



An Interview Study of the Experiences of Police Officers in Regard to Psychological Contract and Wellbeing

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Abstract

In this paper, it is argued that the psychological contract (PC) could provide rich insights into the understanding of employee and employer relations within the police and the stress and wellbeing of officers. Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with active, full-time police officers and these were analysed using framework analysis. More than 100 base-units of meaning were identified which were categorised into six main themes namely ‘Motivation’, ‘Mutual obligations’, ‘Stressors’, ‘Negative consequences’, ‘Mediators’ and ‘Positive impact of the job’. From the interviews, it was apparent that some officers are experiencing PC breach and that this was having a negative impact on their wellbeing. These findings are considered and avenues for improving the situation are discussed.

Keywords Police officers · Psychological contract · Breach · Stress · Wellbeing

Over the past decade, policing has been widely discussed as a stressful occupation as compared to other professions in the literature (Campbell and Nobel 2009; Vuorensyrjä and Malkia Vuorensyrjä and Mälkiä 2011). By its nature, it has been identified as one of the most demanding and stressful occupations worldwide because of the officers’ exposure to a variety of acute and chronic stressful events at work (Lieberman et al. 2002; Magnavita and Garbarino 2013; Paton et al. 2009). Consequently, police officers are at greater risk of physical and mental ill-health, e.g. impaired psychosocial wellbeing and physical ill-health (Garbarino, Cuomo, Chiorri, and Magnavita Garbarino et al. 2013; Lucas, Weidner, and Janisse Lucas et al. 2012), self-harm and poor functioning (Volanti et al. 2016).

Policing in the UK is facing even greater challenges at present with the current organisational climate of budget cuts due to austerity measures. The current number of full-time police officers is 124,066 and their number has decreased by 2.2% (2752 officers) compared to the previous year. In addition, there has been a 35% increase in the number of officers

on long-term sick leave due to psychological reasons over the last 5 years, i.e. from 19,825 in 2011 to 22,547 in 2015 (Allen 2017). According to the Police Federation, the causes of this are unprecedented cuts to police numbers and a change in shift patterns, besides officers facing increasing job demands (BBC 2016; Guingand 2015). It is therefore timely to investigate how austerity measures might directly or indirectly act as a stressor for police officers in the UK and the impact on their wellbeing. The current study therefore aimed to explore the experiences of police officers working in the UK, the stressors they experience and their strategies to manage stress and the impact of psychological contract on their stress and wellbeing.

The success of a law enforcement organisation depends upon a good understanding of the stressors operating within the organisation and managing their impact on performance and wellbeing (Kuo 2014). Generally, there are two accepted sources of stress in policing namely job content (operational stressors) and job context (organisational stressors) (Houdmont et al. 2012; McCreary and Thompson 2006; Shane 2010). Operational stressors for policing, such as exposure to violence and death, pressure to perform efficiently, making critical decisions and life-threatening situations (McCraty and Atkinson 2012; Violanti and Aron 1993; Waters and Ussery 2007), have been linked to psychosomatic symptoms and psychological distress (Burke and Mikkelsen 2005; Dowler and Arai 2008; Setti and Argentero 2013; Volanti et al. Violanti et al. 2006). In addition, organisational stressors, such as shift work, overtime demands, feelings of being always on the job,

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problems with co-workers, inadequate training, weekend duty, poor relationships with supervisors and colleagues and a lack of administrative support (Ellison 2004; McCreary et al. McCreary and Thompson 2006; Shane 2010; Violanti et al. Violanti and Aron 1993), have been associated with depression and anxiety (Nelson and Smith 2016), suicide (Spence and Millott Spence and Millot 2016), burnout (Burke and Mikkelsen 2005), marital or family problems (Alexander and Walker 1996), poor performance (LeBlanc, Regher, Jelley, and Barath LeBlanc et al. 2008), emotional exhaustion, cynicism, absenteeism, early retirement, alcoholism and post-traumatic stress disorder (Brough 2004; Dowler et al. Dowler and Arai 2008; Martinussen, Richardsen, and Burke Martinussen et al. 2007; Setti et al. Setti and Argentero 2013; Toch 2002; Volanti et al. Violanti et al. 2006).

Previous studies have identified that police officers use problem-focused coping (e.g. actively addressing the source of stress) and emotion-focused coping (e.g. acceptance, distraction) to manage their stressors (Evans, Coman, Stanley, and Burrows Evans et al. 1993; Folkman 2008; Gomes and Afonso 2016; Nelson et al. Nelson and Smith 2016). Seeking social support from supervisors at work, family and co-workers has been reported as a coping strategy (Gutshall et al. 2017) to ameliorate the consequences of stressors (Patterson 2003; Thompson, Kirk, and Brown Thompson et al. 2005). In addition, getting good quality sleep was reported as a strategy to manage stress (Gutshall et al. 2017). The type of coping used appears to affect wellbeing; officers using problem-focused coping reported greater job satisfaction, whereas those using emotion-focused coping reported more psychological distress, smoking and alcohol consumption (Pasillas et al. 2006; Pastwa-Wojciechowska and Piotrowski 2016; Volanti et al. 2016). In this paper, we explore what factors police officers report mediating the effects of stress.

A key construct that has been discussed in the literature in the context of employee and employer relationships and work stressors is ‘psychological contract’ (PC) (Noblet et al. 2009; Stansfeld and Candy 2006). This construct is based on the assumptions of social exchange and refers to ‘an individual belief shaped by the organisation, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organisation’ (Rousseau 1989, p.123). Essentially, it refers to mutual beliefs between an individual and another party such as their employer. Employees’ feelings that their obligations are met are known as psychological contract fulfilment (PCF). PCF has been associated with job satisfaction, low work-related anxiety and depression and high levels of trust and fairness between employees and employers (Conway and Briner 2009; Guest et al. 2010). However, if employees feel that their obligations are unmet, it results in perceived psychological contract breach (PCB) (Conway and Briner 2009; Rousseau 1995), which has been found to predict imbalance in the employment relationship promoting psychosocial stressors in the work

environment (Robbins, Ford, and Tetrick Robbins et al. 2012). Psychological contract theory therefore provides a useful lens for the examination of what is experienced as a stressor in the workplace and why. For example, some organisational stressors might be accepted by employees as being ‘part of the job’ because they are part of their psychological contract with their employer. In contrast, other stressors may not be accepted by the employee because they represent a breach in the psychological contract of employer to employee, or because they impose conditions, which prevent the employee fulfilling their perceived obligations to their employer. Differences in psychological contract can therefore shed light on individual differences in the experience of stress in the workplace and reactions to it. Moreover, according to the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory, employees strive to protect their required resources such as time, money and health. Perceived or actual loss of such resources can lead to withdrawal behaviour (Halbesleben and Bowler 2007; Hobfoll 1998). Therefore, in this paper, we examine whether officers’ perceived unmet obligations or broken promises (psychological contract breach) relate to stress and wellbeing.

Despite there being an extensive literature on the importance of psychological contract with employees and employers from the commercial, educational and retail sectors, few studies have examined this construct with police officers (Castaing 2006; Chen and Kao 2012; Dick 2006; Gaston and Alexander 2001; Noblet et al. 2009; Rodwell et al. 2011). Atkinson, Barrow and Connors (Atkinson et al. 2003) investigated psychological contract within the police force and models of career advancement. They identified psychological contract as a key factor for improving retention of probationer police officers ($n = 163$). Likewise, Dick (2009) championed the importance of studying experiences of psychological contract breach or violation to identify the effects of idiosyncratic contracts in the police service.

Noblet et al. (2009) and Rodwell et al. (2011) investigated psychological contract with 582 and 128 Australian police officers, respectively. They found that PCF was not a significant predictor of wellbeing, psychological distress, job satisfaction and affective commitment. Similarly, Castaing (2006) investigated PCF and motivation, as antecedents to organisational commitment with 754 civil servants in France, of whom 179 were police officers. Psychological contract explained 11.8% of the variance in affective commitment. However, teachers represented the majority of the sample ($n = 550$) as compared to police officers, and therefore, it cannot be determined to what extent the results apply to police officers, specifically.

In the UK, Gaston and Alexander (2001) conducted a survey with 1226 volunteer police officers from the 43 police forces to explore the organisational and managerial implications of the employment of special constables in the police service. They identified that an unrealistic expectation

of what the role involved and poor quality working relationships were key factors influencing the decision to resign. Chen and Kao (2012) investigated the importance of psychological contract as a mediator between work values and service-oriented organisational behaviour with 435 Taiwanese police officers. PCF mediated the relationship between work values and organisational citizenship behaviour (an employee's commitment in the organisation, which is not part of a contract). They subsequently argued that PCF could be a key variable for improving organisational behaviour.

Dick (2006) adopted a qualitative approach to explore how managers and part-time officers within the UK police dealt with the transition from full-time to part-time working. He found that officers' beliefs about the transition from full-time to part-time work were influenced by individual inferences from organisational practices, namely industrial tribunals, actions by the human resource department, the government sector responsible for policing and the views of their co-workers who had made the transition.

In summary, there are only a limited number of studies that have examined psychological contract with a police sample. The findings have been mixed in terms of the role of psychological contract in explaining employee wellbeing and organisational behaviour. Only one of these studies has taken a qualitative approach to understanding the role of psychological contract and it had a very narrow focus (i.e. on the transitions from full-time to part-time work). Although previous studies have studied the psychological contract qualitatively with other professionals, due to the nature of the job, it is expected that police officers would have different obligations and reactions to breach than other occupational groups. Therefore, in the austerity climate, it is timely to extend this work using a qualitative approach to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the police officers' psychological contract and how this relates to their stress and wellbeing. In addition, this paper extends Conway and Briner's (2009) suggestion that psychological contracts might be affected by social context and this could only be explored qualitatively.

Conducting such a study has the additional advantage of being able to consider how well existing themes, or content, from extant quantitative measures of psychological contract generalise from the commercial, educational and retail sectors, on which they were developed, to the emergency services. At present, it is not known how suitable they are and this may, in part, explain the mixed findings of quantitative studies to date. Thus, this study would help address this gap in the literature by giving some indication of their suitability. The aim of the current study was therefore to examine UK full-time police officers' perceptions of psychological contract and its impact on their stress and wellbeing.

Method

Participants and Recruitment Participants were recruited from within one English county via advertisement of the study on the Intranet system of the police force. In total, 18 full-time, active, front-line police officers participated. The ethnic background of all the respondents was White, and 13 were males and five were female police officers.¹ Three were divorced, one was separated, two were single and 11 were married or in a relationship. Their length of operational service ranged from 9 to 30 years. They described themselves as detective constables ($n = 4$), firearms officers ($n = 2$), police officers ($n = 5$), police constables ($n = 6$) and a chief inspector ($n = 1$).

Materials A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant on an individual basis. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions that defined areas to be explored and allowed flexibility to discuss emerging issues. During the interview, demographic information was collected from the interviewee namely gender, ethnicity, marital status, job title, number of years worked in the police force and number of hours worked per week. Following this, the questions focused on their reasons for joining the force (to gain insights into their initial expectations of the employer and the job), the police officer's current perceptions of employee and employer obligations, stressors and strategies to manage stressors and the impact of job on their wellbeing (positive or negative).

Procedure Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Science, Technology and Mathematics (STEM) Research Ethics Committee at the University and consent for conducting the study was obtained from the police force. Telephone interviews were requested by the officers due to the nature of their work. Interviews were scheduled by the first author, and the participant information sheet and consent forms were emailed to the participants a week before the interview was conducted. Before the interview commenced, consent was obtained for the interview to be audio-recorded. The mean interview length was 52.82 min (range: 49–68 min). After the interview was completed, each participant was sent an email containing a debriefing sheet. Within the sheet, the contact detail of their support services at work was provided so that they could seek help, if required. The interviewees were given 2 weeks post-interview to withdraw from the study. After the 2 weeks passed, the audio files were transcribed verbatim (replacing names with pseudonyms) and deleted from the audio recorder.

Data Analysis Strategy The transcripts were analysed using framework analysis. QSR Nvivo11 was used to manage the

¹ The majority of police officers in the 43 forces in England and Wales were White, where 6% of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and 29% of officers were female (Hargreaves, Husband, and Linehan 2017).

data, while ensuring the analyst could review the original material. Each interviewee was allocated a row and the sub-headings were placed in a separate column. Each transcript was analysed by coding base units of meaning. These units were further categorised into logical low-order themes. The generated low-order themes for each participant were integrated across participants to further categorise into high-order themes capturing shared experiences of the participants. Lastly, the relationships and interactions between the themes in the matrix were examined by the authors, to ensure they captured the beliefs and experiences of the sampled police officers as expressed in their interviews (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

Results

Six main themes were identified that were labelled ‘Motivation’, ‘Mutual obligations’, ‘Stressors’, ‘Negative consequences’, ‘Mediators’ and ‘Positive impact of the job’ (see Table 1). Each of these themes served as an umbrella theme for high-order categories. These high-order categories consisted of low-order categories and base-units of meaning (see Table 2).

Theme 1: Motivation

This theme refers to officers’ motivations for joining the police force. Primarily, the police officers had three reasons for joining the force. For approximately 70% ($n = 13$) of the participants, their reasons for joining the police force were it being a ‘life time aspiration’ and ‘looking for a better career’:

I started my career as an [job title], but did not enjoy the work. I had aspirations to be a police officer (Male, Police officer 8).

I wanted a better career and also some sort of job satisfaction (Female, Police officer 2).

I was always passionate about having a career in the police force (Male, Police officer 7).

A few police officers ($n = 3$) joined because they thought they would enjoy the ‘diverse nature of the job’, namely meeting new people and learning about diverse cultures. Others stated that they wanted to make a difference by helping people, and they enjoyed the physicality of the job ($n = 12$).

I enjoy helping people; I prefer the physical aspect of the job (Male, Police officer 11).

This suggests that, alike other emergency services (Brunsden, Hill, and Maguire Brunsden et al. 2014), police officers enjoy the special status of helping people in

need. With 70% of participants ($n = 13$) joining for better career opportunities, in the current climate of austerity measures, the employers may face difficulties meeting such perceptions.

Theme 2: Mutual Obligations

This theme encapsulated police officers’ perceived unwritten obligations from their employers (‘employer obligations’), and in return their obligations to the employer (‘employee obligations’) (Conway and Briner 2009; Guest et al. 2010; Rousseau 1990). Five categories of employer obligations towards their employees, i.e. ‘fairness’, ‘appropriate equipment’, ‘value’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘support’, and two categories of employee obligations, i.e. ‘loyalty’ and ‘task achievement’, were discovered (see Table 2).

Employer Obligations

Approximately two-thirds ($n = 12$) of the officers cited ‘fairness’ as an important obligation in terms of promotion opportunities (i.e. no favouritism) and amount of work. This obligation has been captured within existing PSYCONES (2005) measure. The female officers ($n = 2$) stressed equal opportunities and wanting to be treated fairly like male officers. Previous research has associated interpersonal fairness with psychological wellbeing amongst police officers (Noblet et al. 2009).

I want to be treated fairly like other police officers and no discrimination has to be done in terms of being a female police officer (Female, Police officer 17).

Half of the interviewees ($n = 9$) spoke about having ‘appropriate equipment’ as a perceived obligation from their employer. Their safety is put at risk if they attend an incident without appropriate equipment. This suggests that having the appropriate equipment to perform their job well and look after their own safety is a key obligation amongst police officers. In addition, Walker (2010) measure consists of this obligation.

We are dealing with public, so safety is at risk, so having right equipment is very important (Male, Police officer 5).

It was further identified that some of the police officers ($n = 12$) believe that their employers should provide them with ‘flexibility’ (Herriot, Manning, and Kidd Herriot et al. 1997) in terms of deadlines and to understand if these are missed. Herriot, Manning and Kidd (Herriot et al. 1997) measure has mentioned flexibility as one of the obligations. This suggests that due to the nature of the

Table 2 High-order, low-order categories and base units of meaning by participants ($n = 18$)

High-order categories	Low-order categories	Base units of meaning
Motivation		Life time aspiration Looking for a better career Preference for job diversity.
Employer obligations	Fairness	Equal opportunities Opportunities for promotion Amount of work given
	Value	We want our needs to be looked after; look after your troops' wellbeing; value the people that work for you
	Flexibility	If mistakes happen, we should be considered human; Flexible in terms of deadlines
	Support	Provide support if something goes wrong More support from higher ranked officers Provide emotional support
Employee obligations	Task achievement	Unrealistic obligations Realistic obligations Sometimes realistic
	Loyalty (guarding the org. reputation)	Be ethical, moral, fair Maintain competencies Help people
Change in obligations	Internal social context (relation with supervisors)	Work politics Trust and support from colleagues
	External social context (marital status)	Family responsibilities Work-life balance
Breach of the obligations	Feelings of being neglected	Lack of trust No support from employers when required Not well supported when sick Not valuing staff Management more worried about who is going to replace us.
Source of stressors	Personal stressors	Work-life balance Divorce Menopause Family pressures to be part-time
	Operational stressors	Dealing with an armed suspect Seeing the bad side of people Dealing with traumatic incidents Making critical decisions Not able to help person in need
	Organisational stressors	Amount of work/work load Shift pattern Few human resources Untrustworthy and unsupportive colleagues Work politics Over-time requirement Employer having unrealistic obligations No "head space" / overwhelmed
Negative consequences	Intentions to leave	Wants to leave job
	Sleep problems	Nightmares Lack of sleep

Table 2 (continued)

High-order categories	Low-order categories	Base units of meaning
		Disturbed sleep
		Sleepless nights
	Fatigue	Constantly tired
		Exhausted
		No rest
	Psychological effects	Irritable; impatient; mentally exhausted; depressed; anxious
	Job dissatisfaction	Not wholly satisfied; satisfied; not as satisfied as I should be
	Overtaxed	More passive
		More exhausted
		Difficult to relax
		Unconsciously always alert
Mediators	No work-life balance	Miss social occasions
	Formal support / internal support	Communicate with my seniors and colleagues
		Flexible shift patterns
		Good occupational health unit
	Informal support /external support	Talk to my family and friends
		Support from GP
	Life outside work	Play video games
		Go fishing
		Go for walk
	Previous learning	Learning from previous experience
		Have become skilful at coping with stressors
Positive job impact	Personal growth	Have hardened up
		Got to mature quickly
		More responsible
		Confident and respectful
		More aware of diverse culture
		More protective, not paranoid

job and cuts in the work force numbers, officers are struggling with their workload and expect their employer to recognise this difficulty and accommodate it.

She is not flexible at all. She gets at my door and tells what she needs from me. She actually wants me to work as hard as she does. I have my own priorities and decide according to it (Female, Police officer 15).

We failed to attend a follow-up because we were asked to attend another incident (Male, Police officer 4).

Three-quarters of the interviewees ($n = 14$) cited ‘valuing your staff’ as an obligation from their employer. This obligation has been captured within existing PSYCONES (2005) and (Scheel and Mohr 2013) measures. The officers expect to be valued by higher management/their employer and this related to their job satisfaction and wellbeing.

Similarly, Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (Robinson et al. 2004) identified that within NHS employees, the fundamental factor for employee engagement was a ‘sense of feeling valued and involved’. The quotes in our interviews also indicated that this expectation had been breached in more recent times.

You say you value your staff but we are not sure any more (Male, Police officer 10).

‘Support’ is an obligation that has been mentioned in previous measures (Rousseau 1990; PSYCONES 2005). The interviewees perceived themselves to be supported by their employer when they had made a mistake. This implies their reputation and job security when something goes wrong is important to them. In addition, the female officers mentioned wanting emotional support from their employers. This finding resonates with Noblet et al. (2009), who found that support

inside and outside the work as a significant predictor of psychological distress and organisational citizenship behaviour. For some interviewees ($n = 9$), their quotes implied that this obligation was not always being met.

I feel [I need] to be supported emotionally (Female, Police officer 16).

If something goes wrong, happens, they never support. I would perceive more support from the higher ranks (Male, Police officer 9).

Employee Obligations

In exchange, all the employees perceived that the employers wanted them to be 'loyal' towards the organisation by guarding its reputation and protecting its core values. Loyalty is an obligation reflected in several existing measures of PC (Bunderson 2001; Herriot, Manning, and Kidd Herriot et al. 1997; PSYCONES 2005; Rousseau 2000). In terms of protecting the core values, the employer (the Police Service) were cited as wanting them to be ethical, moral and maintain their competencies. In addition, our interviewees believed that their employer wanted them to be fair while dealing with or helping people.

My employer wants me to portray them with dignity. I deal with people with justice and fairness (Male, Police officer 11).

We take oaths and have to do various things within the ethical codes. We promise to do at the best of our abilities (Male, Police officer 7).

A recent study of police officers in Australia similarly noted that a strong focus of police organisational culture was promoting a positive image of the Service to the public and that officers reporting being expected to comply with standardised procedures and codes of conduct (Brough, Chataway, and Biggs Brough et al. 2016). Of the previously published PC measures, only Bunderson's (2001) measure captures the obligation of 'achievement of assigned duties or tasks'. There were mixed obligations in regard to the achievement of assigned duties or tasks amongst the interviewees. Approximately one-quarter of employees ($n = 4$) mentioned that the employer has realistic obligations of them, but 20% of officers ($n = 4$) stated that the employers *sometimes* have realistic obligations. For example, having a belief that employees would protect the core values of the police force was seen to be a realistic obligation. However, around 58% of the employees perceived that their employers were unrealistic

in terms of asking them to perform multiple tasks at the same time with few officers. Further, they believed that their employers were not sympathetic and just gave orders, not understanding that the actual problem was a shortage of staff.

Half of the time the stuff they desire us to do is not achievable. They want us to perform for each and every person. We want to, but we are so short of staff. By the time we have done one job, we have another job to do (Male, Police officer 9).

It's quite easy for them as they sit at the desk and give orders. It's hard for them to understand (Male, Police officer 11).

From the obligations cited by the interviewees, it appears that the perceived obligations to the employer were relatively uniform, whereas the perceived obligations of the employee to the employer were more variable. The obligations cited in the interviews would reflect a relational type of psychological contract, except for appropriate equipment, which is more indicative of a transactional contract. A relational contract is implicit and highly subjective with no clear time frame (Conway and Briner 2009; Rousseau 1990), and it is the type of contract that one would expect to find with these participants since all are full-time active police officers. Previous research has shown that employees on casual contracts tend to have more transactional contracts and employees on permanent contracts tend to have more relational types of psychological contract (Conway and Briner 2009; Guest 2004).

Further, the sort of employer and employee obligations cited by the interviewees overlap with obligations cited for other sectors. For example, having the appropriate equipment, valuing your staff, flexibility, fairness, trust, loyalty and support are all factors within measures of psychological contract developed with employees from educational, retail and commercial sectors. As a result, it could be suggested that psychological contract measures such as those developed by Rousseau (1990, 2000), PSYCONES (2005), Walker (2010), Bunderson (2001) and Herriot, Manning and Kidd (Herriot et al. 1997) would be appropriate for use with samples of police officers to measure psychological contract, at least based on this sample.

Change in Obligations

The police officers also spoke about change in their obligations over time due to a variety of factors. The majority of them ($n = 16$) mentioned that their obligations have

changed on the basis of their relationships with their colleagues and supervisor. For example: quotes indicated that they expect colleagues to be trustworthy, supportive and not underhand; yet, some quotes suggested a change in relationships in the workplace.

There is more politics in the department than it was before (Female, Police officer 17).

Those who were married, in a relationship or single parents, mentioned that their obligations have changed due to having more family responsibilities, and maintaining a work-life balance had become more important to them. They felt their employer should be flexible in terms of shift patterns and having realistic obligations.

Now, I am more concerned about the work-life balance than before (Male, Police officer 12).

Breach of the Obligations

The responses in the interviews did indeed confirm that there were breaches to the officers' psychological contract. More than half of the officers ($n = 11$) reported 'feelings of being neglected' by the police force. They spoke about management not valuing them and being more concerned about recruitment policies.

I don't think really the management worry about the individuals; they are more worried about or bothered about who is going to replace us (Male, Police officer 5).

Feeling undervalued was a theme that also emerged in Brough et al. (2016) study of Australian police officers. A few of the officers ($n = 5$) mentioned that they were not well supported in terms of illness.

On a number of occasions, I was sick and not well supported (Female, Police officer 15).

I have to say no support from employers (Male, Police officer 3)

Another perceived breach in obligation from their employer was concerned with trust. Approximately 50% of the interviewees ($n = 9$) mentioned that they were unable to trust their employers or colleagues. For example, one of the employees mentioned issues of mistrust within the organisation with regard to occupational health department not maintaining confidentiality. Again, a similar theme was reported by the Australian police officers

sampled by Brough et al. (2016). As a result, the officers in our sample reported withdrawing from others.

I have basically turned inward; I mean you have secrets and cannot trust anyone (Male, Police officer 11).

I don't think any support is provided because I don't trust them anymore (Male, Police officer 3).

In terms of previous literature, Robinson (1996) reported employees' trust to be negatively related to psychological contract breach. Thus, building trust with employees is one way in which the employer could try to address psychological contract breach.

Theme 3: Stressors

There were three common sources of stress identified in the interviews, namely personal (stressors outside the work), operational (incident-related stressors) and organisational stressors (work-place-related stressors) (Houdmont et al. 2012; Shane 2010). These stressors were also reported to have a negative impact on the physical and psychological wellbeing of the police officers interviewed (see Table 2). The interviewees specifically referred to the following operational stressors: dealing with traumatic incidents, being unable to help a person with a problem and seeing the bad or evil side of people. Further, they quoted that it was distressing to be making critical decisions at an incident where the suspect is armed.

Dealing with anyone who is armed, you don't know what they are going to do (Male, Police officer 9).

The stressors cited by our interviewees were alike those reported by McCarty et al. (McCarty and Atkinson 2012), Violanti et al. (Violanti and Aron 1993) and Waters et al. (Waters and Ussey 2007).

Further, around 80% of the officers ($n = 14$) spoke about 'personal stressors', particularly work-life balance. They reported difficulty in maintaining a good balance between work and home life. This seemed more relevant to the interviewees who were in a relationship or who were single parents. Work-family conflict has previously been identified as a significant predictor of turnover intentions in police officers (Yun, Hwang and Lynch Yun et al. 2015) and job dissatisfaction (Kinman, McDowall, and Cropley Kinman et al. 2012). In addition, female officers reported family pressure to become part-time officers to maintain a balance between work and home. One of them spoke about going through divorce and menopause at the same time.

It is difficult for me to manage my family life and work life (Female, Police officer 17)

It is difficult to manage my work and life (Male, Police officer 11).

The interviewees mentioned a number of ‘organisational stressors’, consistent with previous studies (Campbell et al. Campbell and Nobel 2009; Shane 2010), such as shift pattern, work politics and poor trust and support amongst colleagues. The most common stressor faced by 70% of officers ($n=13$) was workload due to insufficient staffing. Collins and Gibbs (2003) and Sen (2015) also found workload to be an important factor in the level of stress experienced by police officers, with females being at greater risk of psychological distress.

Actually, the amount of workload we face with few police officers is the cause of stress (Male, Police officer 9).

It seems that within the current climate of financial cuts, the police officers are facing a high pressure of workload because of the decrease in the number of police officers. Therefore, the employers are reportedly expecting current staff to do over-time and their beliefs are perceived to be unrealistic:

The job has changed, as there is more work with less people (Male, Police officer 18).

People don’t realise how difficult a police officer’s job is in today’s financial crisis, how challenging it is as we have more work than people (Male, Police officer 9).

Theme 4: Negative Consequences

In terms of the consequences of these stressors and PC breach, the officers reported experiencing ‘sleep problems’, namely disturbed sleep, lack of sleep and sleepless nights due to shift pattern, no flexibility and nightmares. Sleep problems and sleep disorders have been associated with poor health and performance (Rajaratnam et al. 2011).

The shift pattern and amount of work reportedly had a number of negative effects on the police officers’ ‘psychological’ wellbeing (Campbell et al. Campbell and Nobel 2009). Some of the officers ($n=8$) were ‘fatigued’, which is constantly tired and exhausted. Most of them ($n=15$) mentioned they were mentally exhausted, irritable and impatient due to the amount of work they have to do and the shift pattern. They also reported feeling ‘overtaxed’ in terms of always being unconsciously alert in gatherings and finding it difficult

to relax at home. A few of them ($n=5$) found the nature of the job itself depressing; however, the work pattern and disrupted sleep were also directly associated with feeling depressed. Officers who are fatigued on-duty could be at greater risk of poor performance, work place injury and be a safety risk for the public (Fekedulegn et al. 2017; Waggonner 2012).

I was suffering from depression for a couple of years and the shift pattern and more work was the cause of it (Male, Police officer 10).

Working nights is very exhausting and tiring (Female, Police officer 17).

Disrupted sleep problems in this job are the cause of stressful job and depression (Male, Police officer 11).

Further, two of the officers had ‘intentions to leave the job’ because of the workload and the perceived unrealistic obligations of their employer. This may be because the high workloads are preventing them from spending enough time with their families and causing them to miss family time and social occasions. Similar findings were reported by Yoo and Matsui (2012). This indicates that psychological contract breach is linked with stressors that are associated with turnover intentions.

I would leave the job tomorrow if I could; the workload is increasing not decreasing (Male, Police officer 3).

The shift pattern didn’t work with my family time. I frequently missed dinners and social occasions (Male, Police officer 5).

The analysis further revealed that 55% of officers ($n=10$) were not satisfied with their job. Potentially, this could be linked to organisational stressors because of the workload and employer-employee obligations that were perceived to be unrealistic (related to task achievement, inflexible working conditions, and understaffing).

I have more job satisfaction than an average person but I’m not wholly satisfied (Female, Police officer 1).

I am not as satisfied with this job as I expect to be (Male, Police officer 3).

In summary, the interviewees named a number of stressors and identified a link between PC, stressors and their wellbeing, attributing mental and physical health problems to working conditions, including workload, which is likely more of a problem now than ever it was.

Theme 5: Mediators

A number of mediators were used by the police officers to ameliorate the effects of stressors and PC breach. Social support was perceived as an effective method for dealing with stressors. This was further divided into ‘internal support’ (support within the organisation) and ‘external support’ (support outside the organisation). In terms of internal support, most of the officers reported communicating with their seniors and colleagues when they were facing a stressful event. A few of them ($n = 3$) mentioned speaking to the occupational health department within the police force. Three officers appreciated the support they received in terms of being afforded a flexible shift pattern to help manage work and home life. This indicated that the employers were accommodating the employees with something that could otherwise result in PC breach and have negative consequences for their wellbeing.

I have flexible hours and I am able to give time to my family ... that is a great balance for me along with doing my job that I always wanted to do (Female, Police officer 15).

Around two-thirds of the officers ($n = 12$) mentioned that the external support received from family members and friends was preferable to that provided by colleagues. However, some ($n = 5$) felt that they could not talk about their job with their family, because this would result in their family being stressed or worried about them too. They did, however, have alternative sources of social support. For example,

I rarely talk to family, most of the time I talk to friends (Male, Police officer 2).

Some interviewees ($n = 7$) said they preferred to seek help from their general practitioner instead of seeking help from the occupational health department. The reason for this was that they mistrusted their colleagues and the organisation, as reported above.

Beyond social support, the officers quoted additional strategies related to life outside of work to handle stressors. These included playing video games, going for a walk and fishing. They also mentioned drawing on their ‘previous learning’, namely learning from previous experiences and becoming skilful at coping with stress.

In accordance with previous findings, the interviewees used problem-focused coping to manage their stressors (Folkman 2008; Gomes and Afonso 2016), namely social support from work, family and friends (Gutshall et al. 2017; Thompson et al. 2005; Patterson 2003). The interviewees also mentioned that the strategies they chose varied depending on the situation.

Theme 6: Positive Impact of the Job

There were a number of aspects to the job that were affecting the personal lives of our interviewees but in a positive way. The interviewees reported experiencing ‘personal growth’ with time, such as becoming more responsible, confident, respectful and mature. Moreover, they reported becoming aware of diverse cultures and becoming more protective rather than paranoid when they were off-duty. They also enjoyed helping people and developing close friendships with their colleagues.

I got mature quickly (Male, Police officer 11).

We, the police, have the best job to help people ((Male, Police officer 7; Female, Police officer 15).

Besides reporting facing a range of stressors and a breach of psychological contract, this theme illustrated that the officers interviewed still enjoy the experience of being a police officer.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the concept of psychological contract with a sample of police officers to better understand their obligations to their job and employer and their perceptions of their employer’s obligations to them. Further, we aimed to better understand the relationship between psychological contract and the stress and wellbeing of active police officers in the UK, particularly during a time of austerity.

The responses from our interviewees suggested that, like other occupations, psychological contract was a relevant construct in understanding employee and employer relationships and psychological wellbeing and why some factors were experienced as stressors. There was overlap between the content of previously developed measures and issues expressed by these interviewees. Therefore, the findings support the validity of previously developed psychological contract measures, such as Rousseau (1990, 2000), PSYCONES (2005), Walker (2010), Bunderson (2001) and Herriot, Manning and Kidd (Herriot et al. 1997), with this occupation.

Similar to Dick’s findings (Dick 2006), it was apparent that the psychological contract of a police officer is not just influenced by their immediate employer, but as a public servant, by the organisational practices of the Government, e.g. implementing budget cuts. Therefore, consideration needs to be given as to whether it would be appropriate to clarify what is meant by ‘organisation’ or ‘employer’ in quantitative measures of psychological

contract when used with public servants. The reason is the officers consider multiple individuals to be their employers (i.e. they talk about their immediate supervisor, their line manager and senior management). It is possible that breaches are occurring at one or multiple levels and thus steps to improve psychological contract would need to take account of this. Thus, it would be useful to study the psychological contract from multiple perspectives to understand and improve the employee and employer relationship (Conway and Briner 2009; Tetrick 2004).

Previous studies (Abdollahi 2002; Brough et al. 2016; Burke and Mikkelsen 2005; Kumar and Kamalanabhan 2014; Loftus 2010) have described how public scrutiny and negative media coverage can be a source of stress. Interestingly, none of our officers commented on either of these as a source of stress for them, personally. This might be different for more senior police officers in the organisation or those in different roles. Further, such stressors might be more potent in other countries.

In the present economic climate, our findings were consistent with evidence (Conway, Kiefer, Hartley, and Briner Conway et al. 2014) that organisational change due to austerity cuts is related to psychological contract breach, which in turn can be associated with lower contributions from the employees to the organisation. In addition, the employees are in a position where even if they wanted to fulfil their employers' obligations, they could not manage it because of a shortage of staff (Guinand 2015). Thus, as a result of unmet obligations, such as a lack of trust, unsupportive employers, no flexibility and unrealistic obligations of conducting multiple tasks with fewer staff, there is the very likely prospect of psychological contract breaches. Unrealistic obligations between employees and employers have been found to be a key factor in decisions to resign (Gaston and Alexander 2001). Further, Sparrow (1996) found unfulfilled psychological contract to be related to withdrawal behaviours. Therefore, it is suggested that psychological contract fulfilment could be used as a mediator for improving organisational behaviour (Atkinson et al. 2003; Chen and Kao 2012).

Contrary to Noblet et al. (2009) and Rodwell et al. (2011), the interviews did provide some evidence that psychological contract breach was affecting the officers' mental and physical wellbeing, and their job satisfaction, with some suggestion of negative outcomes for the organisation (i.e. intention to resign). This notion would be strongly supported by the COR theory suggesting that when employees stay within their organisation despite perceiving breach they may engage in withdrawal behaviours to protect the resources they already have (Kiazad, Seibert, and Kraimer Kiazad et al. 2014; Westman, Hobfoll, Chen, Davidson, and Laski Westman et al. 2004).

From the interviews, it was evident that some officers experienced breaches to their psychological contract.

Their perceived obligations of their employer to them included being valued and supported, to be afforded flexibility and to have a trusting relationship. However, in interview, some reported these obligations were not being met and feeling neglected. Interviewees reported not having the required resources to do their job (i.e. equipment) and that their employer had unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved in the time available. This finding was identical to Gaston et al. (Gaston and Alexander 2001) who subsequently found unrealistic employer obligations to be related to decisions to resign. If an employee continues to work besides being aware of unmet obligations, it is likely that the nature of the contract will become more transactional (Atkinson 2007) with the employee experiencing negative emotions, such as anger (Zhao et al. 2007).

The interviewees' accounts further describe how associations between psychological contract, wellbeing and stress are influenced by their social context, e.g. their relationships with colleagues and superiors and their external social context (marital status, family responsibilities). Officers drew on social support available within the organisation by communicating with their seniors and colleagues and from outside the organisation through talking to family and friends to mediate the effects of PC breach.

Although not all officers explicitly mentioned the effects of austerity measures, it was clear from their quotes that fewer human resources were being linked with an increase in workload, which was also reported to be negatively affecting their wellbeing and resulting in them being unable to meet their perceived obligations to their employer. As eluded to above, working conditions such as these can result in resignations and sick leave which further reduces the available workforce. In addition, they may hamper the recruitment of new staff. However, there may be other difficulties experienced in recruiting new officers that are not related to austerity cuts, for example, recruiting BME officers (Sutton, Perry, John-Baptiste, and Williams Sutton et al. 2006).

Limitations of the Study

There were some limitations with the current study that need to be acknowledged. The study design was qualitative and therefore the sample size was relatively small; female and BME police officers were underrepresented in our sample. Therefore, the views expressed in the interviews may not generalise to all police officers in the UK nor to those in other countries. It is, therefore, important to conduct similar research, sampling a more representative sample of officers, from across the UK, and from other countries. Moreover, the interviewees were

self-selected, which might introduce bias in the responses. It is also important to note that the full range of ranks was not represented in our sample. In the future, it would be of interest to compare the findings between different ranks of officer and those in different roles and track any changes over time. Finally, the views reported in this paper solely focussed on the employees’ perspectives. This study did not interview employers to understand their perspective of psychological contract. On-going work by the authors is, however, planned to engage with the employers to seek their feedback on the findings.

Implications of the Study

In terms of what actions an organisation or employer can take to promote psychological contract fulfilment and thereby improve the wellbeing of the workforce, organisational behaviour and outcomes (Chen and Kao 2012), the current austerity cuts place limits on what is achievable. However, there are some suggestions from the existing literature. Guest (Guest 2004) found that organisational communication could help control and manage psychological contract breach. Specifically, job-related (day-to-day work) and recruitment-based (initial entry) communication had an impact on the employees’ psychological contract. One strategy, therefore, would be to encourage peer cohesion and improve lines of communication between employees and employer (Johnson 2012; Miller Mire, and Kim Miller et al. 2009; Nadin and Williams 2011; Robinson and Morrison 2000).

From the interviews with the police officers, it was clear that work-life imbalance was a major source of stress. This can be tackled by enabling flexible working and removing pressure to do over-time. A further consideration would be training in mindfulness. Recent studies have indicated its benefits in reducing stress and anger for law enforcement employees (e.g. Bergman, Christopher, and Bowen Bergman et al. 2016).

Conclusion

The current study addressed a gap in the literature on the psychological contract, exploring its relevance to the police officers’ profession and its reported impact on their wellbeing and stress. The themes identified from the interviews reflect core constructs captured by existing quantitative measures of psychological contract. In the current climate of austerity measures, the officers reported facing considerable workload with fewer staff, which was affecting their work-life balance and wellbeing. Austerity cuts are therefore making it challenging for the immediate employer to fulfil the employees’ expectations resulting in PC breach. Such cuts are beyond the control of the organisation; however, PC theory indicates several areas that could be addressed to reduce the breaches, which were indicated in the interviews conducted.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Science, Technology and Mathematics (STEM) Research Ethics Committee at the University and consent for conducting the study was obtained from the police force.

Ethical Approval “All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.” Further ethical approval was granted from the University and Police Force.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent Prior to the participation, consent was taken from each participant to participate in the study and 2 weeks time was given if they would like to withdraw their data from the study.

Appendix

Table 1 Key themes and their definitions (*n* = 18)

Key themes	Definitions
Motivation	Interviewees’ different reasons for joining the Police force.
Mutual obligations	The perceived mutual obligations between the active police officers and the police force.
Stressors	A variety of stressors mentioned by the interviewees were categorised into personal, operational and organisational stressors.
Negative consequences	The negative consequences resulting from PCB and stressors
Mediators	A number of strategies used to manage stressors.
Positive impact of the job	The aspects of the job that have influenced their life.

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