

'Decoding the silence – an oral history of the impact of leadership and organisational culture upon police officer motivation in an English metropolitan police force

This research looks at the impact of government reforms and organisational change on the morale of police officers.

Key details

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Police region	East Midlands
Collaboration and partnership	West Yorkshire Police.
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Research context

Whilst the global recession of 2008/2009 is over, its impact is still being felt across the public sector in the United Kingdom. Austerity transformed many World Governments attitudes towards public sector funding and this is particularly evident within the police service of England and Wales.

Post-2010 Policing within England and Wales underwent the ‘most significant transformative change ... since the reign of King George the IV’ (Orde 2012, 72).

A central component of that reform has been the Home Office's stated desire to modernise and professionalise the service, through the adoption of private sector practices and associated promises of:

- greater efficiencies
- improved performance
- stronger leadership
- increased accountability

Whilst such a desire was not new, the policing environment post 2010 arguably quickened the pace and coincided with a return to the 1990s/2000s fabled land of 'new public management'; the umbrella term for the business-isation of the public sector/police.

This return was/is personified in the still stated desire to introduce of performance/skills related pay which despite the delay remains a stated objective, modernisation of leadership through direct entry at senior ranks for 'private sector' leaders, and introduction of multiple entry streams for constables, degree apprenticeships, post graduate conversions, graduate entry, direct entry Detective Constables and the ending of the final salary pension scheme.

However, despite the sea-change in policing the majority of post-2010 policing research has centred upon service delivery, the impact of declining officer numbers on public confidence and the impact of privatisation within key areas of policing. Yet, this new approach to policing research is not uncommon, the vast majority of research undertaken into the police, primarily focuses upon immediate policy.

Despite the differing areas of research undertaken, most have a shared commonality in that little research, focuses on the impact that significant organisational change, amendments to terms and conditions of service and shrinking workforces have on the motivation of warranted police officers nor gives a voice to individual officers.

The limited research that has been conducted into how those reforms have impacted upon individual officer's morale are damning:

'...in 38 years of working for this force I have never known staff to be treated as shabbily or morale so low'.

(West Yorkshire Police 2014b)

Yet, the notion that such a view was/could be limited to one force was laid bare through the Government's own admission that, 'the morale of the very great majority of honest, hardworking, committed and brave police officers has suffered' (HMIC 2014) and acknowledged by the Home Affairs Select Committee, who concluded that morale within the police force was an all-time low (Vaz 2013).

Despite these assertions, in-depth research into officer's morale, motivation and views of organisational culture has not been forthcoming. Such an oversight is further compounded in that the research that has been conducted into the issue, has been very broad and resulted in generalised rationales and beliefs.

This lack of exploration and understanding of how organisational, governmental and societal change has impacted on individual officer's motivation. It can be argued that this has shaped the view of policing culture as a whole.

It has long been held that policing culture is at best reluctant to accept change and at worst, actively seeks to block reform (Berry and others, 1995; Reiner 1992; Kiely and Peek 2002; McLaughlin 2006; Reiner 2010). Yet, within the wider world of business and organisational change management it has been recognised that such attributes are indicative of ineffective leadership, poor organisational communication, demotivated employees and 'top down' management.

Aims and Objectives of the research and the specific research question(s)

This research will investigate the effects of declining motivation amongst warranted police officers (from police constable to inspector), in the post 2010 police service of England and Wales.

The aim is to gain a greater understanding of the cause and effect of reduced motivation upon officers, the wider culture of policing and identify how an enhanced understanding of the issues can assist in implementing organisational change within policing given the assertions that it has resolutely failed to do so (Sheehy 1993; Macpherson 1999; Rowe 2006; Reiner 2010).

This study is designed to answer the following questions.

1. How do warranted police officers view governmental/organisational reforms of the police service and are those reforms the cause of police officer demotivation as claimed, or are there other underlying causes?
2. What are the impacts of those reforms upon individual police officers' motivation?
3. How does the culture of policing influence motivation levels of police officers in the context of the wider organisation?
4. What impact does leadership have upon police officer morale and how do police officers view leadership within the police?
5. How can key research findings inform the development and implementation of policing reform?

Research methodology

This research adopts the methodological approach of an oral history. For, it is held that oral histories give a voice and recognition to individuals and groups who have been ignored, marginalised or neglected.

Additionally, its fluidity and willingness to draw on theoretical perspectives from across the social and academic fields (Abrams 2010, 3) is an ideal dovetail to the multifaceted areas of motivation, leadership and culture that this research piece shall be exploring.

The sample will be twenty five officers from constable to inspector from a Northern English Metropolitan Police Force.