoy about your work? What are its challenges? What matters to your clients? How do you find this out? How are you supported in your work? How could things be different?

[Table 1]

Thematic analysis was undertaken inductively following grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In doing so, we discovered that PVS practitioners were, to varying degrees and with diverse inflections, mobilising narratives of their work that helped them keep going. We then selectively reanalysed our data through this lens. Our research agenda led us to prioritise story-lines that were discursively prominent (repeated with greatest frequency) and emotionally resonant (helped practitioners make sense of their emotions) (Needham, 2011). Across the next sections, we describe the story-lines PVS practitioners relied on to keep going—centering resignation, strategy, and refuge.

The 'resignation' story-line

All of the PVS practitioners we spoke with were faced with the harsh reality that criminalised individuals' needs were too expansive and too complex for their efforts to make the kind of difference that they wished. Some practitioners seemingly learned to accept the inevitability of failure and to see anger, frustration, sadness, and despair as an unavoidable, and even necessary, part of this work. These practitioners relied on a story-line of *resignation*.

For instance, Donea appeared to manage the anger she felt about a prisoner's death by underscoring the impossibility of creating meaningful change within the criminal justice system:

Donea (Strategic leader, England): [Name] is dead. I've worked with him for years…That's a huge failure which after years of work I've not been able to change…I haven't been able to achieve radical change no matter what protests I've been on, what fucking work I've done…what groups I've led, what organisations I've been involved in, how 'wow out there' I've been with my fucking ideas. [Name] is dead…We work in a system that is set up to fail…Positive impact in a dreadful, murderous, abhorrent system is relative…everything we do is shit…100% inevitable failure.

Here, Donea seemed to manage her impulse to see this prisoner's death as an indictment of her personal failure by reminding herself of the difficulty of creating change within the criminal justice system. In this way, the story-line of resignation may act as a protective buffer. For Susan, adopting a similarly resigned stance about her impact also appeared to help her manage the sadness and frustration she expressed about enduring structural inequalities.

Susan (Strategic leader with lived experience, England): Even though I have managed to get myself out of [the criminal justice system]…I can't fix the inequalities that my grandchildren face daily as Black children growing up in inner city [City Name]. I can't fix that just by being an inspirational role model. It's so sad and frustrating because then you go to these meetings where they think it's as simple as 'oh you just need to bring some inspiration to these poor people and they'll be fine'…You can't inspire people out of poverty. You can't inspire people out of racism.

Others agreed, noting that the size and complexity of the systems that they were working within left them to manage overwhelming emotions.

Tabitha (Strategic leader, England): I don't drink alcohol at all because I would go home and get drunk every night…You come out [of working in the prison] and you just think 'oh God I need to get drunk'…it would be so easy after days of what we do to just drown your pain.

Clive (Strategic leader, Scotland) similarly described how trying to navigate the complexity of the problems facing criminalised individuals 'can quite often segue into despair.' He later expressed that the difficulty of creating change was 'beyond frustration, it's proper heart sinking.'

For Connor and Isaac, these feelings were exacerbated by their perception that nobody else cared about what was happening to criminalised individuals:

Connor (Frontline volunteer with lived experience, England): They don't give a shite.
Isaac (Manager with lived experience, England): It's draining, it's draining.
Connor: Like a losing battle you know.

For these practitioners, continuing with their work meant accepting the terms of this losing battle:

Lydia (Manager, England): The criminal justice system will never change so fundamentally that you'll get the results that you want.

Ryan (Frontline volunteer with lived experience, England): When I first started, I wanted to make a change…As soon as I saw the system from the other side of the desk, I knew it wasn't going to be doable…for me it was an awakening to the bullshit.

Here, Ryan described the hope he once felt as naïve. He has kept going in his work by learning how to live with the inevitability of 'the bullshit.' Laura (frontline volunteer/activist with lived

experience) described a similar shift in her approach: from being 'a puppy chasing pigeons [who] was going to help everyone' to 'the old dog in the corner that's a bit cynical.'

For these practitioners, resignation about the impact of their work appeared to offer them a way to cope with their disappointment about not being able to enact change. Resignation about their impact was freeing for some—a way to keep going when faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. For instance, Kendall explained that trying to synthesize the full complexity of her work impeded her ability to act at all.

> **Kendall (Multiple roles[8], Scotland):** If you think about it whilst you're doing it, that makes it harder. When you really think about the enormity of what you're doing it becomes too overwhelming…you minimise it as a coping strategy.

By mobilising story-lines of resignation, PVS practitioners were able to combat a common response to wicked problems: paralysis. This occurs when 'people experience or define the wickedness as so overwhelming that it discourages them and prevents them from doing anything about it' (Termeer and Dewulf, 2019:299). In contrast, by taking a resigned approach to their impact, PVS practitioners appeared to avoid becoming overcome with frustration, anger, sadness, or despair about their inability to ameliorate social problems.

There is, however, a risk that story-lines of resignation may have harmful long-term effects on practitioners' well-being and negative consequences for those they aim to help. For instance, Collette's resignation about the impact of her volunteer work left her contemplating leaving:

[8] Kendall works for three PVS organisations as a paid manager, a paid frontline worker, and a frontline volunteer.

> **Colette (Frontline volunteer, Scotland):** There's nobody that's prepared to take this on…I would love to change things, but I've just come up to so many brick walls and the frustration is now got to the point where I'm almost at the point of giving up.

PVS practitioners leaving particular organisations—or the sector entirely—may be one of the long-term consequences of sustained resignation about the impact of their work (see: Worrall and Mawby, 2013). An important limitation in this research is that we only spoke with practitioners who were currently working in this sector; those who have, by definition, kept going. In other domains, feelings of detachment, indifference, and cynicism (running parallel to what we have documented in this section) have been linked to increased burnout and workplace attrition (e.g. Chang, 2009). In short, this story-line is likely unsustainable. As a result, there is a need for additional studies of story-lines that prioritize their longitudinal consequences—including among those who have left this sector.

The 'strategy' story-line

Other PVS practitioners spoke about how they kept going amidst the challenging conditions of their work by interpreting their inevitably limited actions as *strategically* chosen. This story-line was predominantly mobilized by practitioners to manage their feelings of overwhelm at the size and scope of the problems they sought to ameliorate. For instance, Angela (Strategic leader, England), described trying to create change within the criminal justice system as overwhelming: 'it's a *bloody monolith* that we're trying to constantly change'. In response to such feelings of overwhelm, some PVS practitioners envisioned themselves as engaging in strategic calculations about how best to mobilize their limited impact. Emotion words were rarely used in this story-line. Instead, practitioners appeared to manage their emotions by dividing them off from rationality—at least in the narratives they advanced about the impact of their work.

For instance, Andy imagined PVS organisations and their efforts as strategically targeting different, and discrete, issues:

> **Andy (Strategic leader, Scotland):** I suppose the strategist in me is creating silos. We have this group of people who will work with fixing peoples' problems, this group of people who are committed to working in a psychodynamic way with individuals, this group of people who work with the public…They're separate, and they sit in their own little worlds.

Acknowledging that they could not do everything, practitioners like Andy chose to pursue what they thought they could do well. For some, this meant targeting their resources to create small, concrete changes for individuals, rather than grappling with wicked problems in their full complexity. Prioritising small changes was part of what Isaac (Manager with lived experience, England) referred to as a 'layered approach' to tackling social problems. Lydia (Manager, England) similarly described this approach as 'chipping away at the system'. For others, strategy meant focusing on the forms of engagement that were realistic given the funding and political realities that structured their work.

> **Rowan (Frontline volunteer with lived experience, England):** I think it [impact] comes down to two things: what funding you can get…and who is sitting in the Home Office.

In practice, a strategic approach meant that PVS practitioners often drew strong boundaries around what they saw as their specific domain of intervention, leaving problems outside of their remit for others to worry about. For instance, Phoenix and Jill spoke about their work as having quite a narrow remit.

Phoenix (Frontline volunteer, England): We're not here as advocates, so were not able to take forward [prisoners'] wishes, their desires, their aspirations to a higher authority in the prison…That's not our role.

Jill (Strategic leader, England): We are not a campaigning organisation, period. It doesn't mean we don't care, doesn't mean we don't have views, it doesn't mean that actually we don't think that there is a hell of a lot wrong with the system, but that's not our job. Quite enough people, thank you very much, whose job it is. It's not mine.

PVS practitioners mobilizing the strategy story-line rarely appeared to reflect on *how effectively* their different roles fit together and *if* their respective coverages were adequate. As Natalie (Strategic leader, England) explained, 'everything is divvied up into different silos and isn't looked at in a cross-departmental way'. As a result, the PVS's patchwork offerings and the strategic story-lines used to justify this approach may inadvertently leave an unknown number of unmet needs and unperformed functions (Authors, 2019).

However, some practitioners did describe the difficulties of translating strategic story-lines to real practice where service users' needs were unable to be so neatly categorized. Kendall, for example, felt that the strategic boundaries around her organisation's remit were necessary, but frustrating to maintain in practice.

Kendall (Multiple roles, Scotland): I understand completely that they [boundaries] must be there, but when you bash up against that boundary, if you could just push it that tiniest bit further you would make the type of difference which is life changing. I find that really frustrating because I know that I can't go any further because it's not allowed, it's not correct, it's emotionally inappropriate, and yet it's so obvious that it's needed.

Here, Kendall's perspective clarifies the disconnect between the wide scope of service user need and the narrow channels through which help is imagined under the strategic story-line. Making choices about which problems to prioritise was not always easier or less emotional than grappling with the complexity of broad social structures. For instance, Frances told us that the most difficult part of her work was when criminalised individuals asked for help in areas outside of her organisation's strategic remit.

> **Frances (Frontline volunteer, England):** People are sometimes desperate to get something else from you other than what you're primarily there for because there's so little…It's one of things that I find most difficult to deal with…this lack of support for people in such traumatic and difficult circumstances. I find that very upsetting and very difficult because you feel so helpless really. What they need is a lot more than they get.

Laura similarly recalled the difficulty of prioritising strategic funder goals when service users were facing other urgent problems.

> **Laura (Frontline volunteer/activist with lived experience, England):** My peer mentoring was for education, training, and employment, but so what am I supposed to do when she tells me that she's in a domestic abuse relationship, say 'sorry that's not my remit'? You end up sitting in on meetings where people are making judgements about how far you can go to help someone. Who you're allowed to help and where you can spend your emotional labour coins…That's really, really hard to deal with.

Kendall, Frances, and Laura's perspectives call attention to the role of shifting funder priorities in influencing the work that PVS practitioners do. As was the case for both the *Corston Report* and *Transforming Rehabilitation*, PVS funder priorities are continually in flux and are not always reflective

of service user needs. Clive (Strategic leader, Scotland), for instance, was critical of changing funder priorities, calling them the 'flavour of the month' which amounted to PVS services becoming 'a tick chart exercise' for funder 'buzzwords.'

Dilemmas over service delivery priorities were not only experienced by practitioners on the frontline. Rory described the difficulty of balancing aspirations for policy reform and desires to create tangible change for service users:

> **Rory (Frontline worker, England):** We're told we're not meant to be getting involved in [prisoners'] personal affairs. We want this work to be more strategic focused so we're talking about national policy…[but] it's difficult to point at a new policy that a governor has done and say for certain that we influenced that decision or not…you want to be able to deliver some stuff for people. Sometimes my role can feel a bit wishy-washy.

Kendall experienced a similar dilemma in her policy work, describing the process of strategizing how to intervene as 'deliberately split[ing] two parts of herself'—separating the part that sought to create long-term policy change for all prisoners from the part that was concerned about the urgent needs of certain individuals.

> **Kendall (Multiple roles, Scotland):** You build a protective barrier around yourself that's sometimes pierced when I come across people in the system I know well. It's as if you're operating on two levels…at a cerebral, parliamentary level of trying to influence policy and academic discourse. Yet, that seems quite far removed from, you know, [Name] is on a drug testing treatment order that he's breached yet again, chances are he's going back inside.

In prioritising policy over service delivery, Kendall described feeling 'an intellectual loneliness' which can result from being the only person pursuing a certain approach within a diverse workplace

environment. Intellectual loneliness can be mitigated by reaching out beyond the workspace to like-minded/specialist collaborators and networks (Seet, 2020).

We must acknowledge the emotional demands of working directly with criminalised people *and* of making strategic decisions about how to intervene at the intersection of urgent social problems. Isaac succinctly described what he saw as the stakes of his strategic choices:

> **Isaac (Manager with lived experience, England):** It's like you're playing a game, like a mammoth game of chess, but you're playing strategy with somebody's life.

In other research, Lev and Ayalon (2016) describe the emotional impact of practitioners' 'obligation dilemma' as they make choices about how to help service users. Authors (2021) similarly highlight the 'tragic choices' that PVS practitioners must make given their scarce time and resources. The strategy story-line appeared to help PVS practitioners manage feelings of helplessness and overwhelm about the size and scope of social problems. However, this story-line also sometimes left them feeling conflicted or uneasy about their choices or like their targeted approaches were inadequate against the problems service users were facing.

The 'refuge' story-line

Some PVS practitioners described how they took refuge in their organisations' values to manage their disappointment, stay positive, and find fulfilment in their work outside of tangible outcomes. The starting point for this story-line was often reflection on the question, 'How do we want to treat people?' (Clive, Strategic leader, Scotland). By focusing on the alignment between their organisation's answer and their own world views, PVS practitioners were able to keep going when their efforts were not rewarded and their aspirations were unlikely to be realised.

> **Clive:** It's somewhere between pride and almost religious…believing in what you do and having faith in that value base. It sits at the foundation of what the voluntary sector does…values being built into the delivery.

> **Laura (Frontline volunteer/activist with lived experience, England):** Let's face it nobody gets paid well enough to want to be doing this, you know you're doing it for deeper reasons…

Organisational values offered practitioners a sense of who they were and what they were striving for, mitigating limited tangible results. For instance, Natalie spoke about her organisation's values as guiding, motivating, and grounding her work—calling them 'the golden threads that tie it all together'.

> **Natalie (Strategic leader, England):** You have to hold very close and very dearly what you're trying to achieve and what the message is…our organisations' values and principles…that's how you deal with things and how you keep going because that's where you start from.

As Natalie described, organisational values provided practitioners with something to hold onto as they navigated the harsh realities of their work—offering them a coherent way of understanding what they were trying to achieve that was untethered to problems beyond their control. Clive (Strategic leader, Scotland) also spoke about how organisational values helped to combat a 'culture of doom and gloom' in the voluntary sector.

Yet, some PVS practitioners expressed tremendous sadness when the structures of their work left them unable to live up to their personal or organisational values.

> **Laura (Frontline volunteer/activist with lived experience, England):** It's like a mission…whether it's a personal or collective one…and yet we're having to do so in

> structures that don't understand what it's like and constrain you in ways that makes it more emotional. It makes it traumatic really.

The structural realities of undertaking this type of work often meant serious and disappointing compromises. For instance, Victoria (Frontline volunteer and worker, England) described the 'massive irony' between the guiding values of her organisation and their actualisation: 'I had a lot of sadness around that organisation because it was so brilliant at its core and yet we have this terrible version of what could've been…it was really toxic and really limiting'. Andy (Strategic leader, Scotland) also expressed frustration and disappointment about these types of compromises: '…in the long run the red pen would come in from above…you end up getting the sort of bland rubbish that we're used to, and it doesn't get anywhere'.

It can be difficult for practitioners when they are unable to conduct their work in ways that align with their values. They may experience what Taylor (2007) calls *professional dissonance* which results in feelings of guilt, shame, or conflict about not living up to one's values. Fenton (2015) similarly uses the concept of *ethical stress* to understand how criminal justice social workers navigated the disconnect between organisational cultures characterised by managerialism and risk aversion that were inconsistent with social work values. In another context, social workers practicing in environments at odds with their value base engaged in covert activism in order to deliver services that better aligned with their values (e.g. ignoring rule breaking, stretching professional boundaries) (Greenslade et al., 2015). Similarly, in probation settings, Worrall and Mawby (2013) found that officers coped with disappointing realities of their work (i.e. routine or tedious administrative tasks) by engaging in *edgework*—voluntary risk taking—to bring their workplace realities into alignment with their desire for action and autonomy.

PVS practitioners often expressed strong feelings about their organisations' values and actively sought to differentiate themselves from others on this basis.

> **Lydia (Manager, England):** Organisations are very different. We deliver very different services, have very different approaches…It's your roots, it's why you do what you do.

In practice, the different approaches Lydia noted often incited conflict amongst practitioners. She later explained such conflict by referencing practitioners' passionate commitment to their work: 'We're all so passionate and you're here because you care about it. When you see a decision made that you really disagree with you might fly off the handle or get really angry'. Illustrating Lydia's point, Donea (Strategic leader, England) shared an example of a conflict between colleagues that she described as 'shocking and disturbing and distressing' because of how it illuminated their differing values: 'We don't share principles and values at all. We're absolutely diametrically opposed'.

In some of our focus groups, the tension over organisational values was palpable. During one group, Angela raised an issue about the language other participants had been using to describe criminalised individuals.

> **Angela (Strategic leader, England):** You see we never use that word *offender*. That's not in our organisational vocabulary, there are lots of words that aren't in our organisational framework, but we've used [them] regularly around this table.

Another exchange during the same group demonstrated practitioners' competing views of their relationships with criminalised people. Donea sought to critically reflect on the power dynamics between PVS practitioners and criminalised individuals, but this quickly spiralled into conflict.

> **Donea (Strategic leader, England):** We use the word *power* a lot, our work is about power dynamics and working with people who are often described as completely powerless…and systems operate around power and—

> **Angela (Strategic leader, England):** I think we need to [start to] think about our work in terms of power.
>
> **Donea:** Fine. I don't know who 'we' is. We *do* is what I'm saying, so it's interesting—
>
> **Angela:** Well, I don't characterise it that way. And you do…I think the word we tend to use in this sector is 'influence', we don't have influence and that's a—
>
> **Donea:** It's a denial.

The conflicts observed within our focus groups were emblematic of broader sectoral issues, leading some to express disappointment and disbelief in these fraught relations.

> **Donea:** People in prison manage to do this. You get 20 men in jail in a classroom and say 'what does it mean to be a dad?' Don't think everyone's going to say and believe the same things but they're willing to work together to find containment for that and really challenge themselves and each other. Policymakers, colleagues, charity chief executives…different story…We need to find new ways of thinking about what dialogue is, how to have it, what difference means, how conflict is actually beautiful and useful when well-handled and understood. None of those things are true [in the PVS]. If I'm trying to prove to you that my point is correct, we're dead in the water.

As Donea explained, passionate defense of cherished values had the perverse effect of nurturing division. PVS practitioners wasted precious time and energy fighting with one another rather than collectively fighting the injustices they all cared deeply about. In failing to envision their professional ambitions as a collective endeavour, PVS practitioners' capacity to achieve them was, as Donea claimed, severely diminished.

Whilst PVS practitioners are, of course, not inherently conflictual, they are regularly pitted against one another in competitions over scarce funding (Corcoran et al., 2018). Organisational

values are some of the criteria that funders use when making decisions about who to support. Perhaps as a result, these values became a kind of organisational folklore that practitioners fiercely protected against criticism—especially amongst those they perceived as competitors. By contrast, the kind of positive cross-sectoral dialogue Donea alluded to above aligns with Ferraro et al.'s (2015) *participatory architecture* and Callon et al.'s (2009) *hybrid forums*, both of which describe efforts to bring together heterogenous actors and diverse perspectives in a sustained and productive capacity.

Other practitioners, however, noted limitations of these kinds of supportive or collaborative forums. In one focus group, Clive and Andy described the challenges they had faced in trying to create a space for collective discussions about best practices:

> **Clive (Strategic leader, Scotland):** How candid can you be [in these settings]? How much can you actually give away when they took a [funding] contract off me last week or—
>
> **Andy (Strategic leader, Scotland):** It could just become a cesspit…and it frequently did.

Though the story-lines we have documented in this section offered individual practitioners a sense of refuge amidst the frustrations and disappointments of their work, when scaled-up these narratives often limited the collective potential of this sector by inhibiting collaboration. This is all the more concerning given that rising service user need and continually reduced funding will mean that basic survival for many PVS organisations will depend on their ability to work together (Clinks, 2017).

Conclusion

Producing change for individuals and societies amidst wicked problems is incredibly difficult work. Social policy frequently depicts the voluntary sector as capable of supporting individuals struggling at the intersection of social problems and policy failures, yet consistently fails to provide the financial backing, infrastructure, and political will to facilitate this work. As societies around the

world continue to lean heavily on the voluntary sector to deliver vital supports and public services, it is crucial that we understand what it is like to work in these organisations—both for this workforce and the vulnerable individuals they support.

By investigating PVS practitioners' emotions as they sought to ameliorate the harms associated with criminalisation, this paper has offered a pathway to understand the voluntary sector's capacity to intervene in a broad range of social problems. We demonstrated that PVS practitioners' ability to keep going amidst the difficult emotions induced by their work was dependent on the stories they told about what they were doing and why. In particular, we revealed the prominence of story-lines of resignation, strategy, and refuge in PVS work. Focused comparisons of the efficacy of these story-lines are beyond the scope of the present inquiry, but future work may center the efficacy of resignation, strategy, and refuge story-lines—or their combination—for PVS practitioners at different times or under different workplace circumstances.

We also identified some of the harmful consequences associated with specific narratives. The resignation story-line may, for example, encourage detachment, indifference, and cynicism that have long-term consequences for practitioner burnout and sectoral attrition. The strategic story-line may discourage broader reflection on the efforts and omissions of the sector *as a whole* and obscure the difficult choices practitioners must make as they undertake their work strategically. This narrative may also shield individual practitioners from critically reflecting on the efficacy of their efforts—from the right vantage point, almost anything can be justified under the guise of strategy. And finally, the refuge story-line may ultimately be divisive, discouraging collaboration and cooperation amongst practitioners across organisations. As Authors (2019) have suggested, collaboration across the PVS has the potential to broker humanitarian reform, but this is only possible *if* individual practitioners in disparate organisations are open to such activities.

At a broader level, there is a need to interrogate the limits and problems of individualized emotion management strategies. The story-lines we documented in this research tended to reinforce emotion management as an interior process in which PVS practitioners were individually held responsible for keeping going in the face of systemic failures. Yet, in revealing these story-lines and their various challenges we have also opened up an opportunity for practitioners working and volunteering in this sector to critically reflect on, and perhaps even re-write, the prevailing narratives used to understand and cope with this type of work. Future research should explore how PVS practitioners might contest or problematize their emotions, the story-lines used to manage them, and the conditions under which both arise. For instance, in diminishing the difficult emotions of working within challenging structural conditions, do the story-lines documented in this research actually collapse possibilities for transformation that might be motivated by PVS practitioners' unrestrained emotions?

Cultivating transformative possibilities will require a more politicised understanding of emotion that recognizes the possibilities for emotions to 'make, rather than simply emerge from, subjects and the relations between them' (Holmes, 2004:211). The revelation that PVS practitioners rely on similar story-lines across various organisational contexts, diverse roles, and distinct geographic locations suggests opportunities for collective approaches to emotion management that might instead focus on disrupting harmful and oppressive structures and identifying (trans)national opportunities for sectoral transformation (see: King, 2006).

Though the specific emotions and story-lines we have documented here will inevitably vary across empirical domains, our core innovation—envisioning story-lines as a form of emotion work—is widely applicable. Competing pressures, inevitable limitations, and difficult emotions are ubiquitous in social life. This paper has illustrated the value of investigating *how* individuals

narrativize their experiences so that they can keep going amidst the struggles that define their realities.

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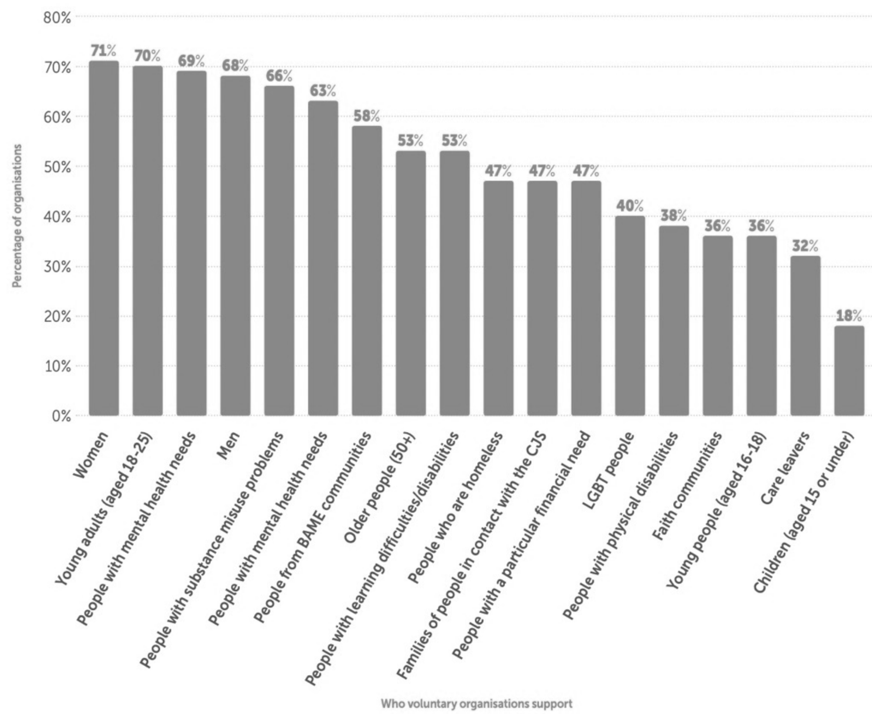
Figure 1. Who the PVS Supports[9]



[9] Originally printed in *The State of the Sector* (Clinks, 2019:17).

Table 1. Participant Characteristics[10]

PSEUDONYM	LOCATION	ROLE	COMPENSATION	LIVED EXPERIENCE OF INCARCERATION
ANDY	Scotland	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
ANGELA	England	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
AVERY	England	Multiple Roles	Both	No
CLIVE	Scotland	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
COLETTE	Scotland	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	No
CONNOR	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	Yes
DAVID	England	Management	Paid	Yes
DONEA	England	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
FRANCES	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	No
FINLAY	England	Multiple Roles	Both	Yes
HARPER	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	No
ISAAC	England	Management	Paid	Yes
JAMES	Scotland	Management	Paid	Yes
JILL	England	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
JULES	Scotland	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	No
KENDALL	Scotland	Multiple Roles	Both	No
KYLE	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Paid	No
LAURA	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	Yes
LIBBY	England	Management	Paid	No
LYDIA	England	Management	Paid	No
MEGAN	Scotland	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
MIKE	England	Organizational Leadership	Paid	Yes
NATALIE	England	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
PHOENIX	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	No
ROWAN	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	No
RORY	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Paid	No
RYAN	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	Yes
SANDRA	Scotland	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
SIDNEY	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Volunteer	No
SUSAN	England	Organizational Leadership	Paid	Yes
TABITHA	England	Organizational Leadership	Paid	No
VICTORIA	England	Frontline Service Delivery	Both	No

[10] Participants who undertook paid and volunteer work were classified as 'both'.