

“Second-class citizens” – Professional inequity in UK Policing

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The present research addresses challenges associated with professional inequity in United Kingdom (UK) law enforcement. The police workforce in England and Wales comprises circa 236,000 full time employees, of which 37.9% are police staff (Home Office, 2025), individuals who do not hold the warranted powers of their police officer colleagues. However, police staff are substantially underrepresented in senior and executive leadership roles (Flemming and Brown, 2021) and disproportionately adversely effected by financial constraints (HMICFRS, 2025). Police staff are also habitually neglected by policing scholars when compared to their officer colleagues. Though previous research has identified resentment of civilian professionals amongst officers (Loftus, 2008) and the challenges policing cultures present to effective integration (Mousseau, Morin and Charbonneau, 2025). Consequently, the present research seeks to explore the unique experience of law enforcement culture by UK police staff employees. With the potential for this broad scoping enquiry to inform future concentrated empirical work.

Accordingly, the research draws upon a broad range of theoretical constructs in exploring and explaining this unique organisational behaviour. Including those relating to the complex nature of policing cultures as simultaneously organisational and occupational, and their potential implications for organisational justice, workplace motivation, equity, and individual and group identity. The role of formal and informal leadership in shaping culture is also considered, including the importance of professional representativeness and opportunity across the leadership structure in a policing organisation. Finally, intersectionality theory is drawn upon in examining some of the unique challenges within the policing habitus experienced by civilian employees.

The research comprised thirty-two semi-structured interviews with individuals in senior police staff roles from 23 policing organisations in the UK. The interviews were conducted via videoconferencing between December 2025 and March 2026, and the resulting transcripts inductively thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify prominent themes within participants' experiences and perspectives. The initial results of which demonstrate the primacy of four dimensions to the contemporary police staff experience.

The principal finding resulting from this work concerns the prevalence of discriminatory language, behaviours, policies and processes which adversely impact police staff in UK law enforcement. Incorporating the degree to which these take the form of unconscious microaggressions on the part of the perpetrators, such is the degree of normalisation within the organisational and occupational cultures. Yet having significant impact upon police staff sense of belonging, voice, motivation and perceptions of organisational justice. As exemplified in the prevalence of discourse conceptualising police staff as 'second class citizens.'

The second principal finding of this work concerns intersectionality, the potential for multiple, context dependent, aspects of social identity to interact in creating, enhancing and sustaining disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1997). For participants, an individual's status as a member of police staff, when coupled with protected characteristics such as being female or from an ethnic minority background, increased challenges of voice, progression and organisational justice. Gender and racial discrimination representing enduring, though less overt, phenomena law enforcement (Brown, Craig and Pike, 2025; Wicks, 2025).

Prominent in equity related discourse was recognition of the limited progression and development opportunities for police staff. Across policing, officers typically logically progress up with ranks with the ability to move laterally across specialisms to gain experience for future promotions. In contrast, police staff generally remain within a single professional

field, with inflexible role descriptions preventing lateral movement. Or limited opportunity progress to senior management roles due to these being occupied by officers or similarly stuck police staff colleagues. Consequently, police staff must necessarily accept the lack of progression opportunity and its consequences for perceived organisational injustice, eudaimonic wellbeing and motivation, or seek alternative employment resulting in intellectual and financial loss to the organisation.

Yet despite the challenges faced by police staff, the research highlighted a strong ethos of public service motivation amongst participants. Including a commitment to achieving justice for victims, crime prevention, public protection and community cohesion via their playing a role in the policing system. As derived from their personal and professional values; and acting as a potential mediator to the strains associated with professional inequity.

This research makes a unique theoretical contribution to the policing culture and organisational behaviour literature via demonstrating the cumulative impact of what may be perceived as microaggressions against police staff. Whether verbal or behavioural, or implicit in organisational structures, policies and processes, as a result of the underlying culture and their normalisation. Further, this work uniquely recognises the potential for intersectionality of the police staff role with other protected characteristics and the associated implications for individual voice, progression and motivation. Whilst also being distinctive for its focus on police staff as a highly underrepresented group in policing organisational research. Consequently, the research proposes a novel contribution to practice via recommendations to enhance professional equity in policing organisations via a whole systems approach which maximises the opportunities presented by UK policing reform and academic-industry engagement.

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