Voluntas (2021) 32:78–89
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00301-x

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RESEARCH PAPERS

# Practitioner Niches in the (Penal) Voluntary Sector: Perspectives from Management and the Frontlines

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Accepted: 25 November 2020 / Published online: 5 January 2021
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**Abstract** Voluntary sector and non-profit studies require theoretical frameworks facilitating better understandings of what occurs on the ground. Following Lipsky's (Street-level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public service, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1980) formulation of street-level bureaucracies, scholars have emphasized workplace hierarchies, reproducing dichotomous 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' conceptualizations of practice which can obscure the full complexity of practitioners' workplace relationships. In this paper, we offer a thematic model of (collective) action that centres the 'division of labour' across, and relations between, professional niches that are differentiated by their 'helping' orientations, workplace tasks, and responsibilities to service users rather than their organizational status or salaries. We mobilize qualitative research undertaken in the penal voluntary sectors of Canada and England to highlight the mutually constitutive efforts of frontline and management work with criminalized service users. Drawing on and extending Alinsky's 'river dilemma', we conceptualize practice in the (penal) voluntary sector as organized according to the differing choices practitioners make about whom to 'help' and how to intervene, which have consequences for social policy, service delivery, and advocacy work.

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**Keywords** Street-level bureaucracies · NGO · Punishment · Penal voluntary sector · Human services

## Introduction

Issues of crime and punishment are often marginalized within conversations about social policy, the voluntary sector, welfare states, and civil society, being problematically constructed as criminologists' domain (e.g. Simon 2012). Despite the rising importance of criminal justice volunteers and voluntary organizations for societies around the world (Miller 2014; Tomczak and Buck 2019), keyword searches across non-profit and voluntary sector studies[1] produce fewer than 100 articles that engage, even peripherally, with criminal justice. Yet, these topics have never been discretely confined to police, courts, and detention facilities, nor should they only interest specialists who study and/or work within these institutions (e.g. Garland and Sparks 2000). Criminalization and punishment are complex social problems intersecting with and compounding (overlapping) inequalities such as poverty, homelessness, race/racism, public health, victimization, (un)employment, family/partner violence, and immigration (Western and Pettit 2010). Simultaneously, crime and its policies have long been strategically politicized in contestations over social and symbolic boundaries of 'good' citizens and communities (e.g. Cohen 1972). These features position the penal voluntary sector (PVS) as a central, albeit often overlooked, site for research and theory

[1] *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, *Voluntary Sector Review*, and *Voluntas*.

building on core questions for this journal's readership: what makes a 'good' society, how might we get there, and what do we owe one another in the process?

The PVS encompasses non-profit, non-statutory agencies working principally with criminalized individuals, their families, and victims, through prison, community, and advocacy programmes (e.g. mentorship, legal advocacy, drug/alcohol treatment, prison visitation, community reintegration support, crisis counselling, education) (Tomczak 2016). As governments around the world turn away from state-dominated criminal justice towards neoliberal reconfigurations where responsibility, costs, and non-performance risks are distributed amongst public, private, and voluntary organizations (Garland 2001), the PVS is becoming a core social policy actor. Existing research has variably conceptualized the PVS as part of the archipelago of social control (Miller 2014), responsible for widening carceral 'nets' and diversifying penal power (Cohen 1985) and, as agitating for social change (Tomczak and Buck 2019), improving public safety (Sharkey et al. 2017), saving the lives of marginalized individuals (Tomczak 2018), and facilitating personal growth (Buck 2018). Despite carefully documenting this variation at the sectoral level, PVS scholars have rarely investigated the actions of individual practitioners, nor their variegated roles,[2] in cultivating such diverse outcomes. The result is that although we know about some of the PVS's different parts and practitioner 'niches', we have very little understanding of their mutually constitutive nature (Resch and Steyaert 2020:716).

Outside our specific empirical domain (the PVS), this paper provides a *thematic* model for conceptualizing 'complex organizational behaviour' (Brodkin 2012) across practitioner roles constituting the voluntary sector, organizations undertaking social service provision, and street-level bureaucracies. Our model re-imagines the "bewildering variety of organisational forms, activities, motivations and ideologies" (Kendall and Knapp 1995:66) present in these domains as part of an overarching and highly interdependent system. Loosely mobilizing an ecological metaphor, this paper illustrates that sectoral outcomes are reliant on the skills, resources, and interdependent efforts of practitioners occupying distinct professional niches that reflect shared 'helping' orientations, workplace tasks, and responsibilities to service users. In doing so, this model stands as a contrast, and a compliment, to existing scholarship on public and social service delivery that has prioritized *hierarchical* relations (i.e. vertical models of organizational status, power, or authority). The PVS is an especially well-positioned case study through which to advance this thematic perspective because, like the voluntary sector more broadly, its work is less bound to status or salary-based hierarchies than the public and private sectors (Steimel 2018), and thus offers an opportunity for new understandings of (collective) action (Resch and Steyaert 2020).

Our paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce 'Alinsky's dilemma' as the inspiration for our thematic model of action and detail its specific value over the hierarchical and status-based classifications more commonly relied upon. We, then, offer a representation of our model and its core features (Fig. 1). Next, we describe our qualitative data from the PVSs in England and Canada and how we combined them as a 'bricolage' (Tomczak and Quinn 2020). Our analysis demonstrates our model in action within the PVS. Specifically, we illuminate how PVS practitioners occupying different professional niches and undertaking distinct kinds of work envision themselves as participating in broader processes of penal reform and social policy implementation across niches; the relationships (i.e. with other practitioners, clients, criminal justice stakeholders) formed in the process; and the demands and tensions unique to management and frontline work. Our conclusion offers implications for PVS research and voluntary sector studies more generally, notes study limitations, and proposes areas for future research.

## Conceptualizing Diverse Types of Voluntary Sector Work

Voluntary sector studies are comprised of "fragmented empirical research in need of […] metaphors, concepts, conceptual relations, and theoretical frameworks that can help us to better understand what occurs on the ground" (Hvenmark 2016:2835). The sheer diversity of organizational forms and practitioners in the voluntary sector has often impeded sector-level typologies (Heidrich 1990), encouraging studies of individuals, their characteristics, and motivations (Kewes and Munsch 2019). Following Lipsky's (1980) formulation of street-level bureaucracies, much of the public and social services literatures have examined workplace hierarchies, entrenching 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' conceptions of governance, autonomy, accountability, authority, and discretion (Hupe and Hill 2007). Whilst important, this focus has obscured the ways that practitioners conduct their work and relate to one another in non-hierarchical ways (Evans 2011; Lieberherr and Thomann 2019), ultimately reducing researchers' ability to understand complex organizational behaviours and their consequences (Brodkin 2012; Resch and Steyaert 2020).

In this paper, we offer an alternative way of imagining practice in this sector, by drawing *thematic* distinctions between practitioners 'taking over this or that area of work'

[2] Exceptions (Robison 2016; Tilton 2016; Quinn 2019).

**Fig. 1** Revisiting Alinksy's 'river dilemma'

(Abbott 2005:246). We conceptualize the voluntary sector as a relational complex of professional niches that are differentiated by their 'helping' orientations, workplace tasks, and responsibilities to service users. This model mobilizes and extends community activist and political theorist Saul Alinsky's river dilemma (recounted below):

> A man is walking by the riverside when he notices a body floating down stream. A fisherman leaps into the river, pulls the body ashore, gives mouth to mouth resuscitation, saving the man's life. A few minutes later the same thing happens, then again and again […] "This time", replies the fisherman, "I'm going upstream to find out who the hell is pushing these poor folks into the water" […] but while the fisherman was so busy running along the bank to find the ultimate source of the problem, who was going to help those poor wretches who continued to float down the river? (Cohen 1985:236–237)

Figure 1 draws on this dilemma to theorize the relationships between practitioners undertaking frontline, management, and activist work. In other scholarship, these titles may be associated with assumptions about organizational status, salary, and hierarchical relations between positions—particularly between frontline workers and managers (e.g. Lipsky 1980; Dias and Maynard-Moody 2007). However, in this paper we use these terms as thematic descriptors only, indicating the kinds of *tasks* practitioners undertake and their primary *orientation* towards 'helping' service users. For example, frontline practitioners intervene primarily at the individual level, prioritizing the immediate

needs of those 'in the river' in front of them, throwing in 'life preservers'. Activists, by contrast, typically intervene at the structural or political level, aspiring to larger changes by targeting the source or shifting resource distribution and/or public and political consciousness 'at the mountain top' (see: Tomczak and Buck 2019; Fehsenfeld and Levinsen 2019)[3]. Managers operate between these poles, acting with and for small groups of service users by securing funding and interpersonal resources ('the supply of life preservers') as well as directing the frontline.

The model of action we propose in Fig. 1 is informed by how ecosystems work. Mobilizing an ecological metaphor requires that social relations are conceptualized as 'interactions between multiple elements that are neither fully constrained nor fully independent' (Abbott 2005:248). This continuum of action incorporates multiple inflection points, only some of which are hierarchically determined. The PVS, amongst other sectors, functions according to the balance of individuals undertaking different kinds of work and relying on different organizational conditions to thrive. Not everyone can, or wants to, 'help' in the same way and underscoring this mix of efforts is precisely this paper's point. As in ecosystems, different (professional) niches and their contributions are essential to the overall system and its effects. For example, in the PVS, abolitionist activists following an anti-carceral agenda which reduces prison numbers still require 'support' services because there are real people held in detention needing immediate resources (Carlton 2016). But 'support' services and activism can inform and reinforce each other. Figure 1 organizes diverse efforts by clustering together practitioners who share similar orientations about how to 'help' service users—regardless of their organizational status and/or the size of their pay cheques. We do not claim the latter features are unimportant but query the priority they have been granted (Brodkin 2012; Lieberherr and Thomann 2019), which has obscured understandings of other kinds of relationships.

In conceptualizing action in the voluntary sector thematically, we demonstrate that 'helping' service users relies on the mutually constitutive efforts of practitioners operating in different professional niches—lateral variety that is often collapsed in accounts of this sector's vertical (hierarchical) relations. We mobilize the concept of *niche partitioning* as a heuristic device to explain why practitioners end up in different positions 'along the river'. In evolutionary biology, niche partitioning describes how coexisting species adapt to scarce resources and competition by behaving or feeding in different ways. In the voluntary sector, practitioners struggle with and against one another over how best to 'help' service users (Quinn 2019; Kewes and Munsch 2019). Due to scarce time and resources, they must make 'tragic choices' about *whom* to 'help' (Heyse 2013), and *how* to intervene (Tomczak and Buck 2019; Quinn 2019). The choices practitioners make on these matters amounts to a kind of role segmentation, wherein individuals self-select professional niches (i.e. through job search practices, education) that align with their preferences about how, or where 'along the river', to intervene. In prioritizing these thematic differences over hierarchical distinctions, our focus remains on the broader goals of these efforts (i.e. what individuals are trying to accomplish collectively) over descriptions of organizational hierarchies in all their intricacies, as others have done. We now turn to our data and methods.

## Data and Methods

Our data are drawn from two qualitative research projects undertaken in Canada and England and later assembled into a bricolage (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). We combine evidence from two national jurisdictions to amplify our investigation of how PVS practitioners experience their work across different professional niches. This enhances our explanations, which emerged from cross-case themes generated across difference (Ryan 2018). We illustrate how certain structural conditions (e.g. differences between frontline staff and management) represent *durable features* of the PVS across jurisdictions and scales. Complementary features of the English and Canadian contexts facilitated our data combination. Both jurisdictions have recently seen growing inequality, reduction in the state's redistributive role, and decentralization of social programmes (Banting and McEwen 2018). Both projects: (1) took PVS organizations and practitioners as their units of analysis; (2) bounded the cases using organizational definitions, including organizations working primarily with criminalized individuals and excluding, e.g. victim-focused or general addiction projects; (3) explored what PVS organizations do in practice, excluding, e.g. board meetings; (4) included paid and volunteer practitioners undertaking different kinds of work; and (5) sought to answer three exploratory research questions—*what* PVS organizations are doing with criminalized individuals, *how* they manage to undertake their work, and the *effects* of these efforts (Tomczak 2016). Our separate research designs are compatible with the research agenda that we collaboratively explore in this paper. However, we neither claim to offer a representative account of the heterogeneous PVSs in Canada and England nor comparison of their PVS policies; the minutiae of these experiences will always be context

[3] Other activists may intervene at the mid- and downstream locations, offering critiques of frontline or managerial practice and/or seeking to reorient 'helping' priorities.

dependent—on (inter)national, provincial, local, and organizational contexts.

Research in England involved content analysis of grey literature, policy, documents from PVS organizations, and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were completed in 2012 with 13 paid and volunteer PVS practitioners undertaking frontline, middle, and senior management roles across 12 organizations. Research in Canada involved content analysis of documents matching those in England, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Interviews were conducted in 2017–2018, with 15 paid and volunteer practitioners undertaking frontline and middle management roles across seven organizations. Over 400 h of participant observation were undertaken from 2013 to 2018, including volunteer and staff training, volunteer shifts, and the work of paid staff.

Voluntary organizations from England were primarily funded by charitable foundations and trusts and provided support services for (ex-)prisoners (e.g. pen pals, prisoner resettlement, support for women). None received competitive contracts, but two held statutory grant funding. Voluntary organizations from Canada supported criminalized women through mentorship, reintegration counselling, employment, housing, and crisis intervention. They were predominantly government funded, receiving further income from non-profits, private donors, foundations, private corporations, and faith-based institutions.

Thematic analysis was undertaken inductively through ongoing comparisons between coding and emerging theory following grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This method recognizes reality as multiple, flexible, interactive, and—to an extent—indeterminate (Bryant and Charmaz 2011). This epistemological position aligns with our aim of centring the lived realities of practitioners. Grounded theory analysis occurs through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We examined our data in its entirety, creating working descriptions of how practitioners experienced their work. We then assembled our data into categories based on emerging patterns and began to posit relationships between categories in conversation with a literature search of voluntary sector practitioners' experiences of their work. Having noticed that practitioners' experiences varied according to the kinds of work they undertook, we selectively reanalysed our data through this lens. By learning across nations, our bricolage offers a rich, analytically rewarding approach that can inform further research and theory building about the global issue of voluntary sector social service delivery. Together, our data offer a novel framework for exploring more expansive practitioner and organizational terrains, adding 'rigour, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:6) to existing accounts.

We now turn to our findings. Aligning with our thematic model of action, our aim is to illuminate how PVS practitioners undertaking different kinds of work in management and frontline niches (collectively) envision themselves as 'helping' criminalized individuals, the challenges that accompany their specific professional vantage point, and the relationships that are cultivated in the process. Though our model also includes activist roles to highlight (potential) relationships between social service delivery and wider social transformation (Chewinski 2019), and encourage future examination of these dynamics, our existing empirical data does not include individuals undertaking activist work in the PVS.

## Management Niche

There is a growing need to investigate voluntary organizations' management due to their increasing formalization and bureaucratization (Sankaran et al. 2006). Managers must consider the world beyond their organization, seeing 'systems of organization, power, and communication' over individual people (Gosling and Mintzberg 2003:4). Our conceptualization of the management niche is not concerned with how managers 'play the boss' in their organizations, i.e. are motivated by financial/status gains or vie for control/authority over decision-making, as other hierarchical analyses have outlined. Instead, we focus on the tasks they perform, the outcomes that matter to them, and the challenges they face.

PVS practitioners undertaking work in this niche envisioned their roles as securing the financial, bureaucratic, and operational conditions required for their organizations to fulfil their social mandates. They conceptualized themselves as participating in broader processes of penal reform and social policy implementation—'helping' service users in aggregate—by ensuring their organizations were run well, and the resources for support were available. Core tasks included: reporting on volunteer and employee performance, strategic planning, allocating resources, coordinating diverse groups, engaging with public policy, public relations, and fundraising (Kraut et al. 2005). We now describe two concerns that were relatively unique to PVS practitioners undertaking work in this professional niche: (i) finding and maintaining sufficient funding for their organizations and (ii) negotiating tense relationships with prisons.

(i) Funding

Whilst funding streams differ across jurisdictions and organizations, maintaining organizational funding was a primary concern of PVS managers. For example, one of

Solomon's (England) primary concerns was his organization's vulnerability to changes in penal and social policy.

> **Solomon:** [Our funding is] subject to the ups and downs of government policy and availability of funding.

Andrea (England) noted that funding changes (i.e. the proliferation of payment by results commissioning wherein payments are contingent on the independent verification of results) could threaten PVS organizations' continued existence.

> **Andrea:** The payment by results issue, for voluntary sector organizations, they can't afford to wait until the money rolls in […] the voluntary sector doesn't have that kind of capital resource to be able to survive without payment.

Emily (Canada) shared these stresses of trying to preserve organizational operations during financial austerity.

> **Emily:** There's absolutely nothing extra in the budget already so when the budget gets smaller…when we find out something's been cut, then it's just scrambling trying to save everything we can…programming and people…some of it can fall to volunteers, but it's not always the case.

These funding concerns were intensified by (ex-)prisoners being perceived as 'unpopular causes' (Body and Breeze 2016) or 'unworthy' recipients of support.

> **Solomon:** A good percentage of the public think that prisoners ought to be locked up and just, you know, throw away the key and don't do anything with them. My next-door neighbor […] was raising this question: well is it ethically right that you should be offering things to people in prison?

Tasia's (Canada) experiences corroborated Solomon's perspective, making the connection between public perceptions of clients and funding opportunities.

> **Tasia:** It's tough to get any donation-based funding because our cause is not sympathetic to most people […] when you say 'offenders' […] for anything to do with asking for money it's basically a dead end.

As a result of how Tasia's work is perceived, certain funding avenues (e.g. private donations) are essentially foreclosed, forcing her organization (and others) to rely on government grants and contracts, which are especially vulnerable to cuts and policy changes.

Navigating funding shortages alongside unfavourable social and/or political fundraising climates impacted managers well-being. Narratives of their work were interlaced with expressions of disappointment and frustration. Shauna (Canada) described how perennial changes and funding shortages caused organization-wide tension.

> **Shauna:** You can really tell when we're dealing with any sort of funding issue. The whole place is just more tense […] it's just constant shifting, constant re-adjusting.

Although funding shortages were widespread across voluntary organizations, managers were predominantly responsible for dealing with these changes, which required tough decisions about resource distribution and even cutting entire programs. Ashley (Canada) highlighted the emotional impact of decisions that managers must make to keep their organizations afloat.

> **Ashley:** When you've been working on something that's a huge passion and you think is so important and necessary, and then you lose your funding, it's just *completely* devastating to let go.

Kathy (England) similarly noted the emotional impacts of persistent austerity.

> **Kathy:** The future's not great. And certainly, when I've been to conferences and meetings everyone just has a bit of a long face really. And you also feel like you're trying to do something really good and that you really care about and you're just fighting all the time, just to get enough money to run the place […] it's a really depressing state of affairs.

Here, Kathy underscored the commitment managers have for 'doing good' and the frustrations of pursuing it whilst being responsible for funding coordination and organizational problem solving.

By analysing the (albeit limited) choices managers make about organizational funding structures—and especially what to do when there are shortages—we gained a sense of what matters to them. In particular, managers felt it was their responsibility to absorb funding cuts and quickly strategize how to keep their organizations afloat with fewer and fewer resources. Thus, maintaining organizational capacity was their primary concern and the dominant lens through which they understood and approached their work. Next, we explore how managers negotiated relationships with prisons.

(ii) Relationships with Prisons

The dissimilar (and often antagonistic) working cultures and goals of voluntary and statutory sector staff produce strained working relationships (e.g. Corcoran 2011; Mills et al. 2011). Yet, PVS scholarship has not investigated how this clash of working cultures is experienced across different roles, each with their own burdens and responsibilities. Our focus on professional niches revealed that

managers disproportionately shoulder these burdens, being primarily responsible for cultivating and maintaining relationships with gatekeepers.

Managers voiced concerns and constraints related to their relationships with prisons more frequently than those undertaking frontline work. Forming and maintaining productive relationships with prison staff required them to navigate complex ideological tensions, work around the constraints of a secure environment, manage prisons' poor communication, and negotiate the trickle-down effects of prison budget cuts. Katrina (England) explained the difficulty of building relationships amidst these conditions.

> **Katrina:** I'm assuming you know about what prisons are like *(laughs)*. They can be really hard to work with, they can, and I'm not going to deny that […] Some of them are just completely sealed off and its really difficult to build a relationship.

This could be especially frustrating because 'helping' prisoners often relies on building relationships with these institutions. Adrian (England) attributed the antagonism Katrina described to differing goals.

> **Adrian:** If you're a prison officer, your key role is always security, it always has to be security, so when they're working with the women they're primarily defined by the fact that they're offenders […] [prison staff] are always slightly gonna think that you are these stupid little voluntary sector people getting in our prison and you know, kind of being annoying. I think its fundamentally quite a tense relationship.

In addition to having different mandates, security measures could impact voluntary organizations' service delivery. Gabrielle (Canada) described the difficulties the prison environment created for volunteer recruitment.

> **Gabrielle:** I have volunteer mentors that go into the prison and I have to prepare them to wear a panic button while they're in there […] part of my job, then, in training volunteers is preparing them to enter the secure environment and not be too spooked […] A lot of volunteers go through the whole training and then really can't handle the idea of having to wear this panic necklace and then they don't want to go in anymore *(sigh)* so I have to start over with my recruitment.

Karen (Canada) also found that security measures and poor communication interfered with volunteer retention.

> **Karen:** For the last few weeks none of my volunteers can get in because of lock downs. So now I'm dealing with volunteers not showing up for shifts anymore because they're sick and tired of commuting and being turned away. If [the prison] could just communicate with me…they know I'm sending volunteers over so…just pick up the phone and tell me that you're on lock down today.

Relationships with prisons were further complicated by power dynamics, which left PVS managers feeling at their whims, unable to criticize their decisions for fear of losing access. For Katrina (England), this required enormous compromise.

> **Katrina:** There's no point fighting against [the prison], you have to work with it, then you can achieve quite a lot […] if you have any kind of aggressive stance against *(intake of breath)* prison, then you won't get anywhere, they'll actually dig their heels in.

Voluntary organizations must bend to the will of prisons because they control access. Adrian (England) explained that any critical stance could lose them access to these institutions, and thus, the prisoners they seek to 'help'.

> **Adrian:** The prison spots something or somebody sees something and goes "oh I don't think I want that to happen", and then they just go, "you can't do this anymore", and that's the end of it […] the power balance is very much…in their favor.

As a result, Shauna (Canada) approached prisons strategically.

> **Shauna:** We have to cosy up to the enemy in a sense *(laughs)*. If the prison is not willing to put up our posters [for our support line] […] then we don't have a program. We are entirely dependent on their willingness to endorse what we do. You have to put that reality at the forefront of your mind when you're feeling frustrated and just wanting to go off at them.

Tasia (Canada) echoed this strategic thinking, explaining how she reconciled her organization's social justice mandate with prison engagement.

> **Tasia:** We are more towards the perspective that women shouldn't be in prison. Ideologically we're opposed to it, we want to see women managed in different ways…Yet, we do strategically partner with prisons because when it comes down to it, is it not better to have access to the women to help them than be iced out?

Here, Tasia covertly advocated for prison abolition, suggesting that strategic engagement with prisons, although strictly outside her organization's ideological mandate, facilitated productive ways to 'help' prisoners inside. By documenting how managers navigated complex

relationships with prisons, we gained insight into the ways that managers facilitate (and protect) frontline practitioners' capacity for supporting service users. In particular, managers cultivated a cautious and strategic disposition when interacting with prisons that was not present in our interviews with frontline staff. This was because of managers' particular role in securing the bureaucratic and operational conditions for frontline work; they were responsible for strategizing long-term, 'upstream', goals, including keeping organizations afloat and negotiating tense relationships with prisons to maintain access to prisoners.

None of the managers we spoke with specifically mobilized language consistent with hierarchical understandings of their work (i.e. talk of exercising control, authority over those 'below' them). Instead of seeing themselves as managing people, the managers we spoke with focused on their role in orchestrating particular conditions for organizational success. They displayed an acute awareness of how their decisions echoed across professional niches to enable and/or constrain particular (collective) outcomes for service users and did their best to balance their immediate needs with long-term planning. We now turn to PVS practitioners undertaking work in the frontline niche, who were primarily responsible for face-to-face emotional work: supporting clients with complex, urgent human needs.

## Frontline Niche

Practitioners undertaking work in the frontline niche—variably referred to as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) or 'street-level workers' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003)—engage face-to-face with the public in order to implement policy and/or distribute social services. Existing accounts have centred statutory actors (e.g. police, teachers, social workers), but complimentary analyses of the voluntary sector are well overdue (Precious et al. 2017). We now illustrate that these practitioners primarily envisioned their roles as engaging one-to-one with criminalized individuals, prioritizing their clients' needs and aspirations over the organizational concerns of managers.

### Relationships with Service Users

In Canada and England, frontline practitioners were navigating distinct organizational, funding, and policy conditions, yet they were remarkably consistent in prioritizing service users' needs over organizational concerns. Marchella (Canada) positioned her face-to-face work with criminalized individuals as urgent and essential.

> **Marchella:** I show [service users], for maybe the first time in their lives, that someone cares about them […] In everything that I do, I try to be the most reliable, open, supportive force in their lives because […] I've seen the kind of difference that having someone in their corner can make.

Teresa (Canada) similarly framed clients' needs as her paramount concern, ahead of organizational policies.

> **Teresa:** I'd rather risk losing my job [by not following organizational policy] than not at least try to help her.

In contrast to managers who were concerned with long term planning, frontline practitioners *always* prioritized their clients' immediate needs. For Matilda (England), this meant that her working hours were driven by service users' needs, requiring (nearly) unlimited availability and willingness to far exceed the commitment expected in other jobs.

> **Matilda:** The voluntary sector is different […] there's more commitment, we don't work to particular hours, 9 to 5. I have a phone and one of the other volunteers has a phone and […] if someone rang up in the middle of the night, we wouldn't say, you know, "we're not open".

Frontline practitioners were impassioned advocates for the criminalized individuals they worked with—sometimes to the point of harmful effects (e.g. burnout, stress, depression, cynicism) (Tomczak and Quinn 2020).

> **Holly:** I can't say that sometimes it doesn't make me wake up in the night worried, because you never know which prisoner's going to be moved off somewhere else.

Gabrielle (Canada) described the long-term emotional weight of working with criminalized individuals.

> **Gabrielle:** Staff here…they just get worn down…everyone comes in optimistic…thinking that they'll be the one to turn someone's life around, but then at some point we're all smacked in the face with reality […] You learn to cope with your own smallness compared to [criminalized women's] problems.

Many practitioners, like Gabrielle, start their careers with grand ambitions and motivations to achieve change but become disappointed with the modest outcomes of their efforts. This is, in part, as a result of the complex and overlapping needs of their clients, as Kylie explained.

> **Kylie:** We're dealing with a very difficult client group […] Every client that we see has different issues, is at different stages, has different restrictions.

In addition to the diverse needs of criminalized individuals seeking services, Rose (Canada) described the varying ways these needs can be expressed.

> **Rose:** Trauma affects every part of you. Mind, body, soul, etc. For the women we support helplessness is a big feeling. When they come in they're going through shock, denial, insecurity, fear, depression, panic, grief, numbness, loss of control, anxiety, low self-esteem, and shame…likely also blaming themselves.

Navigating these challenges required frontline practitioners to adjust their expectations for outcomes. As Holly (England) described, small changes must be prioritized and celebrated.

> **Holly:** It may be a miniscule achievement to anybody else, but actually for them, you know, it's the biggest thing.

Criminalized individuals are often navigating complex histories and traumas as they seek to make change in their lives with the 'help' of voluntary organizations. Under such circumstances, Jacqui felt that even the smallest step forward—by conventional metrics—could be life-changing.

> **Jacqui:** It could take us two months to get someone to turn up to an appointment with us, and actually, they've been in and out of care and in and out of services and had very chaotic lifestyles for the last 20 years. For them to get to an appointment with you and trust you enough to turn up, that's huge and it's life-changing. And you know, it's the start of something completely amazing for them. But, actually on paper what it looks like is that you've made 30 phone calls to this person and arranged five appointments with them, and they've turned up to one.

Service users often bring multiple needs, many of which were beyond the capacity of voluntary organizations. Our data support Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2003:23) reflections on frontline actors: "they present themselves as pragmatists who temper their efforts to do the right thing with a clear understanding of what is possible for individual citizen-clients in the context of their everyday lives". For Steph and Terry (Canada), this meant respecting criminalized individuals' self-determination, supporting their goals and priorities over normative conceptions of 'success'.

> **Steph:** We have to meet [service users] where they're at, accepting them as who they are in that moment with no expectations. We have to get rid of our bias and all our pre-conceived notions. We can't assume that sobriety is the answer. We can't be treating them like who we want them to be.

> **Terry:** It's tough because we've all come into it wanting to help people and so you've got [service users] dealing with things that society has decided are a problem…and maybe even I think it's a problem. But it's a mistake to assume that this problem necessarily needs to be solved. Sometimes she just wants to vent and then go back to things as usual for her.

Under a hierarchical characterization of this sector, these examples could be considered evidence that 'street-level workers are willing to trade bureaucratic failure for client success' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003:115). However, seeking to understand the efforts of one group of practitioners using the metric of evaluation prioritized by another denies the variable ways in which 'success' is strived for in practice and across professional niches. Our thematic approach encourages more nuanced dialogue across the diverse values, considerations, and relationships informing how practitioners envision themselves as 'helping' service users. For example, managers, in their pursuit of organizational capacity, were often beholden to the metrics of success desired by funders (e.g. reducing re-offending rates, clients' substance use). Frontline practitioners, by contrast, were willing to prioritize the kinds of aspirations that their clients felt to be meaningful, even if these outcomes did not map onto their own views or their organizations' official mandates.

Nevertheless, 'upstream' factors and management concerns (e.g. funding austerity, political climate) did, of course, impact frontline practice. Rather than being concerned with 'big picture' responses such as obtaining new sources of funding, frontline practitioners considered these challenges through their individual relationships with service users. For example, Jacqui and Kylie (England) were most concerned with how they would communicate funding cuts to service users.

> **Jacqui:** In terms of the instability…there's always gonna be huge upheavals […] that's what can be really difficult cause you get to Christmas, then you have to start saying to women "we don't know how much longer we're gonna be here".

> **Kylie:** If you just got the 12 months funding, erm, at the end of that 12 months, if you haven't got continuation to work with that particular group, then you've got to say, "Well I'm sorry, we can't help you anymore".

Beth (Canada) shared these challenges, but explained that she could not scale back her support just because certain programs were no longer funded.

> **Beth:** We used to have another person in my position so we could share the work, but we lost the funding for that last year. So now I'm scrambling and doing a lot more work myself because I can't just tell these women "sorry we only care half as much now".

Rather than aligning with the austere financial realities of her organization, Beth continued to work in capacities for which she was no longer paid.

In this section, we have illustrated that frontline PVS practitioners primarily envisioned their pursuit of penal reform and social policy implementation through the lens of their relationships with criminalized individuals. They were especially attuned to the complex, urgent needs of service users, sometimes to the detriment of their own personal well-being and/or in contrast to the workplace policies set by their managers and organizations. Though frontline practitioners recognized the impact of 'upstream' factors on their interactions with service users, they sustained distinct perspectives from managers and continued to advocate for individual service users throughout austere conditions. None of our participants specifically characterized their relationships with managers as hierarchical, i.e. imbued with status distinctions and power disparities, but instead envisioned themselves and managers as each trying to put out different fires, so to speak. Rather than conceptualizing the different actions of managers and frontline workers as oppositional, as much of the existing literature has implied, the practitioners we interviewed saw supporting service users as a mutually constitutive endeavour that benefited from, and indeed depended upon, a 'division of labour' across professional niches.

## Conclusion

This paper has nudged conversations about the sheer diversity of PVS organizations and practitioners undertaking work in this domain (Tomczak 2016) to consider their interconnections. Rather than seeking to pin down what the PVS *is*—definitional work that has long pre-occupied scholars of the third sector (see Gidron 2013)—we have prioritized what PVS practitioners *do* and, more specifically, how their diverse efforts (could) fit together to support service users. PVS scholarship has tended to focus on isolated forms of engagement with service users (e.g. peer-mentoring, arts-based programming, education, religion), with few attempts to conceptualize the overall structure of this sector (but see Tomczak and Buck 2019). In this paper, we have sought to make sense of the diversity of efforts falling under the banner of 'helping' criminalized individuals by classifying PVS practitioners according to their professional niche. We demonstrated how managers and frontline workers charted distinct yet mutually constitutive pathways of intervention, engaged in different relationships (i.e. with other practitioners, clients, criminal justice stakeholders), and navigated tensions that were unique to their professional niche. Due to our broad focus on professional niches and their interconnections, our findings remain relatively abstract. We are therefore not well positioned to comment on how these realities operate within specific organizations, but our model could guide future research using institutional ethnography or case study methods. These could valuably consider the (lack of) interactions and coordination between activists and activist organizations, frontline, and managerial staff members. Further limitations in our research include the limited number of professional niches represented in our data, leaving the perspectives of administrators, executives, board members, and others unexamined; and the collapse of senior and middle management roles into a single 'managers' category due to our small sample size. Continuing the work we have begun in this paper, future scholarship of the PVS might examine the 'division of labour' amongst, and relationships between, practitioners who support particular types of clients (e.g. women, youth, racialized individuals) within and across the professional niches we have documented.

Moving away from the PVS as our specific case study, this paper has also offered a new model for understanding and synthesizing complex organizational behaviour across the voluntary sector, organizations undertaking social service provision, and street-level bureaucracies. In particular, our analysis advances typologies of voluntary sector practice that include (some) segmentation of roles (e.g. Heidrich 1990; Haski-Leventhal and Meijs 2011; Brudney and Meijs 2014) by providing a strong central metaphor and a new analytical vantage point. Thus far, the dominant strategy for analyzing the diverse efforts of practitioners in this domain has been to centre workplace hierarchies and their dynamics—documenting relationships between practitioners' organizational positions (i.e. 'higher' or 'lower') and the power, discretion, and authority they can exercise in their respective workplaces. By contrast, our thematic model focuses on how practitioners engage in different kinds of work, hold diverse aspirations, and attribute distinct meanings to their efforts as they intervene in the (social) problems of service users from different points 'along the river'. Without denying organizational hierarchies and power relations, we posit that any consideration of these features is enhanced by attention to the multidimensional nature of action and the broad range of relations through which they are inevitably filtered. More specifically, our research has revealed that although the efforts undertaken by managers, frontline workers, (and activists) are quite different, they are not discrete. By

mobilizing the ecological metaphor of the river, we demonstrated that 'helping' service users relies on the mutually constitutive efforts of practitioners across different professional niches—lateral variety that is often collapsed in accounts of this sector's hierarchical relations.

Advancing this thematic model in future research will require a shift away from characterizations of this sector that invoke a vertical filtering of ideas, ambitions, and action from policy, 'down' through the levels of organizational management, and finally to the frontline. Instead, and as we have demonstrated, there is much to be gained from envisioning this sector as a system of interconnected professional niches whose interactions involve multiple inflection points, only some of which are hierarchically ordered. Future research agendas in line with this focus may include: (1) exploring variation within the broad categories we have outlined to illuminate how distinct working 'styles' (e.g. risk-taking, innovative, resourceful, creative, charismatic) (Rossheim et al. 1995) operate within frontline, management, and activist niches and (2) further accounting for how personal and social characteristics, educational credentials, biases, or socially promoted mechanisms of help encourage individuals to consider some niches for 'helping' and not others.

Practically speaking, this way of thinking about action has also provided new insights into the conditions required for different professional niches to thrive and support service users together. What we have illuminated about professional niches may contribute to a more enabling approach to social and penal policy—one that is sensitive to the occupational, organizational, and sectoral conditions that variably impact practitioners' (collective) responsiveness to service user need and policy implementation. Thus, in sketching (some of) the professional niches oriented towards 'helping' service users, we have gained a pathway to understand, and potentially to influence, policy implementation and practice in a wide variety of voluntary sector and human service occupations.

**Acknowledgements** Quinn gratefully acknowledges funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada), the University of Toronto Department of Sociology, and the American Society of Criminology Division on Women and Crime. Tomczak gratefully acknowledges funding from the University of Manchester (School of Law Scholarship 2010–2014), the Leverhulme Trust (Early Career Fellowship 2015–2018), the British Academy (Rising Star Engagement Award 2017–2018), and the University of Nottingham (Nottingham Research Fellowship, 2018–2021). Both are greatly appreciative of Rachelle Purych's commissioned illustration of our theoretical model.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** This research received university ethical approval, participants gave informed consent, and pseudonyms are used throughout. The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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