Understanding The Shift: How Police Retirees Leave The Service

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Abstract. Although we know a great deal about the process of becoming an officer, we know comparatively little about how officers leave the police service at the end of their careers. Drawing primarily on 45 interviews with retired Ontario police officers and while using a grounded theory approach, we identify and examine three significant components of the police retirement process: (1) disengagement, (2) symbolic decoupling, and (3) celebration. Our findings demonstrate the act of leaving the police service is a complex social process in its own right, and that it is characterized by an agency/structure dialectic that ultimately contributes to our understanding of role-exit as a generic social process

Keywords: role-exit; retirement; policing; generic social processes

Résumé. Bien que nous ayons une bonne compréhension du processus par lequel les agents de police assument leur rôle en début de carrière, nous avons relativement peu de connaissances au sujet de leurs expériences de fin de carrière et comment ils quittent le service policier. Nos analyses se focalisent principalement sur 45 entretiens menés auprès des agents de police ontariens retraités. À partir des ces analyses nous identifions, en utilisant la théorie ancrée, trois aspects importants du processus par lequel les agents de police prennent la retraite : (1) le désengagement, (2) la dissociation symbolique, et (3) la célébration. Les résultats de notre étude indiquent que l'acte de quitter le service policer est en soi un processus social complexe qui se caractérise par une dialectique opposant agentivité individuelle et structure sociale, ce qui contribue en fin de compte à notre compréhension de la sortie d'un rôle professionnel comme étant un processus social générique.

Mots Clés: sortie d'un role; retraite; police; processus social générique

This paper has two interlocking objectives. The first is to further our empirical understanding of *how* police retire; in other words, we seek to look beyond the decision-making process in and of itself in order to focus on what the social process entails once the decision to retire has been made. Our second, and related, objective is to enhance our theoretical understanding of "role-exit" as a generic social process (GSP, see Prus 1987). As Ebaugh (1988: 23) notes, role-exit involves leaving a role "essential to one's self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex-role." Using an inductive grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978), we draw primarily on 45 interviews with retired Ontario police officers to assess how they went about leaving the service. Our findings indicate that leaving the police service comprises three core social processes, each with specific properties: disengagement, symbolic decoupling, and celebration. In its entirety, the process of leaving the police organization allows us to see how occupationally specific roles, personal identities, and long-standing claims to power and status are socially transformed. At the same time, our findings demonstrate something not commonly discussed in the role-exit literature since Ebaugh (1988): how the process of leaving a role located within a complex and tightly-coupled organizational structure may entail a pronounced agency/structure dialectic as individuals attempt to influence how the exit process unfolds.

We begin with an assessment and evaluation of the role-exit literature before going on to examine what we know about how officers exit the police organization once the decision to retire has been made. We then provide an overview of our inductive grounded theory methodology before delving into our substantive findings where we outline our three observed processes, explore their properties and relevance, and highlight how each reveals an agency/structure dialectic. We conclude by addressing why examining police retirement as a social process is important and what it can tell us about role-exit as a GSP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ebaugh's (1988) *Becoming an Ex* stands as one of the most complete formulations of role-exit as a GSP which, according to Prus (1987: 251), refers to the "transsituational elements of interaction" and thus to "abstracted formulations of social behavior." Using data from a diverse sample of individuals who left roles salient to their identity (e.g., divorcees, recovered alcoholics, ex-convicts, retirees, police officers, and

teachers), Ebaugh presents a model of role-exit comprising four stages: first doubts, seeking and weighing role alternatives, turning points, and establishing an ex-role identity. First doubts involve a reinterpretation of a role's normative expectations in the wake of growing dissatisfaction and are usually precipitated by psycho-social factors such as burnout, organizational change, specific events, or significant changes in inter-personal relations (Ebaugh 1988; Ashforth 2001). Seeking and weighing alternatives involves weighing the pros and cons associated with exiting a role while considering the viability of alternatives. Turning points are events or conditions that generate a sense of clarity and acuity around the need for, and viability of, a role-exit. Turning points often help reduce cognitive dissonance, trigger a formal announcement, and mobilize necessary resources. The final stage, creating an ex-role, involves a reconceptualization of one's identity while, at the same time, incorporating or accounting for one's prior role. This four-stage process is neither linear nor inevitable; indeed, momentum toward a role-exit can be accelerated, slowed or drained entirely as the individual contemplating the exit appraises contingencies and attempts to exert some control over how the exit unfolds (Ebaugh 1988; Ashforth 2001; Crowley 2018).

With more or less fidelity, Ebaugh's model has been used to understand a wide range of exits (see Rich 1995; Spehar et al. 2015; Simi et al. 2017) with many scholars assessing the extent to which subjects pass through the four stages (see Caillet 2011; Dziewanski 2020). Harris and Prentice's (2004) work on retired college instructors and Stier's (2007) work on former elite tennis players, for example, have substantiated the core elements of Ebaugh's model. Conversely, and while still generally supportive, other scholars have identified exit dynamics not adequately captured by Ebaugh's work. In their research on former professional athletes, Drahota and Eitzen (1998) argue Ebaugh's model fails to account for other variations in the exit sequence; for example, some former athletes noted they had first doubts *before* they turned professional and some experienced different types of withdrawal post-exit (e.g., emotional, financial, social).

Other scholars have been more concerned with how specific aspects of the exit process are experienced, whether cognitively and/or affectively, at the individual level. In their examination of role-exit among ex-politicians, Shaffir and Kleinknecht (2005) examine the rhetorical techniques used to neutralize the gnawing discomfort caused by the cognitive dissonance that comes with being elected out of office. A social-psychological focus is also present in Gambardella's (2008) study of how long-term military deployment facilitates role-exit among married couples, Gellweiler et al.'s (2019) examination of how volunteers ex-

perience and cope with the inevitable end of their service obligations, Naphan and Elliott's (2015) examination of how former military personnel manage the transition to civilian college life, and Simi et al.'s (2017) study of residual affect among former hate-group members.

What the literature has lacked since Ebaugh (1988), however, is a sustained examination of how agency and proximate social structures intersect and give shape to the role-exit process itself. Indeed, if, as Merolla et al. (2012: 152) argue, proximate structures are those "closest to persons, such as families, athletic teams, [or] departments within larger corporate or educational structures" and those which generate contexts "within which persons generally enact role identities" (see also Stryker et al. 2005: 95-96), it would seem only logical to examine agency/structure dynamics at points where their dialectical relationship is likely most apparent. To be clear, structural considerations are not *entirely* absent from the role-exit literature; indeed, some scholars acknowledge how larger macro structures can set the stage for particular exits (see Harris and Prentice 2004; Drahota and Eitzen 1998) or, in some cases, how they might prohibit an exit from coming to a conclusion (see Crowley 2018). However, the intersection of agency and proximate structures – such as those comprising an organizational environment – have received very little attention.

As stated, we also seek to enhance our understanding of police retirement as a social process. Although we know a lot about the factors that precipitate the retirement decision (see Violanti 1992; Hill et al. 2015) and retirees' mental and physical well-being post-employment (see Brandl and Smith 2012; Caudill and Peak 2009; Pole et al. 2006; Bracken-Scally et al. 2016), we know little about how officers leave the service once the retirement decision has been made. That said, the broader retirement literature does provide some indication of what might be involved.

Atchley (1976), for example, notes that incipient retirees sometimes develop a "short timer's attitude" whereby they begin to think more about retired life than work as they reduce their "work investments, activities, and motivation" (Damman et al. 2013: 455; see also Ekerdt and DeViney 1993; Harris and Prentice 2004). However, whether this is true for police officers is not clear. Likewise, several retirement scholars have acknowledged the significance of retirement celebrations. According to Jacobson (1996), retirement celebrations can provide retirees with emotional support as they come to terms with the effects of an "imminent rupture of long-standing social and organizational bonds" (Jacobson 1996: 224; also see Savishinsky 1995; van den Bogaard 2016). Violanti (1992) notes that retirement celebrations are common in police departments and that such events can "ease [an officer's] transition into the fu-

ture" so as to not leave him or her "stranded in psychological vagueness" (Violanti 1992: 15). However, Violanti's work leaves many empirical and theoretical questions unanswered; for example, it is not clear whether there are important variations in the form celebrations take, whether celebrations have latent cultural effects that extend beyond individual-level affect, or what role retirees might play in shaping the celebratory experience. In short, we know very little about how officers leave the organization after 30 years of service.

METHODS

Our approach to grounded theory is similar to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) classic, "objectivist" formulation. While we are sympathetic to the constructivist argument that concepts (or "categories") are ultimately a product of researcher-participant interaction (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2015, Thomsen and Brinkmann 2009), it seems only reasonable to assume that, so long as data are carefully collected, compared, and analyzed, emergent concepts can reflect reality well enough to allow for the development of useful theory (Glaser 2012; Thomsen and Brinkmann 2009). Thus, rather than develop a theory of how retired officers *construct* their retirement experiences, we seek to identify and understand latent patterns in the social processes that comprise the exit process (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978).

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with retired Ontario police officers from five different police departments. Participants were recruited via emails sent by their respective retiree associations. Of the 45 retirees interviewed for this study, 39 (80%) were male and 9 (20%) were female. The average age at retirement was 55 and retirees spent, on average, 32 years on the job. The distribution of retirees according to rank – expressed in categorical "tiers" to ensure confidentiality – comprises the following: former Constables (tier 1, n = 14, 31%); those who held middle management positions such as Sergeants, Staff Sergeants, and Detective Sergeants (tier 2, n = 20, 44%); and former senior administrative officers such as Inspectors, Superintendents, Deputy Chiefs and Chiefs (tier 3, n = 11, 24%).

Interviews usually took place in a coffee shop or at the participant's home and lasted between one and two hours. Participants were compensated $40 for their time. After each interview was transcribed and imported into NVivo for analysis, coding began with a line-by-line review to identify as many social processes as possible (e.g., avoiding work, consulting with colleagues, etc.). Coding then became more "focused"

(Bryant 2014) as new or existing concepts were used to capture social processes at a more abstract level (e.g., disengagement, symbolic decoupling, etc.). Although participants were volunteers, theoretical sampling was nevertheless possible because participants tended to share unsolicited personal information via email when they expressed their initial interest in the project. This information was retained and used later to select specific volunteers for interviewing in order to delineate a particular concept's properties or range of variation (see King and Horrocks 2010): this process continued until core concepts were saturated (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2015).

In the spirit of the view that "all is data" (Holton and Walsh 2017), we also collected data from other sources, including field observation, blog posts and, quite unexpectedly, YouTube. In fact, we were surprised to find videos posted of officers on their last day at work, calling into dispatch for the last time, or enjoying their retirement party. Although said videos may reflect particular personalities and/or organizational cultures, their content was surprisingly congruent with what participants described in their interviews and provided us with a unique opportunity to observe the retirement rituals of an otherwise closed organization. Field notes, blog posts, and video were also imported into NVivo and coded.

Police Retirement in Ontario

To provide a sense of context, a few words about police retirement in Ontario are in order. Officers usually retire in their mid-50s and collect a pension that is managed by the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (OMERS). Currently, officers can retire and collect an unreduced pension equal to the average of their best five years of salary if: (a) the officer has completed 30 years of service, or (b) the officer's age and years of service, when combined, equal or exceed 85 (hereafter referred to as 30/85).[1] And while there are many specific reasons for retirement (see Violanti 1992: 32-35; Hill et al. 2015), most officers retire shortly after they reach eligibility (see Greenland and Alam 2017) because their pension policy eventually caps the amount they can receive. At the same time, pension eligibility has also helped generate a widespread *cultural* sensibility that conflates 30/85 with having had a "full" career in policing. Jared (tier 2), for example, noted that 30/85 was like a "magic" threshold after which officers tend to feel a sense of completion.

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1.   https://www.omers.com/Employers/Administering-the-Plan/Supplemental-Plan/How-the-Pension-Is-Calculated/80-Factor-and-85-Factor (access date: October 24, 2019).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, "30 and out" has become a common refrain in some departments with those working longer playfully deemed "crazy" or "nuts."

FINDINGS

Disengagement

As their retirement date approached, some officers began to "disengage" by disassociating from the normative expectations that would have normally comprised their role (see Ebaugh 1988; Damman et al. 2013). That said, our data revealed two forms of disengagement, referred to here as "resentful" and "strategic." Resentful disengagement is reflected in officers who demonstrate a degree of contemptuous disregard for their police-related responsibilities while limiting their investments. Strategic disengagement, on the other hand, is reflected in officers who, while maintaining their sense of commitment, avoid particular courses of action so as to not become involved in matters unlikely to be resolved *before* their careers come to an end: more often than not, strategic disengagement involves avoiding tasks that might lead to court time post-retirement. Both forms of disengagement involve an effort to ensure the role-exit process is not "business as usual" by extracting oneself from the standard operating procedures that would have normally comprised an officer's typical role articulation.

Resentful disengagement appeared to be more common among tier one and tier two officers (i.e., those responsible for day-to-day field operations), especially when mental and/or physical exhaustion were present. Arthur (tier 2), for example, made it clear that while he did not "have any hard feelings about the police department when [he] quit [retired]," he was glad to leave because he had had enough of office politics and the proverbial "bullshit." Still frustrated, he asked rhetorically: "So, what's the sense of me getting involved in it [police work]? Because I quit [retired]! … So, the last three or four months, I practically did nothing." Likewise, after his health began to deteriorate, Scott (tier 2) was transferred into a less demanding role where he admitted to spending the day sitting with his feet up. At the time what Scott really wanted to do was play golf because he didn't "give a shit about anything else." Finally, Marcus' (tier 1) resentful disengagement came as a result of personal illness, family tragedy, and what he thought was widespread ineptitude on the police service. During the final weeks of his career he sought an office position which he described as a "nice cushy job." While there, he

spent most of his time searching for his second career: "Quite honestly … all I was doing was job searching and sending out resumes about six hours of my eight-hour working day."

To confirm our emerging hypothesis that resentful disengagement is more probable among tier one and tier two officers, we theoretically sampled as many tier three officers as we could and found no evidence of similar behaviour. We suspect the reason for this lies, not in the argument that senior officers are not as mentally and/or physically exhausted (indeed, most of our tier 3 participants spoke candidly about their fatigue), but in the organizational dynamics of senior administrative positions. Specifically, resentful disengagement requires a position wherein limiting one's investments can go largely undetected and/or unsanctioned (see Wilson et al. 2015). Thus, it is possible tier three officers are less prone to resentful disengagement because such behaviour would certainly draw scrutiny from a much smaller group of officers characterized by less redundancy in the division of labour.

Other retirees, like Andre (tier 2), admitted to taking their "foot off the gas" strategically but only because they wanted to minimize their professional obligations post-retirement; thus, they began working differently, but not necessarily less. For example, while working in the department's warrant office, Ted (tier 1) sought to avoid future court time by asking his colleague to make all formal arrests while he took care of the paperwork. Likewise, Louise (tier 2) avoided taking the "primary position" on certain calls for service for the very same reason. Brent (tier 2) also adopted the same strategy:

> Brent: I tried not to get involved in too many things because I didn't want to have a court case follow me afterwards [i.e., into retirement].
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> Researcher: …. If you're on your shift, how would you not …?
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> Brent: The other two Sergeants would go to a call if it looked like it would tie me up.
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> Researcher: I see.
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> Brent: …. The other two Sergeants and the Staff Sergeant kinda kept me out of the big picture. I would still give guys advice and I would still respond to calls, but when it comes to an arrest, unless it was totally unavoidable, I wouldn't do it.

While pulling back from certain role expectations, some officers would nevertheless exceed in others. Ron (tier 2), for example, strategically disengaged to avoid court time but remembered working hard to get his files

organized before leaving: "I was still proud of my career and the staff I worked with" he said. "I would never intentionally have let them down." And while Louise (tier 2) admitted she would not put herself in a primary officer position on certain calls, she remained committed: "I think people questioned me when I would [still] go to my management meetings. I was still doing everything, but even a little bit *more* [emphasis added]." In fact, Louise took it upon herself to ensure roster and payroll documentation was up-to-date and that her officers had been scheduled for their use of force exams.

Although we do not know how widespread strategic disengagement is, theoretical sampling suggests it is at least a partial function of organizational structure insofar as the probability of ending up in court is not distributed evenly by rank or assignment. Specifically, officers organizationally removed from contact with direct evidence would rarely find themselves in circumstances that would lead to future court time: this would certainly be the case for tier 3 officers in senior administrative positions. As Jay (tier 3) confirmed by email: "[court time after retirement] is not a concern as very few senior officers would be required to testify in criminal matters." In fact, tier 3 officers like Craig, Tracey, Elizabeth, Don, Martin, and Isaac recalled working hard up to and including their final day at work. By the same logic, tier one and tier two officers working in positions where contact with direct evidence is rare would also have no need to strategically disengage. For example, Murray (tier 1), who worked in the booking hall processing incoming offenders, said the way he worked did not change because ending up in court was highly unlikely.

In sum, disengagement comes in two forms and the likelihood of each occurring appears to be, at least in part, a function of where an officer is positioned within the organizational structure. Most importantly, both forms of disengagement reflect a deliberate effort to shape the role-exit process by not fulfilling the role-based normative expectations that comprise proximate social structures and, thus, knowingly reconfiguring the typical distribution of work.

Symbolic Decoupling

Policing's institutional legitimacy is tied inextricably to a symbolic infrastructure. Uniforms, badges, handcuffs, vests, and police vehicles are not just tools of the trade; they are also the symbolic means by which the organization constructs a legitimate police image and by which officers construct a sense of professional identity and fraternal belonging (Loader 1997; Manning 1977). Therefore, when an officer is about to

retire, the symbolic trappings of the police role must be shed in a process we call "symbolic decoupling."

Symbolic decoupling usually takes place over the course of an officer's last day at work. Moving from one internal department to another, officers return police-related belongings to the organization, such as notebooks, uniforms, radios, weapons, and their police badge. Apart from the organization recovering its material assets, symbolic decoupling is also about taking back that which symbolically designates a person a police officer. As Keri (tier 1) noted: "Turning in my badge and… it's very unceremonious. You walk up to storage and you say here you go …. And I remember the clerk took the badge and through it into a drawer with a bunch of other badges. I guess that means a lot, eh?" In a sense, officers are unceremoniously deconstructed in a fashion that bears no resemblance to the pomp and circumstance that would have accompanied becoming an officer 30 years before.

For some retirees, like Denise (tier 2), the symbolic decoupling process was a practical matter that carried little emotional weight: "For me, it was like get this shit out of my desk. Go, go, go!" However, Denise did suggest other officers, including her husband, tend to find the experience emotionally difficult: "I know giving up his gun and his badge will likely be traumatic for him." Denise's insight regarding her husband seemed almost prescient insofar as most participants acknowledged symbolic decoupling was hard. Meghan (tier 2), for example, described returning her badge as "painful" and Jesse (tier 2) found giving up his badge and firearm "emotionally difficult." Louise (tier 2) also had difficulty: "…the hardest thing I had to do was when I unloaded my gun for the last time. I couldn't give a [damn] if I ever *saw* a gun again, but that was on my hip for 31 years. It's part of your body after that long." For Christian (tier 1), returning his badge was not just difficult - it was gut-wrenching:

> … shit, so I go down and I turn in my uniform and that's where I ran into *big* problems because when you retire then you lose *that* [removes his wallet from his pocket and puts it on the table]. That's your wallet, that's your identity… That's your *badge* … now, they give you a retirement badge but that [his original badge] was my identity. That had been in my pocket since it was two months past my 20th birthday … *Gone*!

Although the intensity of Christian's experience was atypical among our participants, evidence elsewhere suggests it is not uncommon. In a blog post on Badgeoflifecanada.org, an emotional police retiree wrote:

"When you turn in your use of force equipment & your 'real' badge you also turn in your purpose, & what defined you as a person, in my case for nearly 3/4 of my life."[2] Violanti's (1992) work also documents the emotional turmoil felt by some American retirees, one of whom equated returning his badge and firearm with losing "part of his soul" (Violanti 1992: 15).

Though not a significant part of our analytical framework, questions about how participants felt revealed a key property of the symbolic decoupling process: officers who found the experience emotionally difficult appeared to resist decoupling by keeping items that, technically speaking, should have been returned to the police department. For example, after 35 years of service, Brent (tier 2) admitted he had found a way to keep his first and last notebooks which allow him to "flashback" to his time patrolling the streets. Likewise, for a period of time, Louise (tier 2) managed to keep her badge:

> I'll tell you, one of the things … the day I turned all my equipment in … they let us keep our dress uniform ... and then she asked me for my badge back and I said, "uh … no. I'll give it back in January" because I still wanted … that's a huge part of … like I can't imagine having a wallet without having a badge.

Other items retained by officers included batons, handcuffs, police hats, parade boots and, in one instance, the wooden grip of an officer's first revolver. Whatever the items are, the fact that some officers resist returning them suggests "completeness" is an important property which, in turn, demonstrates how incipient retirees exercise a degree of agency vis-à-vis structural processes deeply connected to how the organization maintains control over its institutional legitimacy and symbolic authority.

Retirement Celebrations

An officer's transition into retirement is typically marked by celebrations that come in three distinct forms: (a) the small group gathering, (b) the drop-in session, and (c) the banquet. These celebratory forms appear to have both manifest and latent functions while differing in terms of their level of institutionalization and ritual; in fact, both properties intensify as one moves from (a) to (c) and, thus, as celebrations become more structurally embedded. Interestingly, our data suggests some officers will attempt to minimize the organizational visibility (see Ebaugh 1988) of their exit by curtailing these celebratory processes.

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2.   http://badgeoflifecanada.org/on-the-other-side-of-retirement-2/ (access date: August 30, 2017)

The Banquet

Ontario police associations have been organizing retirement banquets for at least 15 years. Banquets are what Wynn (2016) calls "citadel" occasions – socially concentrated and tightly controlled events that offer highly regulated activities and well-defined roles. Of all three celebratory forms, banquets are the most institutionalized and thus structurally stable. With solidarity predicated on the extent to which attendees can manage changing "awareness contexts" (Glaser and Strauss 1964: 670; also see Collins 2004), the importance of pretense is widely understood insofar as prior misdeeds, lapses in judgement, and/or interpersonal conflicts are to be set aside (Wynn 2016; see also Ashforth 2001). At the same time, and as Ron (tier 2) implies, solidarity is also a function of ritual:

> The Association has a big retirement thing at the [location] …. They put on a really wonderful dinner. The retirees don't pay for anything… You get issued with your retiree's ring, that kinda stuff. The chap that emcees it is another retiree now, but he has a wonderful sense of humour and he goes one to the next and does… almost like a little roast.

Ron's banquet was hardly unique insofar as participants from each police service confirmed that retirement banquets always involve a flattering and/or humorous "recapitulation" (Glaser and Strauss 1971: 98) of the retiree's career, speeches, the presenting of awards and gifts, toasts, and a friendly roasting (see Violanti 1992; Savishinsky 1995; Ashforth 2001). Retirement banquets appear to generate a kind of collective effervescence that drop-in sessions do not.

Drop-in Sessions

Drop-in sessions are usually arranged by a colleague in the unit or division where the officer will finish his or her career. Because there is an expectation that somebody will "pull something together" to acknowledge an officer's retirement, and a shared understanding that stopping by to wish the retiree well is "the right thing to do," drop-in sessions are institutionalized, although not to the same degree as banquets. And although the social pressure to attend does help prevent the drop-in session from becoming a referendum on an officer's popularity, such gatherings are also prone to pretense. Peter's (tier 3) experience is illustrative:

Researcher: So, what was it like that day? Saying goodbye and returning all your gear?

Peter: It was quite fun, actually. Yeah, I enjoyed it. They put on a little retirement reception thing in the senior officers' lounge.

Researcher: How was that?

Peter: It was alright.

Researcher: Just alright?

Peter: I mean it was nice seeing a bunch of people and, you know, I mean a whole bunch of people show up that you can't stand and you know you just stand there looking at them thinking, you phony prick. You know?

By way of ritual, it is common for colleagues and perhaps a senior officer to share a few memorable stories about the retiree before acknowledging their dedication to the police service and wider community. After receiving a small gift, retirees generally use the opportunity to thank those in attendance before going on to identify what they will and/or will not miss about "the job." A sense of collective effervescence, however, is rare on account of the event's informal nature, the unrestricted coming and going of attendees, and a general understanding that the celebration was only meant to be a temporary interruption of an otherwise normal work day.

Small group gatherings

The small group gathering is the simplest form of retirement celebration and usually takes place at a restaurant or pub. These "little get togethers" are by no means institutionalized and, thus, are not precipitated by existing organizational structures. Russell (tier 1) described these "ad-hoc" functions:

A lot of people will have ... not everybody, but they'll get their friends, other policemen, they'll say "well we're gonna have a little celebration at a pub or something." And then they'll get together just for a couple of drinks and you know ... it's a chance to kid the hell out of the person that's retiring [laughs].

Because attendance is generally restricted to those with whom the retiree had a good working relationship, small group gatherings usually lack the pretense of the other two celebratory forms (see Jacobson 1996). And while it is not uncommon for attendees to raise a glass and acknowledge

the significance of the retiree's career, data suggests these events are not ritualized around the significance of being a police officer per se, but around the value of friendship.

While many participants welcomed the opportunity to celebrate their retirement with colleagues, willful participation does not appear to be a foregone conclusion. Although the normative pressure to attend a retirement event appeared to increase with the degree of institutionalization and ritual, our findings suggest officers sometimes attempt to exert control over the organizational visibility of their exit (see Ebaugh 1988). Low organizational visibility, or what is commonly called a "low profile" exit or wanting to retire "without fanfare," is achieved by making one's preference known to colleagues. Jared (tier 2), for example, reflected on his desire for a low visibility exit:

> I just went into work that day and my secretary, [name], and I said to her, "[name], I've got some bad news for you. Today is my last day at work. I don't want you to tell anybody." She said, "are you kidding me?" I started to cry and she started to cry and I said "don't cry, it's just how I want it. I don't want any fanfare" and I left work with my briefcase and never came back.

When Edward (tier 3) was asked about his retirement celebrations, he noted:

> Edward: Um, I didn't want anything. I wanted to just walk away. And I'm very serious about that.
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> Researcher: Why would you uh, just out of curiosity, why would you prefer to, you know, just walk away instead of… have a… have a party or a … or a reception?
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> Edward: I think it depends on your personality. Uh, one of my friend's .... he helped plan his retirement thing. That's what he… he liked stuff like that. Yeah, and my personality is that I didn't like the limelight type of thing.

Likewise, Don (tier 3), Brian (tier 3), Craig (tier 3) and Louise (tier 2) all indicated they were not interested in a highly visible exit and communicated as much to their colleagues. In fact, theoretical sampling revealed tier 3 officers were especially prone to this desire.

Normative expectations around what constitutes a "proper send-off" and a kind of structural inertia can undermine an officer's ability to exert control over their exit's visibility. Louise (tier 2), for example, wanted to exit quietly, but her colleagues had other plans:

… originally, I was just going to leave like on a midnight shift and take my platoon out for breakfast and say, "by the way, that was my last night." But then I got talking to another guy and he said "you can't, you have to… you have to let them… it's like saying I don't want a funeral. People want to come and pay their respects and send … and give you a good send off." …. It morphed into this ginormous [sic] party… I could not believe the turnout. It ended up being huge. So I'm glad I did it.

Despite making his preferences clear, Craig (tier 3) was also unable to exert sufficient control over the visibility of his exit: "Traditionally for [tier 3 officers] ... they have this big formal dinner and everything else. I didn't even want that. But it was somewhat taken away from me by [colleagues] and also my executive officer and my executive assistant." It is difficult to say for certain why senior-level officers appear most likely to seek a low-visibility exit. When asked directly, most implied it was a function of their personality. Whatever the reason, the data indicates that in response to the deeply institutionalized and ritualized celebratory forms, many officers do their best to resist the organizational visibility of their exit.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Scholars have studied why officers retire from the police service as well as their mental and physical well-being after returning to civilian life for quite some time (Brandl and Smith 2012; Pole et al. 2006; Ramey et al. 2009; Violanti 1992; Parnaby and Weston 2020); yet, few have examined *how* officers leave the service after the decision to retire has been made. Understanding how officers leave allows us to round-out our understanding of police retirement by seeing it, not strictly in terms of a crucial decision being made at a specific point in the life course, but also in terms of it being a complex social process in and of itself that allows us to see how occupationally specific roles, identities, and long-standing claims to power and status are socially transformed or dissolved (see Trice 1993; Ashforth 2001). In addition, understanding how officers leave their roles contributes to our understanding of role-exit as a GSP by highlighting how exits from complex organizational structures are likely to entail a pronounced agency/structure dialectic as individuals try to influence dimensions of their role-exit trajectory.

That people reduce their investments, activities, and motivation prior to their final day of work has been well established in the retirement and employee turnover literatures for decades (see Atchley 1976; Cude and Jablin 1992; Damman at al. 2013; Ekerdt and DeViney 1993; Niessen

et al. 2010; Wilson et al. 2015). Moreover, as Ebaugh (1988) and her contemporaries have made clear, disengagement is also a key dimension of role-exits more generally (see Crowley 2018). That said, the experiences of police retirees suggest there might be something more to the disengagement dynamic when individuals are exiting roles tied deeply to complex organizational structures. Specifically, and while not recognized in the police retirement literature to date (see Violanti 1992), our data shows disengagement among officers manifests in two different ways (i.e. resentful and strategic) depending on one's position relative to the chain of command and, thus, the overall division of labour within the organization. As Ebaugh (1988) notes, disengagement is about eschewing normative expectations; but it can also occur within the context of rigid organizational structures that ultimately shape what that disengagement looks like individuals attempt to shape the nature of their exit.

Insofar as symbolic indices of state-sanctioned authority are reclaimed, symbolic decoupling is how the police organization deconstructs an officer prior to retirement and is therefore similar to a "rite of degradation" (Trice 1993; see also Lange 1991; Ashforth 2001). This process has been identified in the police retirement literature (see Violanti 1992), but it has not been examined inductively and thus its properties have not been fleshed out adequately. As we have demonstrated, symbolic decoupling appears to vary with respect to completeness and it is our contention that this "resistance" is likely indicative of high role commitment and, thus, policing's elevated position on the identity salience hierarchy (see Burke and Stets 2009). At the same time, it also speaks to an officers' general desire to exercise a degree of control or influence over a rather rigid procedural dimension of the retirement process.

To the best of our knowledge, symbolic decoupling has not been addressed in the role-exit literature, likely because scholars have tended to focus on how individuals exit from roles where authority or status is not conferred symbolically on members (see, for example, Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Shaffir and Kleinknecht 2005; Stier 2007). In fact, Ebaugh's (1988) original theoretical model did not examine something comparable to the symbolic decoupling process either, this despite many of her participants being former members of the clergy and, to a lesser extent, police officers.

That most officers found themselves caught up in a retirement celebration of some kind is not surprising as there are cultural and organizational pressures to celebrate "properly." We also agree with Violanti (1992) that the manifest function of such events is to acknowledge that a critical juncture in the individual's life course has been reached and to wish that person well (Jacobson 1996; Savishinsky 1995). At the same

time, the importance of collective celebration extends beyond individual-level affect. By highlighting officers' dedication to their organization and community, retirement celebrations, like police funerals (Manning 2015), reinforce the "sacred" (Durkheim 1965) and thus have meso-level significance: their institutionalized and ritualised dynamics (especially in the case of drop-in sessions and banquets) reinforce the value and legitimacy of the organization and the contributions of its individual members (see Collins 2004). That said, officers seeking to decrease the visibility of their exit by limiting or avoiding celebrations suggests, once again, that incipient retirees make an effort to alter the trajectory of a highly structured retirement process, albeit with varying degrees of success. Interestingly role-exit scholars have yet to meaningfully address the importance of celebrations, likely because the theoretical framework has typically been used to evaluate role-exits that are not institutionalized in contemporary culture as a rite of passage (see Crowley 2018; Duran-Aydintug 1996; Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Stier 2007); thus, our research speaks to an under-recognized dimension of the role exit process.

This paper has inductively demonstrated that leaving the police service is a meaningful social process in its own right comprising disengagement, symbolic decoupling, and celebration. At its core, the police retirement process is also a form of role-exit that demonstrates the significance of agency/structure dynamics which have not been adequately recognized since Ebaugh (1988) presented her initial framework. Of course, at the heart of this process are individuals passing through a highly significant phase in their life-course: it is therefore not surprising that so many participants could remember how they left the police service with remarkable clarity. In fact, some participants could remember the sound of the door closing behind them as they walked into the parking lot toward their vehicle for the last time. For some, that walk brought a rush of anxiety, as if they had been abruptly cut loose from a role that had anchored their sense of identity for more than three decades. For others, it brought a sense of relief, as if the weight of the world had been lifted off their shoulders.

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