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**Valour for Money?**  
**Contested Commodification in the Market for Security**

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## **Abstract**

Scholars of security governance generally assume that the labour of private security officers can straightforwardly be transformed into discrete commodities. We argue, by contrast, that it is extremely difficult to commodify the labour of private security officers because their duties frequently require them to confront and work through both economic responsibilities (what does my contract say?) and moral obligations (what does my conscience say?). We substantiate this argument by exploring how heroic acts performed by private security officers – preventing suicide attempts, intervening in violent assaults, orchestrating hazardous evacuations – are celebrated through industry awards ceremonies. In so doing, we not only contribute towards the conceptualisation of security goods as contested commodities, but also facilitate a reappraisal of the market for security.

## **Key words**

contested commodification, heroism, legitimation, moral economy, private security

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## Introduction

Across the globe, rising levels of inequality and fear, the emergence of mass private property and the proliferation of global corporations whose supply chains transcend nation-state borders have stimulated an insatiable demand for protective services delivered by private security officers (Spitzer and Scull 1977; Shearing and Stenning 1983; Loader 1997). In 2017, *The Guardian* ran a feature story on the £140 billion market for security reporting that private security officers now outnumber police officers in no less than 40 countries, including Australia, Canada, China, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) (Provost 2017: 20). In their eagerness to capture the far reaching and futuristic implications of this trend – what Brodeur (2010: 260-261) terms the ‘watershed syndrome’ – scholars of security governance generally take for granted that the labour of private security officers can straightforwardly be transformed into discrete vendible commodities enumerated in a contract and exchanged for money on the open market (Rigakos 2016: 66-73). This underlying assumption gives rise to three overarching narratives on role of the market for security in the contemporary socio-economic order: the ‘sceptics’ who reject commodification as the harbinger of a dystopian, atomised world brutally stripped of the social bonds which hold the public sphere together (Reiner 1992); the ‘idealists’ who embrace commodification as an opportunity to (re)build local capacity away from the overbearing influence of the monolithic state (Wood and Shearing 2007); and the ‘pragmatists’ who accept commodification but, at the same time, draw regulatory lines in the sand beyond which the market is not permitted to function (Prenzler and Sarre 2014).

In this article, we take issue with this underlying assumption and carve out a new analytical space in which to reappraise the market for security. We do so by

defending the following claim: it is extremely difficult to transform the labour of private security officers into discrete vendible commodities because their professional duties frequently require them to work through both economic responsibilities *and* moral obligations. While their average working day is largely comprised of routine activities which can more or less be commodified through specialised record keeping procedures (Rigakos 2002), these officers are frequently stationed in close proximity to 'hotspots' where there is a higher-than-average likelihood of disturbances to the prevailing order – thefts, assaults, drug deals, medical emergencies and so on. When such disturbances do unfold, these officers are usually first on scene and are regularly confronted with risky offenders and/or vulnerable victims. In these situations, we contend, they are compelled to 'zig-zag' between two 'super-utilities', one economic, the other moral (Etzioni 2003: 113). What does my contract say? What does my conscience say? Should I secure this gateway? Should I chase down that fleeing offender? Should I guard this stock? Should I assist that victim? Scholars of security governance tend to disregard these tensions by assuming the primacy of the economic super-utility and, by extension, the inviolability of the commodification process – an assumption Williams (2005: 2) regards as 'one of the last remaining meta-narratives of our time'. In this article, by contrast, we conceptually and empirically tease out the tensions between these super-utilities in an effort to better understand the fragility of the commodification process.

In conceptual terms, we articulate this tension using Radin's (2001) notion of 'contested commodities'. Similarly challenging the discursive hegemony of the economic super-utility – what she terms the 'language of universal commodification' – Radin (2001: 20) introduces a more nuanced spectrum: 'some things are

completely commodified – deemed suitable for trade in a laissez faire market. Others are completely noncommodified – removed from the market altogether’. ‘However’, she continues ‘many things can be usefully understood as incompletely commodified – neither fully commodified nor fully removed from the market’. In this category of ‘contested commodities’ Radin (2001) includes, among other things, the trade in infants, human reproduction, sperm, eggs, embryos, human sexuality, human pain and human labour. In this article, we approach the labour of private security officers as another signal case of ‘incomplete commodification’ – that is, we regard the tension between their economic responsibilities and moral obligations as an indication that their labour is neither ‘completely commodified’ nor ‘completely noncommodified’. Rather it occupies the complex and contested grey area in between these two poles. Furthermore, and once again following Radin (2001: xii), we mobilise this analytical framework as a ‘pragmatic methodology...sticking fairly close to the details of context and not engaging in a search for a grand theory’. So, what is the specific context of this article?

In empirical terms, we focus on how heroic acts performed by private security officers are celebrated within the context of industry awards ceremonies. Heroic acts are, broadly speaking, prosocial interventions which involve a substantial degree of personal risk (Franco et al 2011: 99; Jayawickreme and Di Stefano 2012: 167) and are commonly regarded as a ‘high watermark of human behavior’ (Franco and Zimbardo 2006: 33). Given their apparent ‘moral excellence’ (Walker et al 2010: 914), these acts serve as an illuminating vehicle through which to probe the tensions between an officer’s economic responsibilities and moral obligations and, in turn, the contested nature of the commodification process. The main advantage of investigating these acts within the context of awards ceremonies is ready access to a plurality of valuable data.

Heroism is a slippery object of study. 'It defies clean definitions and on-the-spot data collection', writes Zimbardo (2007: 487), 'heroic acts are ephemeral and unpredictable, and appreciation of them is decidedly retrospective'. As noted in past research (Walker et al 2010; Franco et al 2011), such 'retroactive appreciation' most decisively enters onto the historical record during the course of awards ceremonies for bravery, where narrative accounts of heroism are assembled, evaluated by a range of judges and then celebrated within the spectacle of a ceremony. With a suitably dextrous methodology, awards ceremonies therefore facilitate an examination of heroism from a plethora of viewpoints. In this article, we use documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and direct observation techniques to explore how heroic acts performed by private security officers are celebrated within the context of the British Security Industry Association's (BSIA) Outstanding Act award. This particular award has been selected not just because it is a well-respected accolade – it has been running since 1998 and annually distributes nine regional and four national prizes – but also because the UK context serve as a valuable empirical base from which to draw broader generalisations.

Against this conceptual and empirical backdrop, we advance the following key findings. To begin with, we make a distinction between two forms of heroism in the market for security. The first is 'contractual' heroism in which the economic responsibilities and moral obligations of private security officers are in broad alignment – a harmonious 'incomplete commodification' of their labour. The second is 'non-contractual' heroism in which the moral obligations of private security officers threaten to undermine their economic responsibilities through the generation of organizational risks for their employers – a conflictual 'incomplete commodification' of their labour. Furthermore, we argue that during the course of the awards cycle 'contractual' heroism is often recognized at the expense of 'non-contractual' heroism so as to resolve this

tension in favour their employers' economic interests. Lastly, we observe how this morally problematic resolution is quietly performed outside the spectacle of the awards ceremony in a conscious effort to sustain the sector's moral standing in the eyes of its workforce and customer base. Each of these findings illustrates the difficulties in commodifying the labour of private security officers. We develop these findings over six further sections. The next section critically reviews the extant literature on security goods as contested commodities to contextualise these findings and highlight their contribution. The subsequent section outlines our methodology. The following three sections investigate the celebration of heroism through the BSIA Outstanding Act award from three different angles: the heroic acts themselves, the judging panel and the ceremony. The final section uses these findings to reappraise the role of the market for security within the contemporary socio-economic order.

### **Security Goods as Contested Commodities**

Today there is an extensive and diverse scholarly literature on the market for security (for a recent overview see Gill 2014). A common feature of this literature, however, is the assumption that it is possible to transform security goods – whether in their human form (the labour of private security officers) or nonhuman form (security equipment, technologies and infrastructures) – into commodities in a relatively clear-cut manner (Goold et al 2010; Loader et al 2014; Loader and White 2017; Whelan and Dupont 2017). This is not an unreasonable assumption of course. There is a great deal of analytical purchase in approaching security goods as straightforward commodities using the 'language of universal commodification' (supply, demand, price, opportunity costs, etc) and it certainly does not preclude critical engagement – this literature is replete with warnings about the dangers of complete commodification (Rigakos 2016).



Yet, in our view, any study which proceeds on this basis can only go so far. Security is not an 'ordinary' commodity. It is a constitutive element of any given socio-economic order, intimately associated with the hopes, fears and anxieties surrounding life and death, order and chaos, protection and vulnerability (Loader and Walker 2007).

Recognising this uniqueness, a small group of scholars have in recent years sought to reconceptualise security goods as 'contested' commodities. In this section, we develop this emergent line of enquiry to contextualise the ensuing empirical analysis and to underscore its contribution.

The predominant concern of these scholars is to explore how moral values are projected onto security commodities by those who buy and sell them – that is, 'the ways in which competing social meanings are attached to the multitude of commodities that are produced, circulated and consumed in a bid to make us safe and secure' (Goold et al 2010: 6). On the buying side, for instance, Thumala et al (2015) investigate why parents have generally eschewed the use of GPS trackers to generate real-time data on the whereabouts of their children. While parents are naturally concerned about the safety of their children, Thumala et al (2015) discover, they ultimately view these security technologies as undermining the autonomy of their children and the quality of their familial relations, and thus on balance decline to purchase them. Similarly, Loader et al (2014) look into why gated communities have found significantly less resonance in the UK housing market compared to the US and South African housing markets. Although homeowners are certainly fearful of crime, Loader et al (2014) find, they tend to regard these security infrastructures as antithetical to English middle-class ideals of neighbourliness, and therefore prefer to live in more inclusive ungated communities.

On the selling side, White (2010, 2012), Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) and Thumala et al (2011) examine why goods in the market for security are so often

entwined with the symbolic capital of the state – for example, private security officers dressing up in police-like uniforms and going out on mobile patrol in police-like vehicles. These scholars identify two reasons why industry executives orchestrate these practices in their companies. First, it resonates with their moral compass. Just as buyers are often wary of the tension between economic and moral values in the realm of security, so too are sellers, and they articulate this wariness by appealing to the symbolic capital of the state, with its connotations of universality and equity. It is interesting to note, for instance, just how regularly executives justify their entrepreneurial activities using the language of what Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) call the ‘civic world’, with its attendant vocabulary of duty, equality, rights and the public interest (Thumala et al 2011). Second, it makes good business sense. Through their appropriation of the symbolic capital of the state, these sellers are in effect reinserting the moral values of buyers back into the logic of universal commodification – they are reshaping the goods they supply in line with the nature of the demand. These distinctive practices, in other words, appear to be underpinned by a dialectic of self- and external legitimation – a dialectic we return to later.

By demonstrating how buyers and sellers project a variety of moral values onto the goods they produce and consume in the market for security, these scholars take important steps towards understanding security goods as contested commodities. In the eyes of the parents, homeowners and executives under examination, these goods are neither ‘completely commodified’ nor ‘completely noncommodified’ – rather they occupy the grey space of ‘incomplete commodification’ in between these two poles. At the same time, however, these scholars still take for granted a key dimension of the commodification process – that is, they assume security goods themselves unproblematically maintain their commodity forms. When it comes to nonhuman

security goods (GPS trackers, uniforms, vehicles and so on) this is a sensible assumption, for these goods have no independent agency. However, when it comes to human security goods (the labour of private security officers) this is a hugely problematic assumption, for these goods are possessed of independent agency. Not only might we expect buyers and sellers to project moral values onto the services these officers deliver, but we might also expect officers themselves to articulate these values while performing their economic duties.

Interestingly, although they do not frame their research in these terms, there is a further group of scholars who have long been aware of how the articulation of such values challenges the commodification process – namely, those seeking to understand and control the *antisocial* or *immoral* behaviour of private security officers.

Approaching the private security industry as a criminogenic environment notorious for attracting ‘cowboys’, for example, Prenzler and Sarre (2008: 266-68; see also Button 2008) advance a ‘risk profile’ of such behavior which includes: fraud, corruption, violent malpractice, false arrest and detention, trespass and invasion of privacy, discrimination and harassment. Viewing this behaviour as a danger to the public interest, they duly propose regulatory measures such as occupational licensing to stamp it out (Prenzler and Sarre 2008, 2014). While the intention of these measures is not to reinforce the commodification process by eliminating the articulation of non-market values – in this case *antisocial* or *immoral* ones – this is precisely what they do accomplish. As such, these scholars not only uncover the difficulties of commodifying the labour of private security officers but also how to overcome them.

What has been left almost entirely untouched by scholars to date, however, is how the *prosocial* or *moral* behaviour of private security officers complicates the commodification process. To be sure, there has been some recognition of the

relationship between these two variables, but primarily within the context of how the commodification process is reinforced rather than contested. In their investigation of private security officers in Sweden and the UK, for instance, Lofstrand et al (2016: 303) remark how: ‘officers are often instructed to “look the other way” by company management...security officers would often observe drug deals taking place across the road from the mall, but were given orders not to intervene because it was not happening on their territory’. They also note the dehumanizing effect this has on some officers, with one of their interviewees conceding in ‘awkward’ tones: ‘I’ve been bought’ (Lofstrand et al 2016: 302). Eski (2017, p.5) observes a similar dynamic in German and Dutch ports, noting how private security officers feel as though they ‘merely function as part of fulfilling an obligatory insurance policy for the port company; they are not there to actually take action’. He accordingly diagnoses an acute ‘hypengyophobia’ among these officers – a fear of being held to account for any non-contractual tasks they choose to perform. These examples show how the moral values of private security officers can become suffocated by the hegemonic economic values imposed on them by their employers. It remains to be explored, though, what happens when private security officers refuse to ‘look the other way’ and instead pursue their own moral agenda. This is the gap we address through our exploration of how heroic acts performed by private security officers are judged within the context of industry awards.

## **Methodology**

Before we proceed to this analysis, however, it is necessary to justify in more detail our case selection and data collection techniques. As previously noted, we have selected the performance of heroic acts as a lens through which to explore the difficulties in commodifying the labour of private security officers because these acts are likely to

bring any latent tensions between economic responsibilities and moral obligations into sharp relief. But given the rather extreme nature of these acts, it is important to question the extent to which they represent a suitable base for drawing broader inferences about contested commodification in the market for security. While there is no concrete answer, we can develop some kind of reasoned response by taking a brief detour through some of the key social psychological explanations on the willingness of bystanders to engage in heroic acts. On one side, the ‘situationalists’ contend that bystanders carry out heroic acts because they are confronted with a set of circumstances which demands such action (Franco and Zimbardo 2006). On the other side, the ‘dispositionalists’ claim that bystanders undertake heroic acts because ‘bravery’ features prominently in their personality compositions (Dunlop and Walker 2013). In the middle ground (where majority of scholars are located), the ‘interactionists’ argue that bystanders enter into heroic acts due to a combination of their situation and disposition (Walker et al 2010). If we take this majority viewpoint – that situation plays at least some role in precipitating heroic behaviour – and then place it alongside the aforesaid observation that private security officers are frequently stationed in close proximity to ‘hotspots’ where there is a higher-than-average likelihood of disturbances to the prevailing order, we arrive at the position that a willingness to engage in heroic acts within the market for security is perhaps not quite as uncommon as first impressions might suggest. This lens does therefore constitute a reasonably solid base for drawing broader generalisations.

As mentioned earlier, we have also followed the received wisdom that heroic acts are best studied through the medium of awards ceremonies. We settled on the BSIA Outstanding Act award in particular for three reasons. First, the UK market for security has many commonalities with equivalent markets in North America, Europe

and Australasia (see White 2012). These include: growth factors (rising inequality and insecurity, the emergence of mass private property, the proliferation of multinational corporations and the growth of neo-liberal public outsourcing programmes); the type of goods bought and sold (guarding, patrol, surveillance and transit); source of legal power (derived primarily from property rights); the presence of statutory regulation (occupational licensing) and voluntary regulation (codes of conduct administered by trade associations); and relationship with police forces (mainly junior partners). These commonalities also provide a useful base for drawing broader generalisations. Second, the BSIA is the most influential trade association in the UK market. Since its founding in 1965, it has counted as members all the largest companies and has served as the central point of dialogue with the UK government (White 2010). The Outstanding Act award thus enjoys a high profile in the sector and is run in a professional manner. Third, the criteria for the award reads as follows: 'dealing with a violent individual; using detection skills to solve a crime; fighting a fire; performing life-saving first aid; preventing an individual from committing suicide'. It thus explicitly invites nominations for heroic acts.

To sketch out the data collection techniques we then used to investigate the Outstanding Act award, we first need to describe how the award functions. The nomination, judging and awarding procedures for this award operate on an annual cycle which commences in August and concludes in July. In August, the BSIA opens its call for nominations. While in principle anyone can nominate, in practice the process is dominated by private security companies nominating their employees. Importantly, though, each nomination requires not just a testimony of the heroic act written by the nominating company, but also a letter of support from an independent third party witness, thereby ensuring a reasonable degree of objectivity. In December, nine regional

judging panels evaluate nominations against the following criteria: how outstanding, significance of action, initiative/judgement shown, appropriateness of action and star quality. Each regional winner is announced soon thereafter through a BSIA press release. In March, the nine regional winners are evaluated by a single national judging panel comprising a rotating membership of approximately ten judges each of whom represents a different stakeholder group. They judge against the same criteria, before agreeing upon three or four winners. In July, the winners are celebrated during the annual awards ceremony and BSIA press releases are circulated with immediate effect. This annual cycle leaves behind a rich data trail which facilitates an exploration of not only how different stakeholders in the market for security project a combination of moral and economic values onto these heroic acts, but also how the officers themselves balance their moral obligations and economic responsibilities while undertaking these acts. During the course of 2016, we used a series of data collection techniques designed to study these overlapping dynamics.

To begin with, we carried out an analysis of all available documentary data generated through past evolutions of the annual cycle – namely, the nomination testimonies and the regional and national winner press releases for the period 2010-2016.<sup>i</sup> We then conducted semi-structured interviews with six current and former members of the national judging panel to develop a historically nuanced picture of how the judging process has changed over the 18-year history of the award. We also conducted two further semi-structured interviews with experts on the nominating and judging processes who were recommended to us during the course of the aforementioned interviews. We were careful to ensure that all interviewees represented different stakeholders in the market for security so as to gain a variety of perspectives on these processes, though we cannot disclose these details without

violating anonymity agreements. In what follows, interviewees are simply numbered 1 to 8 in the order they were interviewed. All interviews were undertaken by one or both of us between June and September 2016 and were audio recorded, transcribed and coded in line with the article's objectives.<sup>ii</sup> Finally, we directly observed the July 2016 awards ceremony, to which we were invited guests. Through these data collection techniques, we were able to investigate heroic acts performed by private security officers from a variety of angles: the heroic acts themselves, the judging panel and the ceremony. Over next three sections, we use each of these angles to explore the interplay between the economic responsibilities and moral obligations of private security officers.

### **The Heroic Acts**

While heroism may be a slippery term, it does have some essential characteristics. It is generally accepted, for instance, that for any given act to qualify as 'heroic' it must satisfy four criteria: first, it must be carried out in service to someone in need; second, it must involve a considerable degree of personal risk; third, it must be undertaken without expectation of personal gain; and fourth, it must be recognized as heroism by someone other than the individual carrying out the act (Zimbardo 2007: 460; Franco et al 2011: 99; Jayawickreme and Di Stefano 2012: 167). In this section, we apply the first three criteria to the 38 regional winners for whom we have nomination testimonies and press releases. This is an important process because while the first two criteria demonstrate how the majority of these acts are highly contingent emergencies which cannot be straightforwardly commodified through specialised record keeping procedures, the third brings into frame the motivations of the officer in question and thus deepens our understanding of how they adjudicate between their economic



responsibilities and moral obligations. The fourth criterion is not applied in the same fashion because it is intrinsic to our methodology. In studying heroism through the prism of the Outstanding Act award, we are by definition only dealing with acts which have already been recognised as heroic by a range of observers – though the specific question of who recognises what forms of heroism and why is central to our key findings, as later sections illustrate.

To begin with, it is clear that each of these acts was carried out in service to someone in need. This can be illustrated by grouping the acts into five categories of ‘service’ using the descriptions in the nomination testimonies: i) providing emergency assistance to an individual with acute medical needs (14 acts); ii) preventing an imminent suicide attempt (ten acts); iii) physically intervening in a violent situation (nine acts); iv) evacuating one or more individuals from hazardous circumstances (four acts); and v) investigating a crime against a vulnerable individual so as enable a prosecution (one act). Before assessing the degree of personal risk implicated in these acts, however, some additional background is required. Where the level of personal risk associated with helping someone in need is either limited in scope or absent, it is generally regarded as being ‘altruistic’ rather than ‘heroic’. But as the level of personal risk increases ‘altruism’ morphs into ‘heroism’. In seeking to differentiate between these nebulous categories, Zimbardo (2007) and Franco et al (2011) distinguish, broadly speaking, between two types of heroic risk: the ‘physical risk’ experienced by soldiers, police officers, firefighters, paramedics and other first responders who face immediate injury or death during the course of their interventions; and the ‘non-physical risk’ experienced by, among others, whistleblowers who face social ostracism for the exposure of uncomfortable truths, political leaders who face imprisonment for championing values antithetic to the established order, or entrepreneurs who face

financial and reputational ruin in pursuit of groundbreaking discoveries. Applying this risk typology to each of the 38 acts as described in the nomination testimonies, it quickly becomes apparent that all acts in the 'suicide prevention' (ten acts), 'physical intervention' (nine acts) and 'evacuation' (four acts) categories undoubtedly engendered sufficient risk of immediate injury or death to meet the criteria for 'physical risk' heroism. Furthermore, two acts in the 'medical emergency' category also satisfy these same criteria. However, the remaining 12 acts in the 'medical emergency' category, together with the single act in the 'criminal investigation' category, meet neither criteria and are therefore best regarded as 'altruistic' rather than 'heroic'.

The application of these two criteria emphasises how the majority of these acts are not easily commodifiable routine activities – rather they are emergencies requiring the officers in question to deal with dangerous and/or vulnerable individuals under strained circumstances. What though was motivating these officers while they were carrying out these acts? To explore this third criterion, we examine their motivations using the 'quote from the winner' included in each regional press release. More often than not, these quotes suggest that officers' moral obligations outweighed any expectation of personal gain through adherence to their economic responsibilities: 'I only did what anyone else would have done under similar circumstances' (a 2011 winner); 'Helping people in need is part of my nature and I would only hope someone would do the same for me' (a 2013 winner); 'I didn't do what I did for recognition; I did what I believed to be right' (a 2016 winner); 'I didn't need to think twice about helping to save this lady's life, it's incredible to be rewarded for it' (another 2016 winner); and so on. This surface level reading lacks nuance, however. One might quickly counter-claim not just that these officers continued to receive a wage during their emergency interventions, but also that these 'quotes from the winners' might be somewhat

disingenuous because they were generated within the discursive frame of an awards ceremony press release. It would therefore be naïve to conclude that their economic responsibilities were entirely absent.

With this in mind, a most plausible reading is perhaps that these officers were in fact balancing their economic responsibilities and moral obligations in a positive-sum relationship. We term this configuration of super-utilities ‘contractual’ heroism – that is, heroism which plays out within the terms of an officer’s assignment instructions and is therefore both morally virtuous and economically sound. In coining this term, we have been influenced by Radin’s (2001: 105) distinction between ‘work’ and ‘labour’:

Laborers are sellers; fully motivated by money, exhausting the value of their activity in the measure of its exchange value... Workers take money but are also at the same time givers. Money does not fully motivate them to work, nor does it exhaust the value of their activity.

In a particularly apt illustration of this distinction, she goes on to note how:

‘Firefighters, paramedics, and law enforcement officers can do their work as givers to others while being paid’ (Radin 2001: 105). Against this backdrop, we think it is useful to characterise ‘contractual’ heroism as an example ‘work’ rather than ‘labour’ – as moments of ‘incomplete commodification’ in which the economic responsibilities and moral obligations of the officers in question are more or less in alignment. This is only part of the picture offered by the BSIA Outstanding Act, however. We turn now to the judges whose viewpoints both extend our conceptualization of ‘contractual’ heroism and bring into view its more controversial binary form – ‘non-contractual’ heroism.

## **The Judging Panel**

In this section, we use our interview data to better understand why the judging panel for the national award chooses to recognize some heroic acts in the awards ceremony over others, bringing into frame a new set of configurations between economic responsibilities and moral obligations in the market for security. To begin with, the interviewees were full of admiration for the heroic acts they had been called upon to evaluate, recognising how the officers who performed these acts were guided by a well-intentioned impulse ‘to do the right thing’ (Interview 6), often within the context of a ‘split second decision’ (Interview 5), and carried out their emergency interventions not because it was ‘in their KPIs [key performance indicators], they’ve just done it as good decent folk’ (Interview 1). These officers were seen to display just the kind of spirit and ethos the sector should aim to cultivate ‘because you know, I wouldn't want it to be my mum out there, getting mugged, while the security officer is sat inside the boundary going “I can't step outside”’ (Interview 1). The interviewees were especially impressed given the adverse environments in which these officers were often required to work. Not only are they ‘low down the pay scale’ (Interview 1), but they are ‘abused out there, attacked, put under intense pressure situations’ (Interview 2). The overarching value of the Outstanding Act award, they noted, is precisely that it publicly communicates to these officers – and the wider industry – that this public-spiritedness ‘isn’t totally lost. It is seen and understood and appreciated’ (Interview 2). In so doing, the award ‘raises the well-being’ of the recipients, making them feel, as more than one judge remarked, ‘nine feet tall’ (Interview 3). Above all, ‘it’s a massive recognition of behavior that you want to encourage. It’s a real reward system for the people involved. The annual award ceremonies are quite a glitzy affair. Having spoken to the recipients afterwards, they really, really treasure it’ (Interview 8). These quotes all appear to dovetail with our

first-cut conceptualisation of 'contractual' heroism. They indicate how the acts of heroism under evaluation represent moments of 'incomplete commodification' in which the economic responsibilities and moral obligations of private security officers strike something of a harmonious balance.

However, this is not the only dynamic animating the national judging panel. The interviewees were not just interested in celebrating moral behaviour, they were also concerned with managing the risks it entails:

It's about making sure that the individual truly does something outstanding – whether that's a lifesaving act, whether it's tackling a knife man or something else. But it's also about recognizing that that individual hasn't put themselves or others at greater risk than they should have done in the circumstances'

(Interview 1).

As one interviewee puts it: 'you don't recognize and reward behaviour that, in the cold light of day, you don't really want to encourage' (Interview 6). While the origins of these risks are manifold, the interviewees traced the primary source of risk to the contract of employment which exists between any private security company and the officers it employs. At the heart of each contract is a set of assignment instructions which, in the words of one interviewee, are 'the bible effectively for security officers' (Interview 1). They enumerate in precise detail the duties each officer is expected to perform. Whenever officers violate these instructions, the interviewees explained, they expose their employer to various forms of organizational risk. One common scenario in which assignment instructions are ignored relates to officers responding to shoplifters on the run:

If you're a retail officer they [the assignment instructions] inevitably will say 'Your area of responsibility stops at the front door'. Now if you've got somebody who's stolen something and runs out the front door, the immediate reaction of probably eight out of ten security officers will be to run after him. And it's a natural reaction. But the minute they step out the door, they have all sorts of issues – they're not insured because the insurance stops at the front door' (Interview 1).

Another scenario in this vein relates to officers 'working the doors' in the night-time economy:

If somebody's throwing-up and in distress ten yards from the door, we're entering a different area. That is not something that the door supervisor should be obliged to do within the contract of their employment. Because their employment contract states 'You are to protect licensed premises, prevent drug dealing, prevent disorder etc.'. Do they have a moral obligation as a human being to help someone in distress? Absolutely. But we can't legislate for somebody's morality' (Interview 7).

The interviewees agreed that in scenarios such as these, which of course also play out in other contexts such as business parks, leisure outlets and gated communities, there is a real tension between the economic responsibilities and moral obligations of the private security officer. They also remarked how some companies would look unfavourably upon officers leaving their post and offering assistance in such situations. Rather than

nominating their officers for an award, one interviewee continued, some companies 'would discipline that security officer for not following process' (Interview 1). The spectre of such discipline points to a concrete cost within the commodification process – it threatens to turn these officers into professional bystanders in situations where emergency intervention is required.

Moreover, the interviewees were acutely aware of the precise organizational issues arising from this tension. One issue is compromising a company's insurance cover for employers' liability claims (which relate to employee claims against employers) and/or public liability claims (which relate to third party claims against employers or employees). As one judge explains:

The first thing any insurer will do in an incident is say 'Give me a copy of the assignment instructions'. They'll look at the assignment instructions and go 'Well, your officer didn't follow that process'. So immediately the insurance claim's at risk of being paid out (Interview 1).

Another issue is 'disruption to the business':

Because if somebody gets hit over the head, they could be out for a week, just generally recovering from the injury. It might be longer. But they could be off for months with stress related issues and things like that. That is a huge cost to the business, and it's a hidden cost (Interview 1).

In both instances, the cost of such heroic behavior falls directly upon the company. So, how exactly do the interviewees work through these tensions within the context of the national awards panel?

There was no stock response to this question. Each interviewee approached this tension from a different perspective. As one interviewee reflects: 'This raises the point, I suppose, of people's values...what they [the judges] believe the role of the person [private security officer] is, where that fits into working for a private sector client versus the greater public good' (Interview 4). Another expands on this theme:

What some people see as an outstanding performance, others see as negligent or reckless. And depending on your judgement, will depend on what mark you give. So those who see them as reckless will obviously mark accordingly and those who see it as outstanding will mark accordingly (Interview 3).

Despite this apparent value pluralism, however, the interviewees were in agreement that over the 18-year history of the Outstanding Act award there has been a gradual shift away from celebrating high risk (and more heroic) acts towards low risk (and less heroic) acts:

Ten years ago we would have perhaps recognized an individual who'd just done something absolutely outstanding, but may not have followed process or procedure and put themselves at risk or put others at risk...[but]...attitudes have changed quite a bit over the past decade, the attitude towards that particular award has probably changed somewhat as well (Interview 1).



Another likewise reminisces: 'I've seen how this award has changed over the years. Initially, it was all about guards fending-off robbers, guards trying to stop members of the public being assaulted and jumping in and doing their bit'. He goes on: 'The Outstanding Act has tended to move away from those guards putting themselves at great personal risk, to guards medically helping people who have heart attacks or are injured in a shopping centre, or trying to prevent suicides on top of car parks or bridges or whatever' (Interview 2). This form of risk analysis is accomplished through what one interviewee calls the 'unkind and unfair' task of applying 'dry and unemotional health and safety regulations' to acts of bravery undertaken 'in the heat of the moment' (Interview 6). However, this directional shift is not being propelled by the judges alone: 'Companies are getting sharper', one interviewee observes, 'generally they're getting more aware of the legal consequences of their staff acting in a certain way' (Interview 3). Another continues: 'Whether that's insurance driven, you know, if somebody's injured in the line of duty, you know, you've got potential for HSE [Health and Safety Executive] investigations, or the time off work, compensation claims, all the rest of it' (Interview 1). It appears as though both nominating companies and judges are engaged in a mutually reinforcing process of accentuating the level of risk aversion within the Outstanding Act award.

To conceptualise these further configurations of the interplay between economic responsibilities and moral obligations within the market for security, we need both to deepen our understanding of 'contractual' heroism and to introduce its binary form – 'non-contractual' heroism. To begin with, 'contractual' heroism not only plays out within the terms of the officer's assignment instructions – as already noted – but also exposes their employer to low levels of organisational risk. For these reasons, the judges are more likely to recognise and celebrate the resulting acts of heroism because

they are content with the ‘incomplete commodification’ of the officer’s ‘work’. By contrast, ‘non-contractual’ heroism plays out beyond the terms of the officer’s assignment instructions and exposes their employer to high levels of organisational risk. In these instances, the officer’s moral obligations threaten to undermine their economic responsibilities and, as a consequence, the judges are less likely to recognize and celebrate the resulting acts of heroism – indeed, quite the opposite, their inclination may instead be to re-impose the logic of universal commodification upon the officer’s ‘labour’. This distinction, however, originates from the behind-closed-doors deliberations of the judging panel. What significance does it have for the commodification process on the ground? There are, we think, two answers to this question.

The first answer relates to the status of the judges we interviewed. The reason they have been called upon to serve as national judges in the first place is because of their elite status. They are experienced and well respected individuals who are trusted to express a viewpoint which chimes with the great and the good in the sector. As such, the distinction they make between what we term ‘contractual’ and ‘non-contractual’ heroism is not necessarily limited to the closed deliberations of the national judging panel – it is likely to have resonance throughout the market for security. This is borne out in the interview data which is punctuated not with hypothetical scenarios but with actual scenarios which evoke the realities of everyday life on the frontline. The second answer relates to how the distinction between ‘contractual’ and ‘non-contractual’ heroism is managed within the context of the awards ceremony itself. It is to this process we now turn.

## **The Ceremony**

In this section, we first use our field notes to reconstruct our experience of attending the 2016 BSIA annual awards ceremony, before examining the content of the extensive publicity materials which entered into circulation immediately after the ceremony drew to a close. As our field notes document, upon our arrival at The Hilton, Park Lane – one of London’s most exclusive hotels – we are immediately offered drinks in a plush ante-room, before being ushered through to an expansive auditorium, where the invite-only guests are seated at 50 or so well-laid tables. The ensuing three course meal is high end, the wine flows freely, and the stage is flanked by large screens ready to show the prize-giving which is due to commence once our dessert plates are cleared away by the silver service waiters. It has all the hallmarks of the glamorous celebrity affairs one often sees on television. The first after dinner keynote speaker punctuates his discourse on being kind to people and making a difference with colourful anecdotes from his life as a soldier, minesweeper and world’s first amputee ultra-distance runner. He also underscores the fact that he holds a bachelors degree in security management – a relatively widespread qualification across the sector – thereby establishing a common ground with the audience on which he can reinforce his key messages. These motivational tropes conjure up a mood of celebration – and what is being celebrated is not competitiveness or wealth-creation but moral worth.

Once applause for his motivational speech has died down, the main business of the day gets underway: handing out the annual BSIA Security Personnel Awards. The winners are escorted on stage by a master of ceremonies wearing a royal red morning suit, before posing with the keynote speaker for a photograph. This year, the awards are hosted by a high profile industry representative. In previous years, senior police officers, Home Officer Ministers and other respected personas from the security world

have performed the task, lending their symbolic authority to the proceedings. Each winner is introduced as an employee of a certain company, meaning their employer shares in the recognition given to the winner(s). In between each award, the large screens display the corporate logos of the sponsors – TSS Security, Regency Security Group, Camberford Law PLC, EATON, Contract Security Services and SaferCash – ensuring they too share in the accolades. The winners look visibly happy and excited with all the attention. Everyone’s face is smiling. The applause is continuous. It is a long way from the industry’s popular reputation as a cut-throat, minimum wage, low skilled enterprise. The presentation of the Outstanding Act award follows the same established pattern as previous awards with one exception. The host makes a point of informing the audience that it is being studied by the University of Oxford as if this underscores its cultural significance – and at this point our presence (and whatever symbolic capital we bring to the proceedings) is folded into the unbroken atmosphere of celebration.

What this reconstruction illustrates is that during the course of this extended spectacle there was no hint of the backstage tensions surrounding the distinction between ‘contractual’ and ‘non-contractual’ heroism – all the acts were straightforwardly represented as a virtuous alignment of the winner’s economic responsibilities and moral obligations. Moreover, in the days immediately following the ceremony, the good news stories surrounding the Outstanding Act award were carefully fed into wider circuits of communication so as to carefully reinforce this discursive frame across the market for security. This process was not limited to the aforementioned post-ceremony press releases with their familiar winners’ quotes emphasizing moral obligations over economic responsibilities. It comprised sketches of the prize-giving in the trade press, many of which contain soundbites from industry

figureheads. In one such report, for instance, the Chief Executive of the BSIA says of the awards:

Our industry has an incredible amount of talent on offer, many of whom go above and beyond what is expected of them each and every day. These professional men and women play a vital role in safeguarding our nation and the BSIA takes immense pride in helping to recognise their achievements.<sup>iii</sup>

It also included promotional materials distributed by private security companies. VSG, whose employees won two of the 2016 Outstanding Act awards, praise the 'bravery and quick thinking' of one winner who tended to the victim of a road traffic accident and the 'exceptional bravery' of two other joint-winners whose actions prevented a suicide from a car park ledge 40 feet above the ground. The awards, VSG informs its customers, 'remind us of the great work that our security officers do everyday'.<sup>iv</sup> These post-ceremony publicity materials thus diligently cultivate the impression of a sector populated by 'talented' and 'brave' private security officers who 'safeguard the nation' with the 'great work' they do for proud companies 'each and every day'. Once again, any sense that economic responsibilities and moral obligations might at some level grate against one another is completely removed from view – all we see is the recognition and celebration of 'contractual' heroism. This carefully constructed hegemonic viewpoint, we reason, can be seen to represent not only a cathartic process of industry self-legitimation, but also a strategic process of external legitimation directed towards buyers.

In the first instance, we already know that when the logic of universal commodification is imposed upon and internalized by private security officers,

suppressing their independent moral agency, it can foster a sense of dispossession (Lofstrand et al 2016; Eski 2017). The sentiments embodied in the distinction between 'contractual' and 'non-contractual' heroism undoubtedly reinforce this dynamic. As such, the high profile attempt to gloss over this distinction within the spectacle of the awards ceremony can be interpreted as an effort to ameliorate the effects of any such dispossession within the industry's collective identity. It conveys to those officers who do feel as though their moral obligations are being trumped by their economic responsibilities that they do at least belong to an industry where these two super-utilities are for the most part in virtuous alignment. The extent to which this message actually hits home on the ground is a matter for future empirical enquiry – though given the prestige of the awards ceremony it would, we think, be unlikely for this message to have no impact whatsoever. Either way, we contend, this spectacle constitutes an attempt to set in motion a process of industry self-legitimation by cultivating the impression that 'contractual' heroism is part of 'everyday' life in the market for security.

Furthermore, this impression also sends a strategically important message to buyers. Once again, we already know that buyers are often anxious about the tension between economic and moral values in the security goods they consume (Goold et al 2010; Loader et al 2014; Thumala et al 2015). We also know that industry executives are keen to imbue the goods they sell with any kind of symbolic capital which helps to diffuse this anxiety (White 2010, 2012; Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Thumala et al 2011). With this in mind, the spectacle of the awards ceremony can be regarded as a further example of symbolic capital deployed to the same end. For signalling to buyers that when faced with emergency situations requiring heroic interventions the officers they employ are guided by a positive-sum alignment of economic responsibilities and moral obligations has the effect of reinserting this spectacle back into the logic of

universal commodification, even when the reality is not quite so harmonious. In sum, then, approaching the ceremony as a mutually-reinforcing process of self- and external legitimation illustrates its importance in managing the tensions of ‘incomplete’ commodification.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we set out to defend the claim that it is extremely difficult to transform the labour of private security officers into discrete vendible commodities because their professional duties frequently require them to work through both economic responsibilities and moral obligations. Through our analysis of the Outstanding Act award, we have substantiated this claim in a number of ways. To begin with, we have mapped out a distinction between two forms of heroism. The first is ‘contractual’ heroism in which the economic responsibilities and moral obligations of private security officers are in broad alignment – a harmonious ‘incomplete commodification’ of their labour. The second is ‘non-contractual’ heroism in which the moral obligations of private security officers threaten to undermine their economic responsibilities through the generation of organizational risks for their employers – a conflictual ‘incomplete commodification’ of their labour. Furthermore, we have reasoned that through the awards cycle, we see the recognition of ‘contractual’ heroism at the expense of ‘non-contractual’ heroism so as to resolve this tension in favour of the economic interests of their employers. Lastly, we have observed how this morally problematic resolution is ironed out through the spectacle of the awards ceremony in a conscious effort to sustain the sector’s moral standing in the eyes of its workforce and customer base. These findings hold important implications for extant scholarship on the market for security. Not only do they help us to move beyond an exclusive focus on how buyers and sellers

externally project moral values onto security goods, to a wider appreciation of the extent to which these goods actually maintain their commodity forms. But they also serve as a useful foundation from which to reappraise the dominant narratives on the market for security advanced by the sceptics, idealists and pragmatists – all of whom take for granted that the labour of private security officers can straightforwardly be transformed into discrete vendible commodities enumerated in a contract and exchanged for money on the open market.

The ‘sceptics’ reject the commodification of security goods as the harbinger of a dystopian, atomised order brutally stripped of the social bonds which hold the public sphere together (Reiner 1992). In light of our findings, we regard this narrative as being partially correct but overly pessimistic. It is correct in recognising corrosive effects of the commodification process on social bonds (Hope 2000). We see this not only in the marginalisation of ‘non-contractual’ heroism by industry elites in an effort to protect the corporate interests of private security companies, but also in the way this strategy threatens to turn private security officers into professional bystanders in situations requiring emergency intervention. This trend does indeed point to a disturbing valuation of human welfare embedded deep within the market for security. Yet, we contend, it is important not to overemphasise this trend given that, at the same time, the performance and recognition of ‘contractual’ heroism arguably has the opposite effect, helping to realise the moral obligations of these officers through the performance of their economic responsibilities. It is only by comprehending the various contestations running through the commodification process that this distinction comes into frame.

The ‘idealists’ embrace the commodification of security as an opportunity to (re)build local capacity away from the overbearing influence of the monolithic state



(Wood and Shearing 2007). Against the backdrop of our findings, we view this narrative as being partially correct but overly optimistic. It is correct in championing the proposition that the commodification process can be used to build social capacity. We see this in the performance and recognition of 'contractual' heroism in which economic responsibilities and moral obligations exist in a positive-sum relationship, beneficial to private security officers, their employers and the communities in which they are stationed. However, it is important not to overlook the social costs engendered in the commodification process. For the marginalisation of 'non-contractual' heroism brings into frame two negative consequences. The first is that it serves to foster a 'distortion of personhood' (Radin 2001: 93) among the very private security officers on whom the community is depending for the development of social capacity. The second is that it runs the risk of turning communities into isolated 'neo-feudal' enclosures by devaluing the welfare of those individuals who live beyond their borders (Shearing and Stenning 1983). Again, it is only by recognising the multiple contestations implicated within the commodification process that this distinction comes into view.

The 'pragmatists' accept commodification but, at the same time, draw regulatory lines in the sand beyond which the market is not permitted to function (Prenzler and Sarre 2014). Within the context of our findings, we think this narrative is correct in advocating regulatory measures to resolve the problems associated with 'complete commodification', but fails to see the potential of using such measures to address the problems associated with 'incomplete commodification'. For example, the common regulatory measure of de-commodifying basic entry conditions into the private security labour market – which in practice translates into a statutory requirement for private security officers to have a clean criminal record and a

minimum-level training qualification – is undoubtedly a positive enterprise. However, we contend, our regulatory imagination needs to be pushed further. A publicly constituted regulatory space could serve as the ideal forum in which to develop a new and inclusive dialogue between previously disconnected different stakeholders – from executives and frontline officers to customers and community groups – in an effort to confront and work through the tensions between economic responsibilities and moral obligations in the market for security (see Loader and White 2017 for an initial sketch of how such regulatory space might be constituted). This enterprise would, in the words of Radin (2001, p.107), involve ‘honor[ing] our internally plural understandings, rather than to erect[ing] a wall to keep a few things completely off the market and abandon everything else to market rationality’ (Radin 2001, p.107).

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<sup>i</sup> To the best of our knowledge, no records have been retained for the period prior to 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> It is important to note that we elected not to interview the regional or national award winners in order to deepen our understanding of their motivations because it was not possible to conduct these interviews until after they had already been labelled as 'heroes'. While such interviews would no doubt contribute towards a more rounded picture of these individuals – for instance, by providing insights into their personality traits – they would not necessarily bring us any closer to an 'authentic' reconstruction of the heroic acts themselves.

<sup>iii</sup> Cited at <http://www.professionalsecurity.co.uk/news/commercial-security/bsia-personnel-awards/>  
<accessed 20 January 2017>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.vsg.co.uk/news/2016/vsg-celebrates-record-number-of-wins-at-the-security-personnel-awards/>  
<accessed 20 January 2017>