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'It's Like Another Family Innit': Building Police-Youth Relations through the Metropolitan Police Service Volunteer Police Cadet Programme

Introduction

Improving the quality of police-public interactions has gained increasing prominence in recent years and now occupies a key strand within police reform agendas (Stanko et al., 2012; Brown, 2013). At the heart of such discourse is an attempt to improve 'personal encounters' between police officers and citizens. Underpinned by the work of procedural justice theorists, the assertion here is that if the public perceive the police to be fair in their actions and decision making, they are more likely to judge them worthy of respect, deference and cooperation, accept police actions, empower them to carry out their duties, comply with the law and reflect positively on their encounter, regardless of the outcome (Bradford et al., 2009, 2012; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006; Murphy, 2009). Whilst much of the work on procedural justice has focussed predominantly on adult interactions, there is a growing body of scholarship that considers its importance in relation to young people (Hinds 2007; Dirikx and Bulck, 2014; Saarikkomäki, 2015). Indeed, recent work by Murphy (2015) suggests that procedural justice is more important to youths than it is to adults. With child and young adulthood described as 'the most intensively governed sector of personal existence' (Rose, 1989: 121 in Muncie, 2006) we know from research that contact between the police and young people is not only frequent, but often characterised as challenging or adversarial (Norman, 2009; McAra and McVie, 2005). Moreover, contact is consistently shown to be a significant determinant of attitudes towards the police, and with opinions and views formed in childhood shown to have a lasting influence on adult perceptions, the quality of the 'personal encounter' between the police and young people is imperative (Piquero et al, 2005; Hinds, 2007).

In this paper, we explore the capacity of the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) Volunteer Police Cadet (VPC) programme to improve police-youth relations. The VPC programme is a central component of the MPS's youth outreach efforts, designed to help young Londoners aged between 14 and 19 years enhance life and citizenship skills[i]. Formally established in the 1960s as a preliminary officer training scheme, the ethos of the VPC programme is now focused on engaging young people from a variety of backgrounds in positive activities, and aims to make London safer by reducing youth vulnerability to crime (as both offenders and victims) and enhancing young peoples' ability to contribute and achieve. Cadets are involved in various aspects of police work including operational support at state occasions, crime prevention, and test purchasing, while also taking part in fundraising, physical activities and accredited schemes including BTEC, sports leadership and Duke of Edinburgh. At the time of writing there are 3,755 cadets in total with a further 295 young people on a waiting list to join. Over half (52%) of cadets are male and a similar proportion (54%) from a Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) background. In addition, a third (33%) of cadets are identified as vulnerable to crime or social exclusion (MPS data to October 2015). Drawing on data collected with 210 serving MPS police cadets, we demonstrate that the VPC programme offers a number of important opportunities for young people to develop skills and expand access to social capital in the home, school and beyond. Moreover, we argue that police cadet membership affords young people, particularly those from challenged backgrounds, a *greater sense of belonging* and an *increased stake in conformity*.

Young people, policing and the 'personal encounter'

It is a well-established truism that relationships between young people and the police are generally characterised as problematic, with adversarial contact a common feature of encounters. Indeed, young people are less satisfied in their experiences with the police, and

generally have less favourable perceptions compared to adults. Encounters often contain an element of hostility and confrontation leading to a lack of trust and confidence, particularly for those from BME, low socio-economic or challenged backgrounds (Hinds, 2007; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Murphy, 2009; Sharp and Atherton, 2007; McAra and McVie, 2005). Young respondents (aged 10-15) to the Crime Survey for England and Wales reported a low level of agreement (45%) with the statement 'police treat young people the same as adults', while positivity about the police decreased with age (for example, 10 year olds were around twice as likely to have a positive opinion of their local police overall (75%) when compared with 15 year olds (38%)) (ONS, 2014).

As extensive users of public space, tactics such as stop and search, dispersal zones, curfews and Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) affect young people disproportionally and can further exacerbate fragile police-youth relationships, encouraging feelings of stigmatisation, unfair treatment, and a sense of 'them and us' (Norman, 2009; Muncie, 2006; Crawford, 2009). This 'intolerant policy suite', which underpins many police responses to 'troublesome youth', reinforces negative stereotypes and places pressure on the police to ensure that young people's 'risky' behaviour is contained (Bannister and Kearns, 2013: 381; Kennelly, 2011). Discussions with young people who took part in the riots in London and other UK cities in summer 2011 revealed a highly fractious relationship with the police. Indeed, the vast majority (85%) of participants in the Guardian/London School Of Economics 'Reading the Riots' study (2011) felt that policing was an important factor in explaining why the riots happened. Many respondents felt the police treated them like criminals regardless of what they had done and spoke about an acute sense of mistrust (particularly amongst black respondents). With young people often viewed as 'police property' or 'permanent suspects' (Reiner, 2010; Choongh,

1998), McAra and McVie (2005: 27) suggest that 'amplified levels of police contact and amplified offending levels may become mutually reinforcing'. As young people are likely to have more contact with the police than adults, adolescence is perhaps the most important time to secure normative compliance influenced by procedurally just interactions (Dirikx and Bulck, 2014; Crawford, 2009; Hough, 2013).

The importance of procedural justice in young people's interactions with the police has been observed in different geographical settings. In her study of 14 to 16 year old high school students in Australia, Hinds (2007) reports that procedural justice was the strongest possible predictor of young peoples' perceptions of the police. Respondents who believed that the police adopted procedurally just approaches in their encounters had more positive attitudes about police youth relations, higher expectations of officers, and were more likely to consider that the police do their job well. As a result, Hinds (2007) argues that enhanced police legitimacy offers the potential to increase youth support for the police, compliance with rules, and general commitment to social norms. Similarly, young participants in Clayman and Skinns (2012) London based study emphasised the value of procedurally just encounters, with trust reported as the most important factor in relationships with the police. Saarikkomäki's (2015) focus groups with Finnish young people further identified the importance of respect and the ability of police officers and security guards to listen and interact as common features in young people's narratives of what they defined to be fair interactions. Saarikkomäki (2015: 17) noted that 'a respectful, polite, empathetic and peaceful manner for adults to interact with young people can be surprisingly effective in constituting long-standing trust….and in preventing encounters from escalating into conflicts'. Dirikx and Bulck's (2014) research with Flemish adolescents also found that personal contact was the strongest direct predictor of views, with young people who

felt that the police had exercised their authority in a procedurally fair manner more likely to report trust in the police and a greater obligation to obey. We remind readers that negative contact and attitudes formed during adolescence are likely to persist over time and have a lasting influence into adulthood, impacting on young people's behaviour in future encounters with the police and their willingness to cooperate. (Hurst and Frank, 2000; Hinds, 2007; Piquero et al, 2005).

The present study

This research is based on findings from a study conducted in 2011 with 210 serving MPS volunteer police cadets. This included an anonymous self-completion survey (available both online and paper version) of 161 cadets across the capital, and six focus groups with a total of 49 cadets in six London boroughs. All cadets were aged between 14 and 19 years. The largely quantitative survey, conducted at the start of the fieldwork period in order to inform focus group discussions, generated responses from 81 female and 71 male cadets[ii], with just over a quarter (n=44 or 27%) stating that they were from a BME background. Three quarters (n=120 or 75%) of survey respondents had been a cadet for less than two years, with the remainder in the cadet scheme for up to five years. Focus groups were held in the cadet group meeting venue with between eight and ten cadets in each. Just over two thirds (n=34 or 69%) of focus group participants were male and almost half (n=24 or 49%) were from a visible minority ethnic group. In order to reflect different areas of London, purposive sampling techniques were used to select one borough from each of the five MPS defined Borough Operational Command Unit (BOCU) areas in which to base the focus groups. An additional sixth focus group was 'acquired' through convenience sampling via a cadet who was involved in piloting the survey and personally invited the researcher to their cadet group meeting. Participation in both the survey and focus groups

was voluntary and clear literature was provided to the cadet leader in advance to disseminate to the young people explaining that it was not obligatory to take part.

Both survey and focus group questions explored motivations to join and remain in cadets, barriers or challenges faced in doing so, relationships with other cadets and staff, and the impact of being a cadet on their lives. The survey was conducted at the start of the fieldwork period and basic frequency data analysed in SPSS. All focus groups were recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. Participants included young people from both 'mainstream' and 'challenged' backgrounds. For the purpose of this study, a young person from a mainstream background was generally considered to be one who regularly attended school and was not (currently or previously) in trouble with the police or other authorities. 'Challenged' young people were those who were not in mainstream education or for whom traditional education was a negative experience. These cadets had often been in trouble with the police prior to or during their time being a cadet, or were on the fringes of this type of behaviour.[iii] McAra and McVie (2005) found that previous involvement with offending was the most powerful predictor of later adversarial contact with the police, therefore this group an important target for confidence building strategies.

It is possible that cadets who completed a survey and those who took part in focus groups reflected different backgrounds. For example, a minority (n=6 or 4% and n=10 or 6% respectively) of survey respondents stated that they had committed a crime or been in trouble with the police (including being taken home by the police, the police speaking to parents/guardians, receiving a caution or being arrested), while almost a quarter (n=39 or 24%) stated they had been in trouble at school (defined as 'more serious trouble' such as being

regularly sent out of the class, threatened with, or actually suspended or expelled). While it was not possible to systematically collect background data on cadets in the focus groups, their propensity to over or under report behaviours, or the extent to which they were selected or encouraged to take part by cadet leaders, focus group conversations strongly indicated that those who participated in this element of the fieldwork presented more challenged backgrounds than survey respondents.

Data is drawn from a reasonably small sample of London's cadets and it is acknowledged that those who chose not to take part in the study or had left the cadet programme may hold different views. However, while cautious of any generalisations, the data gives a valuable insight in to a sample of London's police cadets, some of whom reported negative views and encounters with the police and other positions of authority at some time in their life. While the survey presented some interesting headline findings in this study, particularly around reasons for joining and remaining in the cadets, this paper draws predominantly on the qualitative data derived from focus groups. Using such data allows us to 'tell the story' through the voices of young people by capturing their experiences of being a cadet in their own words, and contributes to a relatively limited empirical research base on what young people think about the police (Patton, 2002; Norman, 2009). The data that follows has been organised around two key themes that emerged – firstly, *a greater sense of belonging;* and secondly, *an increased stake in conformity*.

A greater sense of belonging

The majority of cadets in this study reported an increased sense of belonging; this was articulated in relation to fellow cadets, cadet leaders and with other significant adults. Relationships with cadets and a sense of 'being part of something', particularly within an arena where they felt they had control or a 'voice', was a consistent theme in young peoples' rationales for being part of the VPC programme. Over half (n=84 or 52%) of survey respondents stated that they first heard about the VPC programme through family, friends or somebody else who was already a police cadet. In focus groups the strength of relationships came through clearly and was frequently related to shared experiences. This was often between cadets who, due to their backgrounds or lifestyle choices, acknowledged they were unlikely to have been friends in school. The following challenged cadet spoke about his relationship with a mainstream cadet noting that:

> 'If I was at school I'd be like 'yeah, cool, yeah' but cos of cadets we went together Duke of Edinburgh. We climbed together, we went through pain together…Cadet X was there as well I mean that kind of times, they're like emotional... I mean it's like living together, I've been camping, all my camps I've been with, it's with him, innit, so it's emotional'

Other cadets reflected on their stereotypes of the VPC programme prior to joining:

> 'I was with a Youth Offending Team and youth support team for two years and from there they told me like 'what do you want to do in your free time?' I was like, I used to watch that, you know like…them programmes where there's team games and activities. I was like 'that's what I want to do', like water rafting and stuff like that and then my

probation officer was like 'you know what, you should join police cadets' and I was like 'are you serious, are you stupid?'

'My stereotype was that like it would be very rubbish'

'Yeah, like perfect kids...there's a big diversity'

In articulating a strong sense of belonging, many of the young people referred to their group as akin to being a 'family'.

'When you come here, it's like another family innit'

'It's sort of like a family...because we work together when we need to and then when we have our little spats…we have each other's backs in a sort of sense'

Relationships with cadet leaders – the majority of whom were police officers - were also important to cadets in this study. When asked about their main reasons for remaining in the VPC programme, one of the most frequently selected options from a set list by survey respondents was 'I like the police officers/cadet leaders' (after 'I enjoy it' and 'it is fun/exciting'). Extending the idea of belonging to a 'family', for some cadets their leader took on a parental role, with one cadet stating that 'Staff's like a parent'. Such findings resonate with Saarikkomäki's (2015: 11) study in which young people expressed positive attitudes to the authorities when they took on a responsible and protective role conducting themselves 'in a fatherly manner'.

Some cadets spoke about the opportunity that being in the VPC programme gave them to see police officers from 'another side':

> 'I mean if you do it, you just see the police from a completely different side, it's like you just see them in more of a laid back friendly side and you don't kind of expect that from someone whose like meant to be like keeping the public safe. I mean you expect them to be quite dominating sort of thing but when you get to know them it's a bit more like laid back'

> 'Before I was at the cadets you'd see an officer and you'd always act like you'd done nothing wrong and it would make you look more suspicious…But now I'm doing cadets I realise they are just regular people and they're just doing their job and as long as you just keeping to yourself and you're not doing anything wrong then they're not gonna stop you'

For some cadets, being part of the VPC programme had provided an opportunity to engage with police officers in a more 'equal' and less hostile environment leading some to change their views of the police:

> 'Yeah, I always used to argue with them [police] but now I talk to them'

> 'I hated them [police], I absolutely hated them, I didn't want to come here....I've just got more respect for them now'

> ‘They [police] don’t speak to you like they’re above you, like you have conversations with them instead of them talking at you’

Relationships with a VPC leader was particularly important to a cadet in one focus group who had previously been in trouble with the police:

> ‘...then I met PC X and like, this guys a legend. Like people were telling me ‘oh you’re a hood rat’ they were trying to pull me down but PC X, like, he told me, ‘just stay here’, he used to talk to me whenever I had problems I’d call him up…he’d be there to talk to me...he’s like the main reason why I stayed in cadets’

The cadet went on to speak of his concern about upsetting the VPC officer when he was arrested*:*

> ‘...the only reason why I was upset, like I don’t care I was in a cell and that. I didn’t wanna upset PC X and that, like all the hard work he did...But he still stayed with me like’

The positive effects of ‘belonging’ generated by being a VPC seemed even more pronounced for young people when relationships with parents and other adults in their lives were strained. For some cadets from more challenging backgrounds, opportunities to make their family and teachers proud was a rarity, demonstrated by comments from cadets on the reaction of adults in their lives to them being part of the VPC programme:

‘When I told her she was like shocked because I used to be in trouble all the time’

‘Erm, my mum’s happy cos apparently I’ve changed. My nan’s seen a difference in me because I used to go there a lot. I never went home’

‘Erm, well, it’s making my teachers think “oh he can do something positive”’

‘…even though I got kicked out [of school] my head teacher was like “you know what, you’re doing quite good”’

Despite the overwhelmingly positive experiences recalled, young people in this study demonstrated an awareness that this may not extend to officers outside of the cadet programme. Echoing young people in Clayman and Skinns (2012) research, for some cadets positive relationships were built at an individual, rather than institutional, level. Indeed, the cadets below highlighted that they did not necessarily expect to receive the same treatment from all police officers:

‘Some of them are scum in uniform. There are other ones that are nice, like the staff here that are great, but there are some officers you just look at them and you think ‘you’d probably be stamping on my head right now’ so…’

‘Then you do get those police officers that just take advantage of what they’ve got and then they just act like arses basically’

An increased stake in conformity

A sense of belonging, such as that described by the cadets in the section above, is an important predictor of cooperation. If people feel included and valued they are more likely to believe the group is valid, cooperate with group authority and feel invested in the group, which in turn promotes pro-social behaviour. Indeed, once a sense of shared identification is established, members often view the group in more positive ways and behave in a manner that is for the benefit of the group (Tyler, 2006). This was evident in focus group discussions with some challenged cadets in this study for whom the impact of the VPC programme went beyond the development of social skills (often identified by mainstream cadets), to more fundamental behavioural changes including stopping or reducing offending. For those cadets with previous offending and behavioural issues, group membership had given them a sense of discipline, which they often lacked in other areas of their life:

> 'Well here it's disciplined and that's what got me like more goodie…normally I was really naughty, used to swear at everyone, teachers and everything, got kicked out as well.... of two schools, so after that when I joined the police cadets I got disciplined and it's helped me a lot'

> 'Like, be ready for the discipline, be ready to accept that you're wrong...be able to think about why you're wrong without arguing back…it brings you away from the rudeness and the badness'

One cadet emphasised the positive and productive elements of the VPC programme in addressing the lack of structure in his life before membership:

> ‘Come home leaked out my head…go sleep, get up, that’s my life. You know, that was it. And I was like I need to do something, you know, I need to do something productive innit...So now, you know what, I get involved with cadets’

Another felt sure that being involved in the VPC programme had prevented him from being sent to a Young Offenders Institute. When asked what would have been different in his life if he hadn’t joined cadets he replied:

> ‘Erm, probably be in Feltham [Young Offenders Institute]...I know for a fact’

One cadet spoke about the impact of the VPC programme on his behaviour:

> ‘I noticed other talents I had and I’m going into studying into GCSEs instead...Behaviours changed. I used to do a lot of crime, robberies and like I stopped’

Cadets in the study were keen to relay the skills they had gained through being part of the VPC programme, often noting the transformative effects of such achievements:

> ‘You know people think, they underestimate me, like, because I hang round with all the cool people, if they was to look at my CV and see that I do police cadets, I’ve done my Duke of Edinburgh, first aid, they’re like I didn’t expect that from you because I’m doing it out of school hours, do you get it, and in school hours, they think I’m just nothing’

> ‘If someone had asked me like five years ago that I’d be like in this room and have like Duke of Edinburgh up to gold and I’ve met, like I’ve been in these high profile buildings, then I’d be like, nah, that doesn’t seem like my thing’

> ‘If you got nowhere in high school…people like brag on like ‘ahhh you’re gonna get nowhere’, like now if I did this yeah, like Cadet X right now if he never got no GCSEs and he’s here right now, he could still get a job, do you get it?.....It can make something out of you’

With an increased sense of belonging and group identification, some cadets considered themselves elevated as representatives of the VPC programme, which in turn appeared to act as a further check and control on their behaviour:

> ‘I was thinking that I’m part of cadets, the teachers in school know I’m part of cadets and how’s it going to look on me if I’m all erm messing about in school like “he’s a cadet why does he act like that for” so now erm I’ve changed my behaviour completely at school and all the teachers look at me in a positive way and they talk to me and they say “oh, you know you’ve changed your behaviour, well done, good on you”’

> ‘...basically before I joined the cadets I was one of them that would go and fight with the Bengalis. I’m a Bengali. I should fight with my Bengali and stuff like that, but I thought to myself I’m a cadet…if I was a police officer I would be doing something. I would be helping people…like yeah and I felt proud innit’

Discussion

We have emphasised a *greater sense of belonging* and an *increased stake in conformity* as key themes in the narratives of police cadets. Whilst these findings have an obvious resonance for those interested in the study of desistance, the overwhelmingly positive and productive experiences reported by cadets in our research also hold much potential for improving relations between young people and the police.

The strength of relationships between young people in the VPC programme and their fellow cadets and cadet leaders was a consistent finding throughout this study. Identification and solidarity with a group is important, particularly for young people for whom peers form a seminal role in adolescence. Groups provide a multitude of benefits to the individual including resources, self-identification, social rewards and self-esteem (Tyler, 2006; Tyler and Huo, 2002). For cadets in this study, solidarity with their peers and cadet leaders were compounded by a common name, uniform, shared values and norms, regular group meetings, and attendance at residential camps. The importance and positive effects of 'belonging' generated by being a VPC seemed even more pronounced for those young people in this study who indicated that relationships with parents and carers were strained. Here, lesser attachments such as those with volunteer leaders or other adult role models can assume greater significance and contribute to improved outcomes for young people (Gilligan, 2000; Greenberger et al., 1998; Larson, 2005). Indeed, Resnick (2000) argues that a network of positive connections in a voluntary setting, such as the VPC programme, can offer a viable alternative to young people who lack a secure family base, providing order to lives previously dominated by disorder. Relationships with non-parental adults who exhibit conventional behaviour and disapprove of illegal or deviant conduct - as cadet leaders do - can result in young people being less likely to

engage in ‘problem’ behaviour (Greenberger et al., 1998). When those non-parental adults are police officers, as the majority of cadet leaders are, the benefits increase beyond the presence of a supportive, positive role model to contributing to a young person’s exposure to procedurally just encounters.

Group membership has also been recognised as an important predictor of cooperation. If people feel included they are more likely to believe the group is valid, cooperate with authority, and even exhibit behaviour that benefits the group (Tyler, 2006). Jackson et al. (2012a) assert that identification with authorities reflects a connection based on a common definition of social roles and expectations and an internalisation of shared values, which creates a link between legitimacy and compliant behaviour. As Bradford et al. (2012: 4) state, the ‘goals of the police become their own’ and people are less likely to commit crime or antisocial behaviour if they feel included. Indeed, for some young people in this study, their inclusion in the VPC programme appeared to act as an agent of social control, building up their stake in conformity and attachment to conventional institutions. This was clearly demonstrated by those cadets who came to identify themselves as representatives of the VPC programme.

Developing relationships with peers with a high stake in conformity, as cadets in this study did, may have also assisted in developing their own stake in conformity and engagement in legitimate, acceptable behaviour (Fagan and Tyler, 2005; Reisig and Giacomazzi, 1998; Clayman and Skinns, 2012). Numerous studies have emphasised the heightened influence of peers in adolescence, more so than in adulthood, and their role in developing a sense of ‘self’ (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986; Steinberg and Monahan, 2007; Corsaro and Eder, 1990). Gestsdottir and Lerner (2007) argue that adolescence is characterised by the emergence of a

notion of personal future, during which young people internalise the social standards and behavioural mechanisms of those around them and incorporate them within a process of self-regulation. Indeed, social networks are an essential aspect of providing opportunities for desistance to take place and are highly structured by social, cultural and material resources, which are rich in the VPC programme (King, 2013). When a young person positions themselves in an environment that enables opportunities to reach legitimate goals or make adjustments when they are blocked, such as within a cadet group setting, Gestsdottir and Lerner (2007) suggest that positive youth development should increase and problematic behaviour decrease. Indeed, cadets in this study often referred to status, self-esteem, and a sense of 'future' that being in the VPC programme had offered them. A demand for conformity and restrictions in terms of admissible behaviour through commitment to attend weekly meetings and an attachment to fellow cadets who communicated clear standards of acceptable behaviour, together with the opportunity to achieve success through legitimate activities, may have helped cadets to develop a 'buffer' to criminal or other negative behaviours (Portes, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 1996, Thornberry, 1987; Greenberger et al., 1998).

Much has been written about the sense of 'belonging' and 'group solidarity' that police officers experience (Reiner, 2010; Paoline, 2003; Loftus, 2010). The police service can represent both a highly inclusive and exclusive group and contact with the police can be 'status challenging', shaping an individual's sense of identity and belief that they are valued (Waddington, 1999; Bradford et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2012a). As Bradford (2012: 3) states 'policing …carries a heavy symbolic load' which is strongly linked with community and belonging. By being part of the VPC programme, cadets assumed a position of being in the 'in crowd', allowing them to experience fair treatment, be listened to and heard by the police, see 'beyond the uniform' and

have their social standing recognised by the group (Murphy, 2009). Focus group discussions with cadets echoed Tyler's (2006) work, indicating that they valued the status offered by being part of the cadet group and found being accepted within it rewarding. Bradford (2012) argues that people draw important lessons about their status from their contact with the police and positive, procedurally just experiences, such as that largely enjoyed by cadets in this study, can encourage a sense that the individual and police are 'on the same side'. Furthermore, with many studies lending support to the notion that 'vicarious contact matters', particularly for young people who are 'open' communities that frequently share information, the potential for a diffusion of benefits beyond cadets to wider networks of young people is considerable (Hurst and Frank, 2000; Dirikx and Bulck, 2014; Crawford, 2009). As Saarikkomäki (2015: 14, 17) notes 'stories can be powerful' and can 'inform us what young people expect from control agents and more broadly from adult society'.

The success of engagement strategies, however, relies heavily on the interpersonal skills of police officers when interacting with young people and, as some cadets in this study indicated, positive experiences with individual cadet officers did not always lead to favourable opinions of the police service as a whole. Young people in Norman's (2009) study reported that they did not view the police as a united service and were sometimes confused about perceived variations in treatment by different officers. While cadets in this study may have held a greater understanding of the role of the police, there was an acute awareness amongst some young people that indicated negative perceptions of officers beyond the VPC programme. Norman's (2009) study of young people and policing clearly shows the ease with which positive perceptions can be 'easily undone' by 'aggressive and exclusionary tactics of other officers on the streets' (Norman, 2009: 7). Whilst the VPC programme offers an important site within which police can do much to

develop improved personal encounters with young people, for the police to be seen as a legitimate resource for young people's safety there needs to be a consistent approach to engagement across the service, rather than the role being left to 'special' youth focused officers (Hinds, 2007; Norman, 2009: 8). Moreover, we also acknowledge that our study has focussed solely on the narratives of young people and not those of the police themselves in exploring this encounter. The 'personal encounter' is a two-way relationship and as such a greater understanding of how police feel about such engagement is central. In their study of the *Youth in Policing Initiative* in Toronto, Chapman-Nyaho et al (2011) found that while young people were 'socialised into the value system of the police organisation' and came to like the police more, some officers interviewed reported ambivalent and entrenched negative attitudes towards young people. They argue that the police 'gained much from their interactions with youth without having to sacrifice any of their interests, practices or outlooks on the nature of police relations with youth and communities' (Chapman-Nyaho et al., 2011: 93, 95). This is an important finding. Whilst the views of the VPC officers were not explored in this study, we urge scholars to consider and document how police officers themselves experience initiatives aimed at improving police-citizen encounters. Bringing about meaningful change to how individuals and groups perceive one another needs to be embedded in the lived experiences of both parties.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has set out the views and experiences of some of London's volunteer police cadets, and whilst the findings cannot be generalised to all cadets, the data gives a valuable insight in to the views of young people, including those who had previous negative encounters with the police. We concur with findings in the wider literature which suggest that when young people experience fair treatment from the police they form more positive attitudes and enjoy productive

relationships. Such findings support the argument that the most effective way of building legitimacy is for the police to treat people with respect, listen to what they have to say and make fair decisions (Jackson et al., 2012b; Skogan, 2005). According to the cadets in this study, these behaviours were clearly demonstrated by their VPC police leaders creating a plethora of personal contact situations in which positive opinions could be formed and their views around police legitimacy developed and reinforced (Tyler and Fagan, 2008 in Bradford, 2010). The benefits of such personal interactions and familiarity enable young people to 'see beyond the uniform' and establish trusting relationships (Clayman and Skinns, 2012: 474). Through the VPC programme, officers and cadets are afforded the opportunity to engage positively with each other in a non-conflict setting, enabling a range of meaningful and purposive interaction which, according to Bannister and Kearns (2013: 392) can help to 'contextualise observed behaviours…decreasing our reliance upon stereotype and metaphor as interpretive tools'. This challenge to stereotypes is fundamental to both young people and the police if there is to be any real sense of deep seated, long term and meaningful change. Actively seeking out and maximising opportunities for promoting positive personal encounters between young people and the police hold much capacity to impact upon existing and entrenched negative and confrontational relations. Indeed Murphy (2015) has argued that the challenge for police agencies is to identify strategies that will be effective in fostering youth-police relationships – we propose that the VPC programme is one such opportunity.

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[i] Since the research was conducted the Metropolitan Police Service Volunteer Cadet Programme has expanded further to incorporate 'junior cadets' aged 10 to 13 years old who are led in part by senior cadets trained in mentoring and leadership, to provide positive role models to their younger peers.

[ii] The remainder preferred not to state their gender.

[iii] It was beyond the ethical scope of the study to explore young people's personal experiences in any depth particularly that which took place in their home or family life, therefore the authors relied on self-identification through discussions in the fieldwork and some information provided by cadet leaders.