‘When will you go back to “real” police work?’ The liminal nature of victim support police officers

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Victim support police work involves a wide range of relations within a police force, including expectations that set this occupation as a hybrid or liminal position, between what’s commonly considered classic policing and social work. Between victims’ and other police officers’ expectations, their experience is dramatically affected by liminality, with deep effects regarding group identity, satisfaction, and wellbeing. Drawing from qualitative research among victim support officers from Catalonia’s Mossos d’Esquadra corps, this article analyses how victim support officers find themselves between specific police fields and expectations, and how this defines them as liminars or subjects of liminal positions, roles, and actions. This, in turn, we argue, makes them an uneasy object and subject for victims, other officers, and for their institutions.

Keywords: policing; victim support; liminality; police corps; Mossos d’Esquadra

Introduction

Policing, as a professional activity at the core of modern and contemporary states, may be understood, first and foremost, as the formation of boundaries between groups, such as those between lawfulness and unlawfulness. Boundaries lay at the centre of policing, since this occupation's origins were based on poor laws and the governance or control of poor masses (Neoclous 2021) as the management and boundary work of masses and groups within the citizenry. Consequently, boundary making is a key component of police activity, as both legislation and police forces navigate categorical limits and boundaries: between lawfulness and crime, between the police force or corps[1] and society, among police units, etc. This wide range of boundaries and categories, as experienced from the officers' perspective, have been productively researched as constituent aspects of police experiences, as boundaries are made between those in the blue and those beyond (Charman 2017), between deserving and undeserving victims (Charman 2019), or between satisfactory and unsatisfactory policing (Ghaemmaghami et al. 2021), and so on.

Victim support (henceforth VS) police work is a specific activity in which police officers encounter on a daily basis a series of expectations, needs, and experiences that highlight a hybrid role, drawing from both a police corps and social services (see Hoyle and Sanders 2000; Losung et al. 2021; Schaible and Gecas 2010; Wilson and Segrave

[1] We use *corps* as synonymous to *force*, referring to a specific police organisation. We draw from the long-standing tradition of policing and police studies in which the French word is used in English, just as in Spanish or Catalan *cuerpo* and *cos* are commonly used. Consequently, we use *intra-corps* to refer to relations and interactions within a specific force or police organisation.

2011). As VS police officers interact with victims and respond to their experiences, trauma, and needs, they place themselves at the crossroads of practices and expectations, with potential consequences regarding the officers' self-identification, reflection, expectations, and well-being. For instance, how both victims and other police officers have expectations about VS officers being more akin to social services workers than to the corps in general may affect their job satisfaction and wellbeing. The way these officers perceive themselves, in relation to the rest of the police corps and in relation to the society, signals towards a hybrid role of VS work and towards a field of study in which anthropological notions, such as those of liminality, may be productively employed.

In this article, we explore the relational nature of policing regarding both practices and expectations. Following this idea, significant previous research has focused not only on the organisational nature of policing (Ghazinour and Rostami 2021), but also on the role played by boundaries and boundary work within police forces, particularly vis-à-vis officers' expectations, self-image, and wellbeing (McCarty et al. 2019; Rapp, Hughey and Kreiner 2021; Rojas Solís et al. 2021; Schaible and Six 2016).

This article analyses VS police work as a specialised set of tasks, interactions, and expectations within police organisations, drawing from the notion of individual and organisational liminality. We understand boundaries, self-images and reflections, and the self-positioning of officers within social fields to be key elements of this professional activity. As such, this paper builds on original research that explores the liminal nature or aspects of police work, and the specific needs and challenges faced particularly by VS police officers. After a literature review that summarises how recent research has analysed liminality and boundaries in policing and other organisational

settings, we present the methodological framework for our research among Catalonia's *Mossos d'Esquadra* police force. Our findings are structured along the line of the boundaries defined or experienced by the VS police officers, or with whom they establish them. Following the findings, we present a discussion linking our research to the current state of the topic.

Literature review

Victim support and policing studies

For the last decades, victim support policing, or VS policing, has been studied mostly from the perspective of shifts or changes in paradigms in police organisations, as opposed to traditional law enforcement (Clark 2003). Drawing mostly from UK-based community policing and similar models, police institutions and policies' focus towards community- and victim-oriented policing caught scholarly attention, particularly due to the key role of assumptions, conceptualisations, and definitions (Malay 2022; Paterson and Williams 2011). Following this, police-based victim support services have not received as much research as community policing, but they have been studied as a wide range of possible models and approaches that bridge police activities and victims' needs (Wilson and Segrave 2011).

Under this light, victim support conducted by police officers has been productively studied from the perspective of victim satisfaction and officers' health and wellbeing (see Hoyle and Sanders 2000; Losung et al. 2021; Schaible and Gecas 2010; Wilson and Segrave 2011), and as such it has been analysed as a complex role for police officers, with psychological and social consequences of how VS policing is understood and conducted. Following this, we argue that VS policing can be understood from the perspective of its singular position between traditional law enforcement and victims'

needs. Neither fully a beat cop nor a social services' worker, VS police officers, as we will see, may find themselves in *terra nullius*, between and betwixt roles and expectations. Consequently, we argue that liminality is a productive theoretical framework from which to analyse VS officers' experiences and needs.

Liminality and organisational contexts

Liminality has been an effective concept and approach for a wide range of disciplines, as it draws mostly from an anthropological background. Whereas frequent definitions link the concept's usage to Arnold van Gennep's (2011) study of rites of passage, most frequent applications of liminality are more precisely rooted in Victor Turner's (1974, 1982) work. According to his use and theorisation, liminality is characterised as a state or stage between two states or stages (Beech 2011; Cody 2016; Mesaritou 2018; Reed and Thomas 2021; Thomassen 2009, 2011; Wels et al. 2011). Accordingly, liminality may be seen as a 'suspension of identity' (Cody 2016) or as 'a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed, and/or it can be thought of as a more longitudinal experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness within a changeful context' (Beech 2011: 288). From this perspective, liminality has been productively used as a theoretical framework for a wide range of practices and occupations in which different stages may be mixed or suspended, including migratory movements (Craith 2009), affect and emotions in research (McMorrow 2019), gender and precariousness (Doshi 2022), entrepreneurship (Muhr et al. 2019), consumer engagement with brands (Mimoin and Bhardi 2021), or consultancy (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Sturdy, Schwarz and Spicy 2006), among many other topics.

Beyond specific occupation, this concept has also offered a unique vantage point for the study of organisational and corporate contexts, as a particularly promising line of

research for topics such as organisational change (Söderlung and Borg 2018; Tempst and Starkey 2004; Murphy 2020; Willis, Morgan and Sweet 2021), education and training (Rantatalo and Lindberg 2018), or leadership styles and their effects (Shaw-Van Buskirk, Lim and Jeong 2019). In order to fully grasp the complexities of these contexts, more recent authors have further developed the traditional understanding of liminality, reaching more complex arguments and structures. For instance, Bamber, Allen-Collinson, and McCormack (2017) defined specific forms of liminality, such as permanent and transitional ones, whereas Söderlung and Borg (2018) also expanded the concept with the argument that liminality may affect or define a process, a position, or a place. Several authors, on the other hand, have focused on the effects of liminality on liminars (individuals in liminal situations or roles) as they transition between personal and private life (Izak, Schorr and Case 2023) and as they experience uneasy or blurred occupational and personal identities (Budtz-Jørgensen, Johnsen and Sørensen 2019; Reed and Thomas 2021). Furthermore, liminality within occupational and organisational settings has also been explored from the perspective of individual and collective agency, or *liminal identity work*, a dialogic construction that relates to how an individual reflects upon their roles and identities, how these facets interplay with changes and shifts in the workplace and other individuals' or organisational perceptions and practices (Beech 2011).

To sum up, liminality has expanded into a broad conceptual framework particularly well-suited for blurred or uneasy contexts, in which liminars, either individuals or organisations, experience a combination or shift in expectations, roles, and experiences. Consequently, it provides a potentially productive set of approaches or tools from which to study an occupation previously characterised by the role of boundaries or classifications.

Police-related liminality

Drawing from a wider framework of organisational liminality, policing studies have also applied this concept to a wide range of corps- and police-like contexts and occupations. This is due to the fact that liminality is a productive lens from which to analyse unease positions and roles, such as those of policewomen in several United Kingdom forces (Brown, Fleming, and Silvestri 2021), officers in conflict-laden contexts such as Northern Ireland (Southern 2019), bodily and psychological transitions through police custody (Woof and Skinns 2018), and migration and movement by police officers (Durão 2011). Throughout these studies we find fruitful applications of liminality as a perspective that favours the uncertainty of changing conditions, uneasy roles and imprecise relationships, and these dimensions make it a promising framework for VS police officers and their experiences.

Similarly, the relational nature of police work has also been productively studied from the perspective of *boundary work* (see Jefferies, Bishop and Hibbert 2019; Rapp et al. 2021; Zietsma and Lawrence 2010), and this must be seen as a consequence of the liminality of tasks and expectations within police organisations. Boundary work is deeply connected to *liminal identity work* (Beech 2011), as ways to define and maintain limits and boundaries with other persons, organisations, needs, and responsibilities. For instance, research on the role of irony and humour of a communicative mediator between expectations and actual police practices (see Wieslander 2021) and on the role of silences and informal learning processes within police forces (Wieslander 2019) have shown how distinctions and boundaries among police officers and between them and other social actors are not necessarily clear-cut. Rather, they are continuously negotiated as part of the officers' agency, as they use and create boundaries to locate and define themselves within liminal contexts (XXXX 2023).

Drawing from this literature review, we argue that VS police work must be understood as an inherently liminal activity, or *permanently liminal* in Dorow and Sandrine's (2022) terms. This is due to the fact that VS police officers' activities sit at the crossroads between the expectations associated to policing and those associated to victim support and social services. On the one hand, other police officers, both colleagues and superiors, may have expectations about what policing ought to be that are informed by a beat cop- and detentions-based *esprit de corps* and organisational culture (Karp & Stenmark 2011) against which affective and care work provide a significant contrast. On the other hand, the relationship between VS officers and victims may define expectations that set said officers as a constant negotiation between police work and social services, in which boundaries must be continuously set to redefine officers and their roles as part of police work (XXXX 2023). Further research is needed on the experiences of VS police officers as liminars, and particularly of how they experience the interactions with both victims and colleagues. Whereas the police-victim relationship has been studied in the context of VS policing, the relationship with other police officers and with superiors has not been adequately studied, and as such more research is needed. Catalonia's *Mossos d'Esquadra* corps offers a crucial vantage point from which to study these experiences.

Materials and methods

Research context: Catalonia's police force

The analysis put forward in this paper is grounded on qualitative research conducted in late 2021 within the *Policia de la Generalitat-Mossos d'Esquadra* (henceforth PG-ME), the regional police force of Catalonia, a self-governing region or Autonomous

Community of Spain. With early XVIII century origins, the PG-ME became the regional integral police corps of Catalonia in 1983[2], with a wide range of responsibilities and tasks: public safety and order, judicial and administrative policing, criminal investigation, VS, and rural policing. As of 2021 the PG-ME had 17,360 officers according to their open database, distributed throughout eight hierarchical ranks and nine police regions[3]. The nine regions encompass the whole of Catalonia's almost eight-million population, and they vary geographically, demographically, and socially, ranging from the dense Barcelona metro area to the sparsely populated Pyrenees piedmont. This functional and geographical diversity makes the PG-ME police corps a particularly productive field from which to study how intra-corps and inter-unit differences inform police officers' experiences. In particular, the differences between units and within them, depending on the location, provide significant vantage points for the study of the relevance of the local context.

Within this organisation, a team designed and conducted research focused on the psychological and occupational issues experienced by VS officers, and particularly those who engage with gender-based and domestic violence victims. To this aim, we targeted three distinct functional units within the PG-ME, tasked with street patrolling and emergencies (USC, or *Unitats de Seguretat Ciutadana*), complaints reception and management (OAC, or *Oficines d'Atenció al Ciutadà*), and specialised support to victims of domestic, gender-based, hate crimes, and other sensitive cases (GAV, or

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[2] https://mossos.gencat.cat/ca/els_mossos_desquadra/ensfaltes_tu/coneix_el_cos/

[3] https://mossos.gencat.cat/ca/els_mossos_desquadra/indicadors_i_qualitat/dades_obertes/cataleg_dades_obertes/

Grups d'Atenció a la Víctima). Compared to other countries, USC roles involve frontline policing or the most expected functions of so-called beat cops, whereas OAC roles involve mostly processing from a police station. GAV roles, finally, are more akin to community police in the United Kingdom, as they tend to be related to Catalonia's community relations police. These three functional units, however, serve as posts within a police station, and not as distinct bodies or ranks, as all officers involved may be the same rank and division.

Sample and recruitment strategy

Drawing from the functional and geographical diversity within the PG-ME corps, we considered each police region's caseload of gender-based and domestic violence cases, divided them into three groups, and selected three regions out of nine, with above-average, below-average, and average caseloads. This selection, which also depended on the convenience of access and rapport with superiors in the police regions' headquarters, involved the consideration of how policing and the officers' experiences may vary along the geographical or demographic continuum. For instance, the three regions around Barcelona (Barcelona, Metropolitana Nord, Metropolitana Sud) had quite similar caseloads, whereas more sparsely populated police regions had fewer cases, but their police officers could have a more flexible or expansive set of tasks and roles within their local communities.

The recruitment strategy followed a combination of contacts via the main research unit within the PG-ME corps and our sampling strategy. Due to several emergencies some interviews and meetings had to be rescheduled, whereas some participants to the focus groups could not attend because of shift changes or urgent matters. This strategy, and our research team's dependence on the three regions' police

headquarters, had both benefits and limitations. First, we were able to access said headquarters, as well as other police stations, and contact more officers than we could have without their superiors' support. On the other hand, however, some officers felt compelled to participate and, in some cases, the unexpected participation of some high-ranking officers in the focus groups unbalanced or changed the group dynamics.

We ended up interviewing 11 individual officers (2 from USC, 2 from OAC, and 7 from GAV) and 26 officers in five focus groups (6 from USC, 4 from OAC, and 16 from GAV). Among the individual interviews there was almost a balance between the three police regions, whereas GAV officers where the majority, due to the project's focus on victim support. As for the five focus groups, the densest police region, RP3, had slightly more representatives, and GAV officers were also a significant majority. Focus groups ranged from three to seven participants, and two out of five were GAV-exclusive.

Interviews, focus groups, and analysis

As for the research design, our team conducted qualitative research focused on VS officers' experiences and perspectives. We designed the research as a two-phase process in all three selected regions, with the aim to exploit the complementarity of in-depth individual interviews and focus groups. First, individual interviews with officers in police stations and regional headquarters focused on the daily experiences of police officers from all three regions and all three functional units, and as such they served as the pillar for the second phase. During these interviews we followed a flexible interview script that drew from desk research on policing, occupational psychological issues, and resilience, among other topics. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, as well as anonymised. The focus groups conducted in regional headquarters focused on this

technique's potential for comparative and contrastive research. The logistics of the focus groups were more complex, as we depended on several officers, and we ended up with a wide range of combinations of police stations and functional units. Whereas all interviews were conducted by a single researcher, focus groups were a team effort with two researchers, who took turns leading the questions and the group dynamic. The comparative dimension of focus groups was incentivised with questions and elicitation techniques that sought to facilitate the comparison between units, police stations, and regions. As for the confirmative dimension of focus groups, we used them to confirm or test hypotheses that arose from the interviews. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed, as well as anonymised.

All interviews and focus group transcripts were codified and analysed with the use of qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. We combined a series of thematic analysis drawn from the desk research with open coding that arose from the analysis.

Findings

Victim-officer liminality

As the VS-related tasks within the PG-ME police corps depend on interactions between officers and victims, this dimension makes up the most significant issue affecting the officers' occupational experiences, both negative and positive. All three functional units encounter victims throughout a somewhat theoretical process that not all victims need to follow, starting with a crime and incident, and ending with specialised support. First, USC officers may encounter victims while conducting street patrols, but also when responding to emergency calls. They also involve the first triage at the police stations, as they operate the facilities' reception, and they evaluate and filter cases. Second, OAC

officers involve the first formal barrier that victims encounter, as their police tasks involve filing formal complaints. Domestic and gender-based violence cases, which we focused on throughout our fieldwork[4], were considered by the participant officers among the most complex cases, as they tend to require more time and involvement. Finally, GAV officers' routine involves interactions with victims of sensitive cases, as well as communication with public and private institutions. As a victim's case enters a police station's GAV system, they tend to have a closer relation with the GAV officers, and particularly so for high-risk victims. GAV officer-victim interactions encompass initial screenings and risk evaluation, recurrent phone call to assess or reassess their case's risk, and to bridge the victim and the case's needs regarding judicial procedures, protection orders, and referrals to other services.

Throughout this process, VS officers sit at the crossroads between victims' experiences and needs, on the one hand, and their organisation's language, procedures, and expectations. First, all officers interviewed acknowledged that their occupational satisfaction draws mostly from their ability to help people. In fact, most participants lauded the interactional and communication-based nature of their job: 'It's… when you see that someone's life has changed and they thank you for it sometime, thanks, and it's a recognition that the organisation won't give to you' (IRP3_1)[5]. Among the most

[4] The project was funded by a public institution focused on gender equality, and consequently research had to focus on police officers who interact with victims of domestic and gender-based violence.

[5] Henceforth, 'IRPX_Y' refers to the Yth interview conducted in police region X, whereas 'FGRPX_Y' refers to the Yth focus group conducted in police region X. RP1 is a below-average police region, regarding their case load of gender-based and domestic violence, whereas RP2 and RP3 are average and above-average police regions, respectively. They

common satisfactory experiences with victims, they included being able to change their mind about protection orders or complaints, judicial resolutions deemed favourable to the victim, and being thanked or remembered by the victims. Officers may also refer to a deep connection, more akin to a bidirectional one:

> The job… I always compare it, right? To a job in which we'd work with objects… If this was an assembly line and we worked with things, obviously if you stop working you screw things up with the assembly line, right? But of course, in our case we work with people… and sometimes the person can only talk to you at 13:30, which just happens to be your lunch break, and that's it. […] They tend to be very thankful, and there's a connection with victims. I've always thought that victims end up taking small fragments from us, a small piece from inside me, and they also leave us with pieces from them. (IRP1_3)

These interactions, however, also provided the most frequent sources of anxiety, doubts, and negative experiences on the job, as most participant officers explained how an excessive link to a case or to a victim's trauma may impair them or even make them quit the job altogether. Exposition to victims' traumas and experiences, particularly the most violent ones and those involving children or elderly people, may affect the officers' performance, as well as their mental state, as they may need to take a break or discuss what happened with someone. 'There's people who find it very difficult to disconnect. There are people who find it difficult to… they make it [the case, the trauma] their own, and you see it' (IRP1_1). The research also revealed feelings of responsibility and duty that are linked to an officer's agency, as their individual resources and capabilities are deployed when facing a case, just as Sarah Charman

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also coincide with the demographic division of Catalonia, as RP1 is among the least dense police regions and areas, with a mostly rural environment, while RP3 is among the densest ones, as part of the Barcelona metro area.

(2018) studied. Most participants explained how their personal experience, and learning from colleagues, helped them stop wanting to go the extra mile, beyond their individual and professional capabilities: ‘experience helps, right? I remember that when I started I experienced it very badly, because it’s this issue, as if wanting to rescue them’ (IRP3_1).

This connectedness to the victims they work with is linked, however, to how VS officers place themselves as a link between victims and the PG-ME corps. Particularly in the case of GAV officers, they tend to be the first or most relevant contact between a victim and social services ranging from regional and local institutions. Throughout recurring calls and visits to check on victims’ wellbeing, more relevant in the case of victims with restraining orders against offenders or abusers, most GAV officers end up having a close relationship with some victims. Some officers explained frequent anecdotes or memories of meeting victims outside of police settings, or helping them with appointments or bureaucratic procedures with other institutions. This echoes a commonly shared practice, particularly in small police stations in which the GAV units are unipersonal, of individualisation or personalisation of cases: officers who voluntarily seek a more personal connection to a victim as a way to help them and understand them better. This clashes with the explicit defence of victim-officer boundaries by the PG-ME corps, as the organisation recommends avoiding such a personalisation of the police VS work. For instance, a two-officer GAV managed jointly their cases: ‘there may be GAVs that do distribute the cases, but we both do everything and we are involved in every procedure. […] It isn’t good for a victim to focus on only an officer, because they sometimes overshoot’ (IRP2_1).

While discussing this issue in most interviews and focus groups, most participants shared the notion that victim-officer individualisation or personalisation

may have negative psychological and practical effects, particularly as victims may expect VS officers to be the main providers of services and solutions, even beyond policing duties. Against this risk, most officers acknowledged the need for boundary work or limit-setting strategies. For instance, they may explicitly involve other colleagues, they may avoid managing repeated visits from a previous victim, or they may use their uniform, as it may 'build a distance for you, right? But… the uniform also gives a sense of safety and of protection' (IRP1_3). An explicit use of boundaries as a strategy for managing and safeguarding one's mental and physical health (see Rapp et al. 2021, Domínguez Ruiz et al. 2023a), however, may be limited by environmental and organisational factors. For instance, throughout the least populated police region, RP1, whose population tends to live in small cities and towns, officers may find it more difficult to define boundaries between their private and professional life. All RP1 officers explained how the 'little town' nature of their municipalities made it easier for them to encounter victims while taking a walk or doing the groceries. An officer explained how whenever they go to the fishmonger 'I go for a one-minute chore, and I stay for at least fifteen minutes because… as I walk the supermarket's aisle the people keep on stopping me' (IRP1_1). Rather than seeing RP1 as an outlier, we must consider this a consequence of significant factors that vary along the demographic and geographical characteristics of all police regions, as officers from small police stations within the densest region, RP3, also experience this issue.

Another issue that defines a liminal status for VS officers, particularly regarding one of Söderlung and Borg's (2018) topics of liminality, is the lack of a space of their own for victim support meetings. Focus groups were particularly useful for this topic, as VS officers from different police stations and localities compared the spaces they have for meeting with victims, or lack thereof. In most cases, with small GAV units, they

share offices with other units and they need to either ask their colleagues to leave or ask for a moment of privacy to make a sensitive call (IRP1_3). In some cases they need to use waiting rooms, common rooms, and even the personnel canteen, which creates uneasy situations for victims and other officers (IRP3_3). In one case they needed to stop using one of these shared spaces as other officers used to share pictures and personal details of cases and victims. For the majority of GAV officers this lack of a space of their own made them constantly need to negotiate spaces with other units' officers, despite some few cases of material support from superiors who did provide them with priority for some rooms.

A final factor that adds blurredness to their occupation, regardless of the police region, is the victims' misconception of where police tasks end and social services start. As VS officers interview victims and conduct risk and needs assessments, they may liaise with judges, prosecutors, social services, emergency housing, and a plethora of private and public institutions focused on specific needs and capabilities. Officers may be the single interlocutor with victims, or at least among the first ones, and they may receive requests that, from the police organisation's perspective, are way beyond their resources and prerogatives. Even though, as we saw, acknowledging one's limits was shared as an individual strategy to counter potential senses of greater responsibilities, participants did share instances in which they may go out of their way to help victims. Despite this, they may also need to remember victims that they are in fact police officers, in both implicit and explicit ways.

The most significant example is that linked to protocol- or court-ordered actions, locally known as '*oficis*' or *ex officio* actions. As sworn police officers, VS officers share the legal obligation to report any crime they know of, on a level or scale different to that of a civilian social services worker. As such, they are aware that when they are

dealing with a victims' report, or during an interview, they have the legal obligation to report a crime, even though the victim may not be willing to file a formal complaint. Several GAV officers discussed this, the role of *'oficis'*, when discussing cases of gender-based violence in which the victim did not want to file a complaint, did not want to file it yet, or was not sure about doing it. Several officers explained how they reminded victims of their legal obligation to report crimes, even interrupting them, when discussing their cases. This must be seen, in our view, as an explicitly acknowledged boundary negotiation, as police officers are aware of the legal limits of their formal knowledge and, instead of aiming to know a potentially criminal fact, may erect a boundary that lets them not report it.

Consequently, the VS police work, as experienced by USC, OAC, and GAV officers, may be productively seen as a clearly liminal work. Sitting at the crossroads between a social services-oriented role and police structures, procedures, and responsibilities, VS officers constantly negotiate their position, role, and place with victims. The reminder of their police and legal duties regarding '*oficis*', the strategic use of depersonalisation and uniforms, and the use of psychological and physical separation tactics, such as physical exercise after work, are forms of explicit *liminal identity work* (Beech 2011), as a co-construction process in which liminars continuously define their boundaries and roles. As such, vis-à-vis victims, VS officers face an uneasy or constantly shifting position in which they need to assert to victims and to themselves how their role includes both policing and victim support. As victim officer interactions involve intersubjective negotiations of expectations and practices, we may thus see the role of both *permanent* and *liquid liminalities*, just as we conceive their occupations as *neither a full-on police officer nor a social service worker*, or a constantly shifting mix of both roles. VS officers may be understood as *permanent liminars* as they may be

constantly seen as living or embodying either a middle-ground or a no-man's land, professionally speaking. This liminality not only involves their role and their tasks, but also their use of spaces, as most GAV officers said they lack spaces of their own for meeting with victims, and they need to negotiate their physical and occupational space with colleagues.

Intra-corps liminality

If interactions with victims set VS officers at a limbo-like space between social services and policing, communication and relations with other PG-ME officers, on the other hand, further define VS work as a liminal occupation that may be seen as not police-like enough. Interactions with colleagues make up a large part of daily interactions for all three units analysed, as they intersect at different points of a victim's trajectory from a crime or incident to the appropriate specialised support. On the one hand, interactions with other officers nurture the *esprit de corps* (Karp & Stenmark 2011) or corps pride and culture, as they share and comment on the organisation's mission and values: 'I like the job I do, you know? And I think that it's so necessary, so necessary and so important…' (IRP3_1). These interactions, on the other hand, inform daily practices and roles, as they tend to need each other. For instance, when OAC officers have good relations with the '*companys de porta*' (gatekeeping officers, or the first filter at every station), they tend to share tips or criteria to evaluate the urgency of the cases. Similarly, GAV officers, even when in unipersonal GAV stations, also rely on other colleagues when in need to share experiences or vent their frustration or stress, and they may participate when needed in operations with other officers.

Interactions with colleagues from other units encompass the majority of negative experiences shared by VS officers. Particularly among GAV officers, their view is that

the rest of the corps does not understand their job, as ‘among colleagues, we’re seen as… those who stay inside an office and earn the same, who don’t patrol the streets […]. We aren’t police officers’ (IRP2_4). We may identify a relevant dissonance between a stereotyped view of VS policing as straightforward job, and a lack of actual knowledge or willingness to do more about it. Officers explained how ‘in fact nobody wants to volunteer for our Group’ (IRP3_1), or that GAV ‘is a department that isn’t appreciated’ (IRP2_4). Interestingly, the most explicit comments shared by officers regarding their perceived lack of respect by other colleagues involve their very own identity as police officers. An officer shared how platoon colleagues would make remarks to them such as ‘those who actually work… As if I didn’t work, you know?’, while another one during the same focus group complained about some colleagues’ surprise when they had detained four perps, as ‘the idea is that it’s impossible for one [of us] to detain four people because we spend the day chatting, chatting, and chatting’ (FGRP3_2). Another officer also shared how some colleagues asked ‘when will you go back to *real* police work?’ (FGRP2_2).

As for the leadership styles and how VS officers feel regarding their hierarchical superiors, our research signalled towards a widespread negative view with few exceptions. This negative assessment did not need to be targeted exclusively towards their immediate superiors, as relations with them could be appreciated and valued, but most frequently they complained about the upper echelons of the corps. Focus groups were particularly fruitful as the direct comparison between colleagues from different stations revealed vast differences regarding management styles, trust given by immediate superiors, or the discretion entrusted by them to the OAC or GAV officers. Further critiques towards the resources provided by their immediate or higher superiors involve the material spaces in which they must work. Most GAV officers need to share

offices with other units, particularly in the case of unipersonal or small groups, and they may thus lack private spaces for the victims to talk. During two focus groups, for instance, GAV officers compared their available spaces, ranging from briefing rooms they must vacate before meetings, empty offices they must look for and request, even asking for favours, or even the outermost waiting room, among visitors, noises, and emergencies. 'The spaces are inadequate. I think that if the corps or the station bosses cared a little bit about the GAV, within the corps […], they would look for an adequate space' (FGRP3_1).

When considering the perspective of the higher-ups within the PG-ME hierarchy and the public administration it depends on, participant officers were highly critical of what they understood as a sharp contrast between the public relevance given to VS by the corps and the resources and support the officers actually receive, and this fact left them not knowing what to do, what to expect, or what to feel about their tasks. An officer succinctly by saying that 'the politician wants to provide an image, and if to do so they must throw the *mosso* (officer) under the bus, they'll do it' (IRP3_2). The main critique, further discussed during several focus groups, involved the comparison between the political promise of GAV services and the actual resources, time, and capabilities of the existing VS officers. A focus group participant expanded this as a comparison between what superiors and political representatives promises to the public or the corps and what police officers actually receive in terms of resources. In their view, within the PG-ME the tendency is to 'sell projects, to sell things… and we're increasingly far from the expectation citizens get, the reality they actually find. We're selling a Ferrari and the people come and find a [FIAT] 600 without doors' (FGRP3_2). They further expanded the compassion by saying that the PG-ME corps and the Catalonian political representatives tend to sell an image of a highly capable, resource-

rich, and community-oriented police force, whereas VS officers still experience uneasy situations and are particularly limited in terms of resources. In their view, the service provided by VS officers is comparable to the high quality of a Ferrari because of the officers' willingness and commitment, while with the resources and support they receive the service could be more akin to a low-quality, semi-broken-down vehicle. This view criticised the resources, but not the actual officers' commitment and service.

The hybrid or complex role of these agents, at least according to how they are perceived by fellow officers, resonate with studies of how liminars, or liminal individuals and groups, may be seen as dangerous or impure. Similar to Cody and Lawlor's study of liminal consumers, we can argue that VS police officers, because of 'their liminal characteristics and existence […] confuse and complicate accepted classificatory schemes, resulting in a visible exclusion from societal activities and organization' (2011: 222). As such, they may find themselves lacking an adequate voice or representation within their organisation and this may not depend on a temporary or transitional shift, as it may be part of 'a state of permanent liminality in which there is an oscillation, that is, being both X and Y' (Brown et al. 2021: 263). Like consultants such as those studied by Czarniawska and Mazza, the liminal condition may cause a 'fragility of self-esteem', in this case within the police corps, and liminars may thus 'look for possible sources of pride and self-assertion' (2003: 277). These forms of pride and compensation may be experiences and memories of successful cases, cherished quotes by victims, and a comparison to other officers' management of victims' needs and expectations.

The everyday reality of VS police work within the PG-ME corps, as an occupation neither fully understood nor supported by most colleagues and superiors, leave VS officers as liminars not only with victims but also with colleagues. Drawing

from Bamber et al.'s (2017) types of liminality, we argue that VS police officers occupy a permanent role of *occupational limbo*, as it 'infers a fixed, "trapped" state, to be changed only via profound intervention', and '[t]hose who inhabit this state are *not* moving towards a threshold' (2017: 1521). During our fieldwork USC, OAC, and GAV officers discussed a potential imminent change that would force all GAV officers to also file formal complaints as OAC officers do. This change, which would alter GAV officers' workload without additional officers or further changes in procedure, further exacerbated their liminal role and position within the force, as they felt neither understood nor supported, and abandoned by both politicians and superiors. Against this background, VS officers reminded themselves of the importance of their occupation and shared experiences among VS colleagues.

On the one hand, how VS officers interact with victims can be seen in fact as an oscillation between potential roles or tasks, or rather between sets of tasks understood as either police-like or social services-like. However, VS officers fully know that they are *still* part of a police corps, and they show this fact via their management of information, *oficis*, their responsibilities, and their relationships with victims, institutions, and other officers. On the other hand, their position and role within the Mossos d'Esquadra corps may be seen more productively as that of occupational limbo, as their liminal situation from their colleagues and superiors' view and assessment may be seen as a fixed one that could only change via organisational interventions in their culture, resources, and procedures. Political shifts and media campaigns regarding VS jobs within the corps and the promotion of victims' reports during our fieldwork promoted a shared view of most participants as what we may understand as the embodiment of occupational limbo. Neither fully part of the corps as per a male-, violence-, and arrest-dominated narrative and view of the corps, nor a part of the social services system, and with a deep

commitment of belonging to the corps and to policing, despite a feeling of not being respected or funded as they should.

Discussion

VS police work sits at the crossroads of two significantly different sets of expectations and practices. On the one hand, stereotypical police work, drawn from a *esprit de corps* marked by masculinity, detentions, and public safety activities. On the other hand, victim support and its link to social services and other public services' providers, as a response to victims' needs and expectations. The contrast between these two activities or, rather, between these two sets of expectations, define a liminal role and position for VS police officers, who may be seen and may experience their occupation as a constant negotiation about what being police officers entail and about what they can and ought to offer to victims. Consequently, liminality is a productive framework from which to understand the blurred nature of VS police work and how officers understand themselves, how they are seen and understood, and how they interact with other individuals and organisations. As VS officers encounter victims, for instance, they find themselves within a myriad of needs and expectations that may place them amidst different roles, tasks, and even professional identities. Whenever the boundaries between the job and the personal or private life get blurred, furthermore, VS officers may find themselves facing tendencies or trajectories between those of police officers and judicial procedures and *ex officio* actions, on the one hand, and those of social services, psychologists, and other service providers, on the other hand. These VS officers reflect upon their role and position within their police corps, beyond their interactions with victims and other civilians. Under this light, they may also feel out of place, between or betwixt expectations, roles, and identities that may place them in

uneasy spots, uncomfortable positions with colleagues or superiors, and even in the midst of difficult mental and physical places.

Liminality may act here as a 'fruitful darkness' that offers 'constructive potential for exploring the lived experience of interstitial positioning' (Cody and Lawlor 2011: 208), and as such it provides a productive vantage point from which to study the nuances of complex roles and positions within hierarchical organisations such as a police force. As our research has shown, liminality is a fruitful perspective for the study of blurred roles and positions, and particularly for the analysis of the three dimensions singled out by Söderlung and Borg (2018). First, VS police support may be seen as *liminality as a process*, as the whole process of victims through the PG-ME corps entail a blurred transition from beat cop-like tasks towards VS and social services in which GAV officers in particularly enact this process daily. It is precisely their everyday procedures of connecting police institutions and tasks to social services and other institutions that constitute a liminal process in which victims do not necessarily know or understand the boundaries between policing and social services. Second, VS police work entails *liminality as a position* due to the contrasting expectations and responsibilities that officers negotiate between police work and victims' needs. Issues such as boundary work and liminal identity work highlight the liminal position in which VS officers constantly need to negotiate their identity as both VS providers and police officers. Finally, the lack of spaces of their own, the constant negotiation of spaces for VS tasks, and the strategic use of spaces and distances highlight the fact that VS police work involves *liminality as a place*.

The fact that the PG-ME corps was experiencing changes at the time of the fieldwork, regarding the possible incorporation of GAV officers into OAC tasks and regarding public campaigns to promote the humane and support side of the corps,

supports the idea that liminality may be productively employed for the study of organisational change (Söderlung and Borg 2018; Tempst and Starkey 2004; Murphy 2020; Willis, Morgan and Sweet 2021) and education and training (Rantatalo and Lindberg 2018). VS police work and its place within the PG-ME organisation also proves the relevance of *liminal identity work* (Beech 2011) as a potential perspective from which to study agency within liminal situations, contexts, and roles, and as a possible bridge between liminality and boundary work (Domínguez Ruiz et al. 2023b). Taking into consideration the myriad practices, encounters, comparisons, and auto- and hetero-reflections involved in said identity work highlights the relevance of in-depth ethnographic research. This also exposes the importance of adopting innovative pathway towards new theoretical and empirical insights informed by the study of police organisations, social services and other similar institutions, and the experiences of victims and the professionals they interact with. VS police work is thus a relevant research topic from which to study how liminality may be applied to various occupational settings as a productive vantage point.

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The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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