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# “Whenever big changes come, big talks don’t” – An examination of the police experience of recruitment and promotion positive action processes

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## ABSTRACT

Policing in England Wales is currently experiencing a large uplift in police recruitment. This has been due to the Government’s target to uplift officers by 20,000. As a result, police forces are implementing large scale, sustained recruitment drives. These are accompanied by positive action schemes to address deficits in officer representation. Current statistics now indicate that representation in forces is rising slowly, as these initiatives are employed. There is little literature that examines the impact of positive action on existing police officers’ perceptions, despite the initiative’s relative proliferation. Procedural Justice theoretical literature is utilised to situate this in the research context.

This study represents 17 theoretically informed, long form, phenomenological interviews conducted with serving officers in a uniform, response policing environment. The interviews were semi-structured, open ended and participant led, allowing the officers to present and explore their own thoughts and feelings about positive action, developed through their lived experience in an active police role. These interviews were conducted in an operational environment, from an insider-outsider perspective with total privacy. Officers openly discussed how they felt about the implementation of such policies and procedures.

The findings indicate that a taboo exists with regards to the discussion of positive action processes in the police workplace. A juxtaposition also exists between the existence of positive action initiatives and the theme of meritocracy amongst the police officers. Officers strongly refuted the need for positive action to remedy issues with representation, but similarly criticised the current representation levels within forces. Theoretically this indicates an informational gap between police implementation of positive action interventions, and the perceived need for them to exist at all amongst rank and file. Implications for the study’s findings are explored and possible remedies discussed.

## 1. Context and positive action in police recruitment

Policing in England and Wales is in the midst of a sustained recruitment drive. Instigated in 2019 ([National Audit Office, 2019](#)), this drive seeks to lift current numbers of police officers by 20,000 in all police services across both countries. Against the total employment of police officers in England and Wales, this represents an uplift of just under 20% ([National Statistics, 2022](#)). This drive exists within a political context that is emphasising the current need to increase diversity across the service ([Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016](#);

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House of Commons, 2017; Metropolitan Police Service, 2017). This recent uplift was set against a prolonged period of Government austerity (HMIC, 2012), which saw similar numbers stripped from the service as they tightened their spending on public services as a whole. There is little ambiguity in the area of policing diversity, the government has been very clear; police services are to strive to meet representation levels that mirror their served population.

This drive is present in other public services (Bradbury and Kellough, 2011), and is predicated upon the theory of Representative Bureaucracy (Krislov, 2012). The theory has been developed for several decades and posits that greater representations within the institution is directly linked to more representative outputs from within that institution. This has been researched directly within the policing context (Decker and Smith, 1980; Hochstedler et al., 2016; Hong, 2015, 2017; Hur, 2012; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017; Regoli et al., 1975) with mixed empirical outcomes across the literature. It could however be argued that there is a moral case (Audi, 2008; Haidt et al., 2003; Johns et al., 2012; Noon, 2007) for diversity that transcends the mixed, current empirical evidence base, and this may be the case more truly represented within the political environment.

In the English and Welsh context, the first recommendation for positive action originated in the Scarman, 1981, yet there was significant reinforcement in the MacPherson, 1999 following the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The political commentary on positive action and increased representation then persisted over the next two decades, as scholars have sought to understand why representation was important to policing (Gustafson, 2013; Hur, 2012; Miller et al., 2003a, 2003b; Murji, 2014; Nowacki et al., 2020; Rowe and Garland, 2013; Spence et al., 2017). Little consensus exists in this literature for a definitive evidence base for diverse police services, yet Hong's recent studies (Hong, 2015, 2017) in Wales indicate empirically that representative bureaucracy in the context of policing does improve operational performance.

Over the 40 years since the Scarman, 1981, police services have therefore been attempting at some level to diversify their workforces. This is supported by a sustained, political will that has steadily culminated into the subject of its own parliamentary inquiry (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016; House of Commons, 2017). Recent statistics do indicate that overall representation in England and Wales is rising slowly (National Statistics, 2022; UK Home Office, 2022), although the effort put into achieving this goal will be spread amongst the 43 police forces in a way that can certainly not be labelled uniform. This slow progress is displayed in governmental statistics, that illustrate in 2019 (Police Workforce - Gov.uk, 2023), diverse employees represented just 6.9% of the police force, in contrast to the 14% of the general population. Although this statistic requires significant critical analysis in order to be understood properly, the margin is clear enough to generate the political pressure that has seen the sustained generation of positive action initiatives over time.

Due to the pressure this lack of progress has created, positive action initiatives are in operation in every police service across both countries. They comprise of practical steps seeking to address the level of disproportionality present in the current recruitment statistics. These interventions seek to lift (in a literal sense) the performance of under-represented candidates engaged in the process. Although there is some literature looking at this more widely (Iganski et al., 2001; McCrudden, 1986), there is little available research on specific evaluation of such initiatives within police services in England and Wales. This may be due to the availability of detailed enough data, as the overall governmental statistics are an aggregate, with few – if any – individual police services choosing to publish their levels of disproportionality in recruitment.

These initiatives are nested within current recruitment processes in England and Wales. They are essentially a mix between national online assessment centres delivered by the College of Police Workforce - Gov.uk (2023, College of Policing, 2021a) and more localised recruitment processes in individual services. This is alongside the implementation of the 'newer' Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF) pathways (Tong and Hallenberg, 2018). These three new pathways relate to prior educational experience, and in places are still operating alongside older methods of police recruitment that still offer only vocational training. This further still complicates the ability to properly assess disproportionality. The newer online national instruments are applied in a controlled and uniform manner and recent evidence illustrates disproportionality in the national assessment centre stage has reduced (College of Policing, 2021b). This may be construed to be an isolated 'win' as police services continue to operate their own, obscured recruitment processes at either side of this particular stage. A more comprehensive examination of positive action efficacy as it currently stands is simply not possible.

Due to this variable picture, in practice, positive action initiatives differ greatly. Police services have access to data that may indicate that particular processes are creating disproportionate results with regards to race or gender. These particular stages are then reviewed by human resources and senior officers, before decisions are made to design specific support to address that disproportionality. In the context of this study, the positive action initiatives were designed to intervene after the initial application form in recruitment, and prior to the entire process in terms of police promotion. Both constabularies in this study employed bespoke, 'opt-in' positive action initiatives, that were a relative mystery to all of the participants in this study apart from those that directly experienced them.

Within this landscape, there have been some studies in England and Wales that discuss the perceived impact of positive action initiatives within the policing workforce. Johnston (2006) represents perhaps the most relevant to the current recruitment drive, as that study related to the hurried nature of Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) recruitment in the Metropolitan Police. There were a number of negative outcomes observed including the delegitimization of the competence and abilities (merit) of under-represented recruits in the eyes of serving officers. This can be supported by studies in the United States (US), which although they exist in a very different operational environment, also discuss positive action initiatives that have been observed to lead to perceived negative outcomes (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017; Wilkins and Williams, 2008, 2009). This may suggest that positive action initiatives are part of a wider milieu requiring solid explanation and contextual implementation in order to raise their perceived efficacy within the operational police workforce.

Linos et al. (2017) explores some of the sharper edged approaches to addressing under-representation in police recruitment.

Utilising nudge techniques, they employed bespoke positive action interventions upon a recruitment process in a southern English Constabulary. Psychological nudge techniques were deployed (Halpern, 2015; Lin et al., 2017) to redress already evidenced disproportionality, resulting in statistically significant changes in the success of under-represented candidates. The effects in terms of perceived legitimacy from within rank and file were neither measured nor discussed in this study, illustrating a lean into the relative weight of outcome for police services. Increased representation in terms of measured outcome may matter more than perceived internal legitimacy of the processes utilised to reach those outcomes. The nudge techniques themselves were linguistic, and related to the email that introduces the online assessment exercises. Negative language perceived to increase anxiety was removed, positive primers included, and a call for the participant to reflect on why they wished to be a police officer was introduced. These relatively minor changes resulted in a 50% increase in success for non-white candidates in the situational judgement test. This was rooted in an attempt to reduce the effect of a theoretically defined concept known as *Stereotype Threat*.

This study represented much more focused and applied research that is genuinely useful for attempting to understand some of the barriers in operation during the recruitment of ethnic minorities. Whilst it also provides a bedrock of empiricism to the implementation of positive action initiatives in England and Wales, the ethical questions of utilising Nudge should be considered (Bovens, 2009; Lin et al., 2017; Raihani, 2013; Selinger and Whyte, 2011). Nudge in this context represents a psychological manipulation, with the aim again to 'lift' the performance of under-represented candidates. The real problem should not lie in the raising of under-represented candidate's relative performance, but instead solidly investigating the recruitment processes themselves. The disproportionality is being evidenced in the recruitment process within individual constabularies, and is to be remedied via Nudge techniques that attempt to work upon the individuals taking the tests themselves. This could logically be considered to be the recruitment process version of 'victim blaming' (Crawford, 1977; Hayes et al., 2013; Henning and Holdford, 2006; Johnson et al., 2002), as the manipulation is upon the candidate, rather than through a solid review of the assessment tool that is involved.

More widely, there have been studies into recruitment in policing that do address issues of diversity more directly. These are gathered together and evaluated well by Rowe (2016). Rowe discusses prevalent issues of methodological and access based challenges, noting that diversity is not simply the recruitment of officers from under-represented groups, but also the expression of concepts such as race in a performative sense during active duty. Put simply, this is how officers express and navigate the issue of race during their day to day operational work. The performative nature of race is discussed at length by Holdaway in earlier literature (1991, Holdaway, 1994; Holdaway, 1997) as he argues that racialisation of policing is a constantly ongoing and negotiated process. This literature has developed into more contemporary study that seeks to understand officer retention (Barron and Holdaway, 2016; Holdaway, 1991; Rigaux and Cunningham, 2021; Wilson and Grammich, 2008), indicating that the impact of racialisation within policing does not end with the point of recruitment. This debate is reinforced in other recruitment based literature as the 'active-passive' representation debate discussed by Hong (2017). Summarised, this argument centres upon whether the recruitment of under-represented police officers has an instrumental, behavioural or operational outcome. This can lead to outcomes in this area being considered as 'window dressing' (Cashmore, 2002); outcomes for the purposes of altered perceptions, rather than any sort of operational, tangible change in police behaviour. For the purposes of this article, this debate will not be directly considered; it instead centres upon the perceptions of diversity based initiatives internally, specifically the implementation of positive-action interventions within the context of recruitment and promotion.

## 2. Organisational justice in the police

Organisational justice is a developing field of study in policing, and can be separated into two main fields; interactions between citizens and police, and interactions between the organisation and police (Donner et al., 2015). Positive action initiatives are implemented at the behest of senior officers, influenced from within both the local and the wider political context. These initiatives are attached to existing processes such as recruitment into the organisation or for promotion, and therefore represent a process to which appropriate organisational justice principles can be applied.

As a sub-set of Organisational Justice, Colquitt et al. (2005) describes Procedural Justice as fundamental to the good running of organisations, and puts forward a number of categories that organisations should be cognisant of when involved in process based, fair decision making. The Donner et al. (2015) State of the Art Literature Review then synthesises this and other research based solely in the policing domain. The analysis from this study indicates that internal police organisational processes and their implementation can affect police officer's trust in the organisation itself, their job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and retention amongst other factors.

Individual studies in the police environment (Bradford et al., 2014; Herrington and Roberts, 2013; Hough, 2013; Hough et al., 2010; MacQueen and Bradford, 2017) have illustrated that the implementation of fair and proper organisational decision making leads to positive outcomes for officers, and can in turn be held to lead to increased self-legitimacy (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). These studies may indicate that healthy internal, organisational environments directly affect external practice. This is under-developed empirically but an area of promising study. Further research here may develop an evidence base for the evolution of particular processes within police organisations.

The framework used in this study is defined in a report from Quinton et al. (2015, p. 4). They lay out a two faceted framework for the application of organisational justice in internally based policing processes. They define two areas.

- 1) **Distributive justice** - How fairly employees feel that inputs (e.g. workload, resources) and rewards (e.g. pay, recognition) are allocated across the organisation.
- 2) **Procedural justice** - Perceptions of procedural justice can be seen to consist of the following three elements:

- How fairly employees feel decision-making processes are in the organisation
- How open, honest and timely employees feel decisions are communicated.
- How respectful and dignified contact is perceived to be between senior staff and employees on a personal level.

The report is a practical gathering together of the literature in the policing environment, and provided a professional framework for the exploration of the implementation of positive action policies and processes within the context of this study.

### 3. Method

This study examines reports of the lived experience of police officers; it investigates phenomenon (Detmer, 2013; Laverty, 2003) as described in Husserl (1970). Whilst performing their duties, police officers will come into contact with new police recruits, and police promotion process hopefuls. Both of the interactions with these actors are direct a result of instigated organisational process. Attached to these processes are positive action initiatives, and officers in the execution of their duties are therefore interacting with potential recipients or non-recipients of positive action initiatives on a daily basis. Officers will therefore come into regular and persistent contact with those that were eligible to receive, and indeed did receive positive action in either recruitment or promotion processes.

In order to investigate this interaction from the perspective of those officers, 17 long form (Warren and Karner, 2005), standardised (Wright et al., 1989), open ended interviews (Turner, 2010) were conducted across two police services in 2017. These interviews contained questions that explored the officer's experiences and perceptions of positive action in the workplace, informed by the framework of Quinton et al. (2015). The interviews themselves were conducted in active police stations, and the participants were recruited via convenience sampling (Emerson, 2021). Wide generalisability of the findings (Schofield, 2012) was not a priority during data collection, with instead the thickness of data (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Dey, 2003) presenting as the challenge with the study of any phenomenon.

Ethics clearance was gained from Canterbury Christ Church University. Ethical issues were present due to the currently serving researcher's rank and their potential to influence access and participation. These issues were addressed via the removal and non-disclosure of rank during any recruitment or the development of access agreements. Candidate agency was also emphasised at all points to prevent any in-person rank based influence (Davis, 2018), with the inclusion of candidate participation consent forms and the 'Right to withdraw' discussion mandated prior to every interview. Despite the conscious removal of rank, the researcher enjoyed a great deal of access (Stubbs, 2023) privilege as a serving police officer. Both recruitment sites were different, with one service representing a large metropolitan force, and the other a larger county based force. Access was negotiated through formal permission request to the visited stations, and interviews were conducted in unranked uniform due to the significant time restraint placed on the researcher. Upon reflection, this insider based (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Westmarland, 2016) approach to negotiating access to participant recruitment offered an opportunity for very real access to the operational environment.

Practically, participants were nominated by serving, operational, emergency response Sergeants who were approached following formal negotiation with supervision for a researcher visit. The consenting participants were the officers available i.e. not deployed actively upon arrival at site. This ensured that those involved in the study were active officers in physical, operational deployment. These were the officers who would tutor new recruits (all new officers reported to Response for two years upon recruitment), and would be in daily contact with potential and newly appointed supervisors. There was a large variability in service, with officers still in their probation through to officers with almost twenty years' active service. The interviews were often conducted in empty interview rooms inside the operational station. These were sourced dependent upon availability. Insider status (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) was shared with the participants and often resulted in lengthy discussions about the outsidership of engaging in formalised academic research as a serving response officer.

The questions and context were tested by the researcher before exploring final interview schedules (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The subject matter was tested in groups, and found to be very controversial. When positive action or race related subjects were broached in small groups of serving officers, it quickly became clear that these subjects were not to be explored lightly. In one sample test, a serving Sergeant was interviewed in company with a response officer that he did not supervise. Rank was present in the room and the researcher received single word answers from the constable until the supervisor discussed his distrust of positive action initiatives. This represented a conceptual icebreaker for the constable who then began to participate more fully in the interview having received a tangible, unsolicited permission to speak. For this reason, the interviews were conducted with single participants. The evidenced 'taboo' that was present in the test interviews became a part of the interview schedule. Anonymity was emphasised, along with the participants representing candidate numbers unattached to their respective constabularies. A shared, common ground ensured a quicker traversing of the taboo, resulting in interviews that were up to two and a half hours long.

The sample itself was made up of eight female and nine male police officers (self-defined) (n = 17). Alongside the wide range of service amongst the participants, two of the participants were under-represented officers in terms of race. There was a variably equal split between the two sites with (n = 9) officers interviewed within the metropolitan service, and (n = 8) officers interviewed in the county based service. The interviews were transcribed by hand, coded in NVIVO deductively as according to the theoretical framework, with extra inducted codes introduced if they emerged from the interview data (Boyatzis, 1998; Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *The racial taboo*

The initial taboo experienced during the testing of the interviews was present in a large proportion of the participants (n = 14). It was a barrier that had to be traversed at the beginning of the interview if the phenomenon was to be properly investigated. Representative examples of this taboo included:

“... it makes it awkward to talk about the whole thing in the first place. You feel ... I’m stuttering because I feel like I’m treading on toes that I shouldn’t be, just by talking about it in the first place – maybe it’s just me, maybe I’m a bit of a ... I don’t like to upset people ...” **Interviewee 16**

This quote represented the genuine awkwardness of broaching the subject at all. The fact that the issue of recruitment targets and positive action was a subject felt to be barred from discussion in the parade room illustrated a distinct inability to make sense of the organisational decision making. This awkwardness was accompanied by a level of learned helplessness in the officers:

“I think it’s a difficult one because it’s been something which has been highly politicised. It’s highly sensitive. And it makes it quite a difficult subject matter I think, for people to broach ... You feel more uncomfortable with the subject matter because it is so emphasised ... More importantly, it makes people reluctant to openly discuss it, because it seems so taboo ... because people are sceptical of the reasons.” **Interviewee 11.**

These comments were elicited upon the asking of the first question concerning recruitment targets for police recruitment and promotion, and positive action. Participants were asked how they feel about them being present. The discomfort was tangible, and required instant navigation to open up the interviewees to further discussion. From a Procedural Justice perspective, the reasons for the use of positive action are not trusted by the officers, and the subject exists with threat of sanction:

“I mean we are in an interview situation now where it is all anonymous, and that’s great. Ordinarily people wouldn’t talk about this to hierarchy, and they certainly wouldn’t mention [unhappiness with positive action] to you about it existing – if it does.” **Interviewee 13.**

This discussion of race and positive action being silenced was collocated with homophobia and racism:

“It’s the easy factor, if you want to get done by DPS, be homophobic or racist, and they will jump on you. Whereas, probably a couple of years ago that wouldn’t have happened at all.” **Interviewee 17**

This inclusion of DPS (Department of Professional Standards) in this initial opening portion of the interview indicates that even gentle discussion of these issues is connected to perceived possibility of punishment or internal investigation, illustrating significant distrust on the part of the officers engaging in the interviews. Although the connection discussed here is inferred, the officers voiced general discomfort about any level of discussion concerning race. The linguistic collocation with internal investigation and punishment may provide some explanation for this, indicating that officers believe that race related discussion is very close to suffering some element of internal disciplinary intervention.

This represents a tangible hurdle for police organisations attempting to pursue representative numbers within their ranks. Although the goal of numerical representation could theoretically be reached, the perceived legitimacy of those under-represented officers hired by the organisation may be seriously affected. It is a direct breach of the open and honest categorisations discussed in the Procedural Justice policing literature (Hough et al., 2010; Quinton et al., 2015). This was further reinforced by unsolicited discussion of possible remedies that could be applied by leadership in this area:

“And I think that’s where the message has got lost. And it hasn’t ever been clearly explained, at any stage. At no point would you have a senior manager sit down with a team and say, right well, there’s an application coming up, there’s some poor feeling, or someone has said this, I’ve heard some rumour about this ... I just want to let you all know, this is the script and this is the rules that we play to. Because the police is a rumour mill, and something will be said on the top corridor, and by the time it comes down to us the story’s completely different. Completely irrational. It makes no sense. And that then leads to that ill feeling that goes on. There’s no clear line. [of communication] ...” **Interviewee 10**

This quote represents a group of quotes that explore directly the lines of communication around the use of positive action in recruitment. The provision of positive action in recruitment and promotion is simply a matter taken for granted by senior managers, yet is subject to a taboo at the level of the operational officer. The same Interviewee succinctly illustrates the problem in a nutshell:

“Communication is the whole problem ... If you want to wear that [leadership] responsibility feel free. But, at least, turn around and say, there’s been a little confusion over this, or we want to explain the bit where we are going as a force. And that is the thing. Whenever big changes come, big talks don’t ...”

Interviewee 10

These previous quotes essentially bookend the issues raised by the earlier interviewees, who are discussing the outcome of the implementation of policy without any explanation or internal communication from inside the service. This results in confusion, a lack of understanding, and ultimately the collocation of punishment with regards to the conversation happening at all. This appears to be a

logical extrapolation and subsequently a conclusion of the assumption that the even the leaders are unwilling to discuss the issue of race openly with rank and file.

With regards to research these findings may also represent a hurdle for others conducting studies in this area. As an insider-outsider (Westmarland, 2016) whilst conducting the interviews, the researcher shared the professional identity of the police officers being interviewed, allowing them to navigate this sensitive area with shared trepidation and mutual acknowledgement of the risk involved. This discussion had a performative and instrumental purpose. It was important that the sensitivity be articulated, which then allowed officers to express negative perceptions and emotions safely. It also had an emancipatory effect; once the researcher and the participant had both acknowledged this subject was extremely sensitive, it appeared as if the participants were then free to express their discontent with the status quo.

Once this taboo had been discussed candidly, the participants were then also free to discuss their experience of how positive action was perceived during their daily experiences, leading to the following theme of meritocracy.

#### 4.2. Positive action and meritocracy

The conversation about meritocracy was preceded by further illustrations of officer's ignorance around the implementation of positive action interventions. This ignorance was not displayed with an underpinning of malice, but one of exploration and curiosity:

"It's so vast, that we seem to be concentrating on something that is a personal decision – why someone has chosen a career – with, we are looking for you. And I think that is excluding ... it's exclusionary. It's kind of excluding, or it seems to be demonising other areas that are equally as important." **Interviewee 11**

"It doesn't make sense to me. You can't force a particular group of people to join the job. They either want to do it, or not, and I don't see why we should be going out there and actively targeting, and at the same time ignoring other groups." **Interviewee 13**

Both interviewees are not aware that police recruitment processes can be exclusionary themselves (Linos et al., 2017), and that the issue does not wholly lie with under-represented officers not wishing to become officers. The 'other groups' discussed here represent the dominant white middle class that mainly comprise the service, to which the interviewees belonged. The two passages above use the adjectives of 'exclusionary,' 'demonising' and 'ignoring', suggesting strongly feelings of distributive injustice. There is a clearly expressed feeling of disproportionate allocation of resources. This lack of legitimacy is reinforced by the earlier discussed lack of informational justice and communication, presenting in culmination a veritable informational vacuum. Not only are the reasons for positive action not discussed, their application and results are not discussed either. This allowed a figurative space for further exploratory discussion between officers around these topics.

This space was filled by discussions of merit in the data. Referred to as 'competence', the interviewees see this as the casualty of the implementation of positive action and recruitment targets:

"However, it still comes down to the best people for the job. If a white male/female are possibly not getting to be police officer in the Met or nationwide because they are not from an ethnic minority – that's wrong. As simple as. It has to be the best person for the job, rather than making the face fit ..." **Interviewee 12**

Positive action in the above quote is referred to as '*making the face fit*'. A perception of forcing the recruitment of under-represented candidates, and subsequently disadvantaging white candidates. Merit in this case is referred to as the '*best people for the job*.' The implication in the above example is that under-represented candidates may not represent the '*best people*'. This is a perceived injustice in the outcome of the positive action policy, suggesting illegitimacy in the perceptions of the interviewed officers in both the way that the policy is applied, and exactly what it also *does*.

"But I don't understand why – like has been said before – an officer is there to do a role, it shouldn't matter what colour they are, what sex they are, what orientation sexually they are. As long as they can perform that role to the required standard or better, it should be irrelevant what their make-up is. We should be looking at the quality of the person, not any other issue regarding their sex, their race or any of that. It should be, or the main part should be, can they do the role to the right standard or above." **Interviewee 13**

Here the words are slightly different, with competence being described as '*the quality of the person*,' and the benchmark of '*[doing] the role to the right standard or above*.' These are relatively neutral standards in terms of terms used, but are not qualified by any kind of defined criteria. The *why* in this case is with regards to the need for positive action, and not the need for increased representation. This is important, as informational justice directly contributes to the perceived legitimacy of a process; in this case the lack of information is the *why* surrounding the need for an additional resource to be allocated in order to pursue the goal of representation. This is a conflation of perceived injustice, with the perceived unfairness of allocated resource being supported by a lack of sufficient information to justify it. It is of note, that the interviewee in this case clearly does not believe that positive action is a legitimate resource allocation for the purposes of increased representation, and this may be construed as particularly (or wilfully) naïve in the current racially sensitive context.

As the interviews progressed, the interviewees were encouraged to offer more detail around exactly what these terms relating to competence mean, or how they are physically experienced in the doing of police work:

"... if you start doubting that [their competence], then it's not a great working mentality. You should be following a leader – through thick and thin – you know. And if you start doubting that you might be on the back foot. It might take you that extra

second to react in public order situations, safety issues, and that could lead to potentially serious consequences. Just having that split second sort of doubt, that extra split second to make a decision, you are doubting what you are being led into. It could go horribly wrong, not just for you, but for the people around you.” **Interviewee 1**

“This job, the decisions and the things we do affect people’s lives massively. And if you are just filling a role, because we think we need to, but the person isn’t capable of doing it, then the knock on effect is massive.” **Interviewee 2**

These comments begin to define what the officers actually mean when they refer to competence or merit in the response policing environment. They refer back to the physicality, the hypermasculine (Scharrer, 2010), the romance (Van Maanen, 1973) and the *real* of police work. They infer risk to life and specifically discuss public order and safety. This is a tangible retreat into the cultural pillars of defensive solidarity with colleagues and the celebration of masculine exploits (Bowling et al., 2020; Loftus, 2010), the officers believe that they represent the thin blue line between order and chaos (Bradford and Quinton, 2014).

Questions must be asked here about the connection of positive action initiatives with the threatening of personal safety. On the face of it, this appears to be a large leap in logic, yet it manifests within an organisational information void with regards to positive action, one bereft of any sort of discussion of representation or why it is important. It is logical to assume that where those gaps exist, there may be a tendency for officers to return to their tried and tested patterns of inter-relational behaviours and tropes. As Waddington (1999) discusses, the cultural themes are often discussed in a negative and critical light, yet they may serve as important forms of psychological maintenance for serving officers. If the organisational information around the implementation of positive action has not been explained, and the subject of race is taboo and too laden with punishment related stigma to acceptably discuss it in the parade room, officers may rely on what they know and experience well; those things that represent the explanatory bolt holes for the pressures inflicted during high demand response work.

As one officer discussed the outcome of a recent promotion process that incorporated positive action, they stated:

“So, it’s really, really unfair. But then, the person that it happened to – on a personal note – are lovely. On a professional note, perhaps not the best person for the job.” **Interviewee 1**

This was in reference to the promotion of an under-represented sergeant. The interviewee was not part of this promotion process, and was an experienced officer in terms of service. It is difficult at this point to properly judge comments such as this. The outcome of the process is clearly viewed to be illegitimate, and the findings discussed earlier indicate the lack of information around positive action implementation and any reasoning that went into its design. These are clear indications of perceived organisational justice breaches in this comment, yet some could reasonably deduce that the statement represents racism. Although this should be an important consideration, the statement above could also represent a personally honest account of a judgement of that particular officer’s version of what they see as competence. This presents as a challenge for policing organisations who are seeking to change promotion and selection processes, as they will be subverting established, well understood and personally experienced processes in order to address much needed change in an area fraught with sensitivity. These changes should not be underestimated, and may indeed present as ‘big changes’ that require ‘big talks.’

#### 4.3. *It is not the goal, but the implementation of the process*

Following the exploration of these two collocated themes, there was another contra-indicatory theme that was well represented amongst the candidates. The result of positive action was seen to be both necessary and important. This was unanimous amongst the officers interviewed.

“Obviously, you have got to be more reflective of the communities that you serve.” **Interviewee 7**

“... the police force should represent the population it serves, the communities ... And I think, yeah, damn right I welcome it.” **Interviewee 3**

“There does need to be sort of emphasis on improving the representation of BME in various different roles.” **Interviewee 14**

The researcher decided not to accept this on face value, and explored these comments and their motivations. The underpinning understanding around these comments appeared to be at odds with the other findings concerning competence, and this destabilised the thematic findings around organisational justice. Almost all of the officers (n = 13) displayed a sound understanding behind these assertions.

“I appreciate at the same time, obviously there are other areas where we have larger populations of ethnic minorities which make policing easier if you’ve got someone from that.” **Interviewee 2**

“... it brings in other expertise, other experiences, other knowledges, which works in your key individual networks and your local communities. Also, it broadens our minds.” **Interviewee 3**

It is only upon closer inspection that the organisational justice landscape in this area becomes more clear. The police officers interviewed both accepted and acknowledged the importance of increasing representation. This is in line with both the senior officers implementing the processes, and the politicians calling for it (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016; House of Commons, 2017). The conflict and injustice appears to rest not in the objective of the implemented positive action processes, but the communication and the administration of the means with which to reach it.

5. Discussion

Returning to the first theme around the taboo inherent within this particular area, multiple organisational breaches are evidenced. These lie within the officer’s ability to even discuss or broach the subject in public, and the officer’s perceived distributive justice issues with the application of the positive action method. This is a failure of officer voice, and organisational, informational justice. The outcome of these organisational justice breaches appears to be a perceived subversion of the meaning of competence. This can be seen in Fig. 1 below.

The main problem with the perceived justice of these processes arises in the separation of the issue after first instance. Senior officers and Human Resource managers are making the choice to subvert processes that have been lived through and experienced for decades within the police service. This choice has a solid and shared objective, one evidenced strongly in the interviews across both sites. Police officers are totally removed from both the reasoning and the practical implementation of the processes, experiencing only the outcomes of the process changes.

Logically, it could be assumed that the recruitment and promotion positive action schemes are perceived to represent distributive unfairness. More resources are being allocated to the support and success of under-represented participants. Positive action is an exclusionary process and would breach the strictly distributive nature of a theoretically ‘fair’ process in the policing environment, as discussed by Quinton et al. (2015). It is therefore very important to accompany the implementation of such processes with openings for employee voice and high levels of information. These changes subvert the perceptions of police officers who have lived experience of a system without discretionary additions for support to particular groups of recipients. Legacy may change this, as positive action interventions become lodged in the experiential building blocks of socialisation, but this will take time.

That the perceived unfairness can be justified as collateral damage in the mission to reach the goal is a distinct feature of New Public Management (Diefenbach, 2009; Maesschalck, 2004), where additional resources or operational decisions are made in order to reach previously defined targets. Much of this approach led to improved management practices within police services (McLaughlin et al., 2001), yet much of its application also led to corruption (PASC, 2014). In isolation, a pursuit of representativeness as a goal whilst utilising targets may lead to organisational decisions that have simply not existed since the police’s inception. If this is the case, then the decisions made in order to reach this new objective will be without comparator and may require bespoke informational justice processes within policing organisations. The ever-present political pressure to diversify the police, is still now incentivising the evolution of recruitment and promotion processes, aiming towards the representation statistics that signify a justifiable moral good. This is seemingly supported by all parties in this study, yet the devil may remain in the detail around the implementation of the how that good is to be reached. This is not a criticism of positive action as a means within which to reach this targeted goal, but of the implementation, publicization and critique of that process organisationally within the police.

There are also potential implications for these findings that transcend the perceived illegitimacy of the outcome of the processes. Research in procedural justice is beginning to link the experience of internal organisational justice, and the output of self-legitimacy in police officers (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). Tankebe and Meško (2015) found that when officers believe that they were treated fairly by supervision, they were more likely to engage in pro-organisational behaviour, and were also more likely to utilise alternative disposal rather than engage in the use of force. Other studies also support similar findings (Bradford et al., 2014; Bradford and Quinton, 2014; Herrington and Roberts, 2013; Tankebe, 2019). Within this context, it would be presumptuous to link the application of positive action within policing to externalised race-related operational behaviour, yet theoretically, this could be a potential area for further

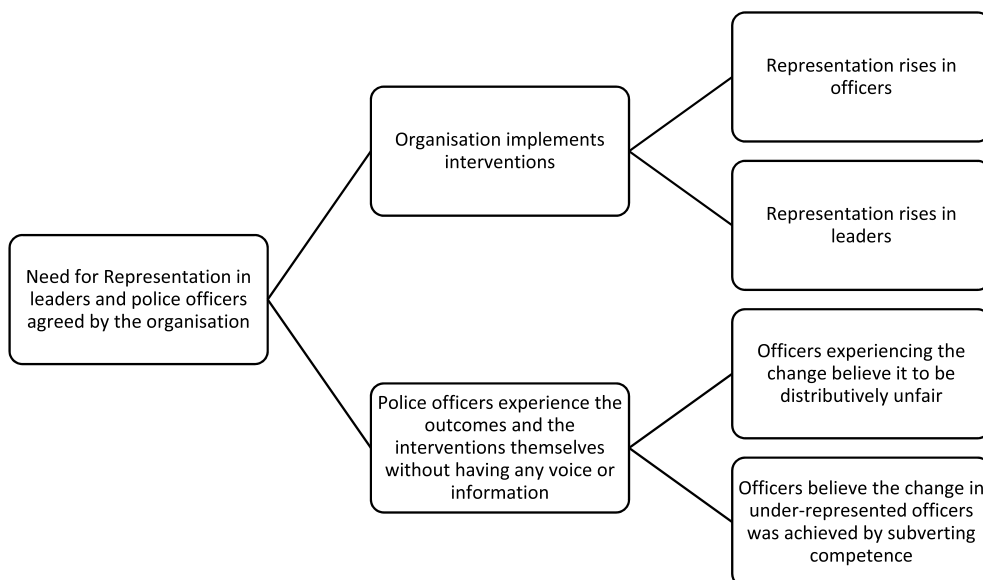


Fig. 1. Figure 1: Diagram of the conceptual challenges observed in the data

in-depth research.

## 6. Limitations, recommendations and further research

This study aimed to gain understanding from long form, phenomenological interviews. Its aim was not to generalise but to gather validity (Creswell and Miller, 2000) through the in depth analysis of police officer's lived experience. It has provided enough insight into the perceptions of organisational justice and positive action to justify further research in this area and direct further data collection. The interviews were only conducted across two sites, and this could have been much more widely placed for triangulation purposes. Due to time constraints, only 17 in-depth interviews were conducted, but these represented many hours of transcription due to their open-ended, phenomenological nature. It is also possible that further disclosures and access in this area may be limited by the political climate, something that only became navigable in this study through insider-outsider (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Westmarland, 2016) access.

It is possible to code the process depicted in Fig. 1, allowing further quantitative measurement of the phenomenon on a wider basis. It is also possible that a great deal of organisational decision making in the policing environment follow similar patterns. The overall agreement on the goal may not be in dispute with regards to diversification of the police, yet the conflict was present in the methods used to attend to that goal. Other contentious areas that this may relate to include Stop and Search (Bradford, 2019; HMICFRS, 2021), use of force (Fyfe, 2010; Tankebe and Meško, 2015) and traffic stops (MacQueen and Bradford, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2018).

Underlying these very difficult and contentious areas may be fundamental issues with policing leadership and organisational administration that link back to earlier research by Van Maanen and Reuss-Ianni, 1984. The separation between the goal to be reached and perceived organisational legitimacy occurred when the upper 'Management Cops' decision making became totally separated from the operational, lived experiences of the 'Street Cops.' It is perhaps in this space of between that organisational justice, and therefore self-legitimacy may emerge. The potential outputs from this malaise of internal communication may itself be reproducing many of the problems that it, in turn, seeks to solve.

If the findings in this study were to be discussed in light of future recommendations, they may not lie in whether there is a need for positive action, or indeed whether positive action works. They instead lie in the application of communication channels, methods and opportunities that are not present within police organisations. Despite serious misgivings about the implications of positive action interventions, there were evidentially no avenues for operational officers to discuss them safely with senior officers. Perceived danger with regards to their discussion can only limit organisational understanding in this area, possibly leading to perceptions of illegitimacy for many potential new recruits or promoted leaders. If senior leaders are implementing these initiatives with well-publicised targets in mind, the bucking of the command and control environment (Grint, 2010) in policing must be a consideration. With matters of such political contention, a simple 'We tell, you do [accept]' approach may be totally inadequate. A command to patrol a particular area or respond to an incident may not equate - in any way - to the changing of an organisational process that is perceived to disadvantage the majority of the policing organisation, even if that perception is fundamentally incorrect. This serves as a challenge for senior officers engaged in such decision making: when is it acceptable to command and expect unreflective acceptance from police officers and staff, and when is it acceptable to have to switch organisational decision making style into an area that may require much more open, detailed deliberation and communication? The unravelling of decision making in this area will remain contentious, yet necessary, raising questions surrounding the skills that future leaders may require in an increasingly complex political landscape.

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