

## 2. The Abstract Police and Occupational Culture

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### Introduction

This chapter uses data from qualitative interviews with serving police officers, police community support officers (PCSOs)<sup>1</sup> and police civilian staff (herein referred to as staff) from four English police services to explore potential consequences of ‘abstract’ forms of policing for occupational identity, subculture and, relatedly, staff well-being. Terpstra et al. (2019: 340) use the concept of “abstract police” to describe a situation within contemporary policing where, “both internally and externally, the police have become more at a distance, more impersonal and formal, less direct, and more decontextualised”. They argue that forms of abstract police impact on relations, both internally with colleagues and externally with partners and the public.

In this vein, we identify changes to police working practices that make police more abstract. According to those interviewed, these changes to police practices could have a negative impact on mental and physical health in the workplace, in part because they have reduced opportunities for informal mutual support – identified as important for mitigating the impact of stressful, risky and dangerous experiences. However, our evidence also suggests that police officers and staff continue to find opportunities within their working lives for informal mutual support and that this in turn produces and sustains occupational culture, including that which helps them manage workplace stress. It might be that an era of increasingly abstract police reworks, rather than wholly removes, ways in which police culture operates. The interviews were part of a larger study on visible policing and considered the link between police visual culture and occupational identity.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter we focus on the impact of changing working practices on occupational identity, highlighting elements of their working environment that our participants associated with ‘abstract police’ (Terpstra et al., 2019). These included the increasing tendency for singlecrewed deployment, the disappearance of traditional ‘backstage’ spaces within police stations and the increasing centrality of digital devices. There was, we found, evidence to support the notion of abstract police, at least in relation to the organisation and delivery of police work (less was forthcoming about community engagement), but the implications that this might have for occupational culture are mixed. The findings from our research extend the application of this concept and trend. We argue that despite changes in police work associated with abstract police that have resulted in greater physical distance between police colleagues during shifts, positive aspects of police subculture – such as mutual support leading to trust, solidarity and loyalty – can endure. Indeed, our research shows that it is because of abstract police that subculture is now being practised in different spaces (including technological domains) to a greater extent than conventionally regarded in police studies. This means that subculture is no longer reliant on close physical proximity among officers during shifts but is also performed using technology and outside of work and workspaces. In doing so, we find agreement with Loftus (2010) that police subculture is being maintained because the experiences of officers and the challenges they perceive, and the structural position of the police in society, are the same as in previous periods.

The following section considers the concept of abstract police and its links to occupational subculture. Later, the methodology applied in our research is outlined. We then present the

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK, Police Community Support Officers are uniformed civilian personnel, with some prescribed legal powers. They are neither police officers nor fully civilian staff (see O’Neill, 2019, for a full account).

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research findings in connection with going from job-to-job-to-job, the physical working environment, single-crewed deployment, technology and issues relating to the police family. The last section discusses the research findings in terms of changes in police working practices and police occupational culture. The research findings suggest avenues for further exploration in terms of developing the concept of abstract police in relation to occupational identity, officer solidarity and welfare.

### **Abstract Police and Occupational Culture**

A key feature of abstract police is the increasing physical distance among police employees during shifts. As Terpstra et al. (2019) illustrate, this has been brought about by contemporary changes in policing, including closure of police stations and use of technology that facilitates remote working. Officers can now cover larger areas, leaving them with fewer opportunities to engage with colleagues face to face. Terpstra et al. (2019) contend that contact among police employees is increasingly mediated using technology (including email and the internet). Further changes include more formalised systems of internal communications, with officers expected to follow official procedures to engage with police colleagues across specialisms. For Terpstra and colleagues, these changes have implications for the culture within the organisation and relationships among police employees. They contend that greater distance now exists across rank and file that can be seen in relation to officers and their chiefs who now have “less personal, familiar and direct, and more formalised [contacts] and governed by ‘systems’” (2019: 343). Furthermore, they report that forms of abstract police mean that police employees are now less likely to be familiar with colleagues across their teams and that this “differs radically from the traditional police culture of solidarity, strong feelings of togetherness with colleagues and social cohesion” (p.345).

These features associated with abstract police point to the need to consider its impact within the organisation on occupational culture. Over time, police cultures have formed a central part of police studies, as researchers have sought to understand shared beliefs among police employees and the impact of these on everyday policing (e.g. Cockcroft, 2020; Loftus, 2010; Manning, 1989). Reiner (2010) reports that police subcultures often coalesce around a cop-culture code, characterised by suspicion, solidarity among colleagues, masculinity and danger and that this is resistant to change (see also Westmarland, 2016). For Skolnick (2008) this can lead to a blue code of silence, protecting colleagues at the expense of others. Research by Loftus (2010) suggests that these subcultural traits have continued over time because policing and the challenges officers experience have remained similar. Loftus (2010: 3) proclaims that “the underlying world view of officers displays remarkable continuity with older patterns and continues to exert considerable influence over the day-to-day police work”. Loftus (2010) also reveals how officers use humour among themselves to conceal the more unpleasant and serious aspects associated with police work.

While the negatives of police subcultural practices are well documented, as Waddington (1999) once highlighted, there may also be positives in terms of mutual support, trust, solidarity and loyalty, affecting officer mental health and welfare. Waddington also highlighted the differentiation between ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ police cultural practice – the latter referring to the informal interactions and spaces that shape the occupational context of officers beyond their formal and professional interactions with the public and the formal police hierarchy (see also see Goffman, 1959; Holdaway, 1983). Further, while Loftus (2010) emphasised continuity in police subcultural practice, other scholars have reported a shift from the core characteristics offered by Reiner and Loftus and have suggested that police subcultures are malleable and subject to change based on cultural differences within and between police organisations. For example, O’Neill and McCarthy (2014) report that officers engaged in partnership working viewed colleagues working closely alongside them from other

organisations in a favourable light, and not entirely as ‘outsiders’. Research by Charman (2017) and Millie and Hirschler (2018) suggests that changes in the views of occupational culture can occur as officers move through training and into operational work. Moon (2006) also reports that police officers in South Korea were positive about aspects of community policing, thus contrasting much of the evidence found in Anglo-American studies that suggests community work is often seen as being of lesser importance than crime-fighting police roles.

### **Methodology**

A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers, PCSOs and staff from four police services in the North of England between October and December 2019. The services varied in size and covered both rural and urban areas. Interviewees were selected by police contacts. We ensured all participants were aware that their involvement was voluntary. Altogether, 21 males and seven females took part. Nineteen were police officers, seven were police staff, and a further two were PCSOs. Police officer participants varied in years of service and roles, including, for example, neighbourhood, traffic, armed response and counterterrorism. Staff too had different roles, such as digital and IT, evidence-based policing and policy. The interviews were carried out in connection with five key themes: role in the police and motivations for joining, material artefacts associated with the police, occupational identity and the relationship between the police and citizens. In order to study these themes and to spark discussion, police officers and staff were invited to bring to the interview an object or an image that they identified as being an important expression of their occupational identity. The material artefacts brought to interviews included a drone, police badges, police hats and caps, a shoulder number, whistles and a hairbrush. As well as this, photo elicitation was used in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of police staff and officers’ perceptions of their cultural and occupational identity through the lens of police artefacts. These photos were selected from visual representations of the police found in news articles at the time the fieldwork was carried out and public contributions of photographed police artefacts that were submitted via a project website.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place in each of the divisional headquarters for the four police services involved. The interview schedule guided the conversation, and each was digitally recorded and fully transcribed. The data was analysed using the qualitative software NVivo and thematic coding and recoding. Ethical approval was granted by Northumbria University. Pseudonyms for individuals and places are used throughout to safeguard anonymity.

### **Findings**

In the sections that follow we identify key themes that emerged from our interviews in response to ways in which participants regarded their working environment to be changing and the impact that this had on them and their colleagues in terms of the cultural ‘work’ performed in the backstage areas of police services. These are organised into five sub-themes (‘job-to-job-to-job’; pace of work; changes in the physical working environment; increasing single-crew deployment; technology; and well-being and the police family) that were often closely interrelated. All the five sub-themes were related to an underlying – and sometimes unstated – perception that the nature of routine police work had fundamentally changed in recent times and had become more abstract. Very often, these changes were regarded negatively (which is itself a recurring theme of police working culture literature over a very long period), although this was not always the case. Each of these is considered in turn, before the chapter concludes by considering the implications of these findings for police occupational culture.

### **Job-To-Job-To-Job**

That police officers have a strong orientation to action, excitement and danger has been a key feature of the police culture research from early studies to more recent work (Cockcroft, 2020; Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 1978). Our findings suggest that this is further heightened in an era of abstract police. Respondents noted that the need for increased efficiency and a background of austerity cuts underpinned features of abstract police and put them under increasing pressure in terms of the pace of their work. This has parallels to Terpstra et al.'s (2019) argument that the application of the principles of New Public Management, with its emphasis on efficiency, helped forge abstract police. Often, respondents spoke of the unpredictable nature of police work, its variety and the latent possibility of danger. Many of these perspectives reflected folkloric narratives that have developed among police officers and staff (interestingly, the phrase 'job-to-job-to-job' – the subheading of this section – was used by officers across all four force areas, and Fenn (2019) found it in use in his study of the Metropolitan Police). The following extract demonstrates some of these wider conversations, as Stephen reflected on the experiential basis that officers sometimes drew on in understanding their work:

I mean if you've maybe got officers with some years' experience, you can tell when a night's going to be a bad night or a good night, you get that gut feeling. We have the superstition as well of full moon, that's our superstitions as well, even ambulance and fire have the same, it's full moon, oh no, everything's going to go wrong. It's just that superstition that comes into your head.

Yeah if you've got no information, they [the control room] say there's going to be a kick off or you've got stuff like that, yeah you usually you're more happy to do these types compared to say, like you say, going into a call where you're going in blue lights because you don't know what you're going into. Even with this, you don't really know what you're going into, but you have an idea because you're like, yeah, it's this, this, and this. So you can't really go to those calls happy in that sense, you've got to go there with this mind [set] saying "Right, focus, you're going on, keep your guard up", stuff like that. (Stephen, police officer, police service area 4)

As noted, police work has previously been characterised as being either frontstage (or public-facing) or serving a backstage function (see Goffman, 1959; Holdaway, 1983; Waddington, 1999). For those interviewed the frontstage was characterised frequently as being a fast-paced environment in which officers were under pressure to make significant decisions against a background of fluid and complex developments. For most interviewees, this pace of work had been increasing in recent times, and this was often explained in terms of greater demand from the public coupled with a decrease in officer numbers: both factors identified in a recent Police Foundation (2020) review of the pressures on contemporary policing. As mentioned, across all four police services interviewees used the term 'job-to-job-to-job' as a means of expressing the relentless pace of incident-driven demand, which was the normal state of frontstage shift work. The following extract illustrates something of this description of police work:

it's go, go, go all the time. There's never really an actual opportunity where you stop and switch off or revisit things, talk about things, de-brief the situations. It's kind of like, "We've dealt with that, we'll move on to the next one." I think it's impossible to stop because it's that busy. You just don't get the opportunity. Going back to [city name] again, when I was on response there, you'd literally start duty, you'd be putting your uniform on, turn your radio on and you'd not even officially started duty yet and

they'd be shouting you up to go to this job. It would be constant, job, job, job, job. No meal break. It would just be relentless. (Mac, police officer, police service area 1)

Many officers welcomed the excitement and the challenge of this fast pace and often stated that the associated unpredictability of police work was an attractive feature of their work. However, as Mac's words illustrate, the job-to-job-to-job pace precluded any opportunity to 'revisit things, talk about things, de-brief the situations'. As elaborated on later, this element of operational work meant that the officers were denied opportunities to speak informally with colleagues. Periods of quiet are integral to policing, partly because of requirements to wait in custody suites, hospital accident and emergency departments, at courts, and so on for other agencies to complete tasks and sometimes just owing to a late night 'quiet shift'. This was not widely noted among our interviewees, possibly owing to a desire to present a dominant narrative of policing as action oriented and exciting. This leads to a self-reinforcing position such that 'real' police work is fast-paced and risky, and so any contrary activity is not seen as 'real' policing, even if police officers spend considerable periods working in such a way. They suggested that this pace of work not only denied reflexive moments but also shaped the nature of work in the sense that some activities might not get done. In the following extract, Craig suggested that some aspects of community policing might be deprioritised in the light of urgent demands on officer time. Not only were officers 'abstract' from each other because they were busy, but apparently they could also be abstract from the public:

I think with the amount of stuff that we do these days, you're quite focused on maybe going to a community event or a community centre, so you'll have your day planned out as to where you're going to be and what you're going to do really ... Nowadays, sometimes it's actually having enough hours in the day to do the things that you need to do really. You just really don't get time sometimes to crew with other people unfortunately. (Craig, PCSO, police service area 1)

The low-status of community engagement work within police occupational culture is widely noted (e.g. O'Neill, 2019), and so it is possible that citing the high volume and priority to respond to more pressing incidents might provide a plausible explanation as to why less-favoured tasks are de-prioritised. This might point to an element of 'self-abstraction'. It is worth noting the potential for confusion between Terpstra et al.'s (2019) concept of 'abstract police' and the policing term 'abstraction', which relates to an officer being abstracted or removed from their duties by a more senior officer to cover priority demands. In this case self-abstraction relates to an officer removing themselves from roles and relationships that they regard as less important, either in organisational terms or in the context of occupational cultural understanding of what constitutes core priority work.

### **The Physical Working Environment**

Police officers and staff felt that they were sometimes more and sometimes less visible to their police colleagues – but less visible to the public on account of contemporary changes to the police estate. Abstract police, in these terms, was reported in terms of relations with the public but was more complex in terms of relations with colleagues. Changes to the police estate included the closure or amalgamation of some local stations and police office function often being concentrated into fewer, but larger, headquarters and divisional headquarters buildings. Relatedly, officers and staff found themselves being moved around owing to such reorganisation. Officers reported that they were now less likely to have face-to-face interactions with senior ranks. This is consistent with Terpstra et al.'s (2019) argument that local officers and senior officers come to interact in more distanced ways. They saw

themselves as working ‘out in division’, whereas senior ranks worked at force headquarters. This idea was expressed by Craig, who stated that he no longer walked along the same corridors as senior ranks in the police. This reflects a key element of abstract police:

We used to work out of a building just round the corner which was classed as the sort of headquarters ... and you had people up to Superintendent level walking along the same corridors. Now, because of how the police stations are built ... Anybody really of Chief Inspector or above are stationed at these [centralised HQ] buildings. It’s very, very rare that we see anybody of Chief Inspector level really. As I say, the highest normally we get to know, to actually talk to, is Inspector level. (Craig, PCSO, police service area 1)

However, amalgamation and closure of police buildings have meant that, in some cases, police officers and staff work *closer* together. This point was conveyed by Jen, who said that officers and staff in her police service had recently relocated to the police headquarters and thus ‘work under the one roof’. On account of her younger age, and short-lived experience in the police organisation she also described how she attempted to carry out her role as quietly as she could. This connected to her admiration towards colleagues with considerable years of service in the police, as she was also overawed in their presence.

We never used to work with response officers until they shut our stations and we all got moved into one big station, so you start to integrate yourself a bit more, but sometimes you will get looks and you’re a bit like, “Oh, you’re intimidating. I’m just going to sit here at my computer and not look up. (Jen, PCSO, police service area 3)

Police officers also thought that contemporary changes to the police estate made the frontstage of the police less visible to citizens. The visible presence of police stations located in the centre of neighbourhoods, towns and cities could provide a reassuring presence for communities, depending on a person’s own experience of interaction with the police (Millie, 2012). Traditional police stations were seen by officers interviewed in this study as being identifiable to citizens. For example, Ron (police officer, police service area 2) stated that they are ‘designed through the masonry as police buildings and will have the crest of the force and the name of the police station’. Likewise, Lee (police staff, police service area 3) argued that the ‘public visibly identify with police stations as well as officers’ and therefore ‘give an emotional response’ when police stations are closed as they view this as detrimental to their ability to contact the police. Some police officers interviewed in this study noted how these stations can be replaced by newer buildings located in out-of-town peripheral locations farther away from where people live and thus more difficult to access (although, of course, easier to access by car). For Ron, the transition resembled the historical shift in policing that saw officers move from foot patrols to using cars. The shift to cars and then to out-of-town both contributed to a less visible police service and a more distant and abstract relationship between the police and the public; according to Ron:

And again, going back to what we did with the beat constable where they’ve got cars, so we closed all these police stations down, and again, through cost effectiveness or whatever else, they drew in and drew in and then there’s less and less police stations, more and more cars, less and less visible. (Ron, police officer, police service area 2)

An additional perspective advanced by police officers was that the closure of police stations had led to greater demand for call centres – although, of course, this was their perception

only, the relationship could be in reverse, or non-existent. The relationship is further complicated by the introduction of crime reporting online. Yet this idea was conveyed by Fay as she argued that after the recent closure of a station in her police service people began to phone the police instead of travelling to the headquarters.

But people find it difficult now because the new Headquarters is up at [name of town], it's not on a bus route, people are ringing up for all sorts of things and sometimes if you nipped into the police station it could be dealt with there and then but we're getting so many phone calls in now because the police are out the way. (Fay, police officer, police service area 1)

Respondents commonly noted that the closure of police stations, and changes in backstage areas within those that remain, meant that opportunities to interact with colleagues had either decreased or had shifted to other locations. Effectively, this meant that the traditional 'backstage' of the policing environment might no longer exist. Following Waddington's (1999) discussion of 'canteen culture', our respondents noted that the 'canteen' itself no longer featured in their working life. George (police officer, police service area 1) noted that the privatisation of the catering service at his station meant that officers and staff were more likely to use more affordable local supermarket cafes and that this meant a decline in informal socialisation that had characterised earlier periods in his service.

I'm not just talking about the bars at the end of the shift, what we used to do, when we had good canteens, you would go in for your lunch. You would go in for your lunch and other people would go in because you had set lunchtimes, you sit around the table and you talk. You talk about the jobs you've been to, you talk about what's going on in your life. If you think about the traditional family set-up, you have your meal together, you know? I have kids and when we have our evening meal, it's family time. Telly's off, iPhones off, everything. "Let's talk about what we've done today." Well, that's what we had in the police with canteens – gone. (George, police officer, police service area 1)

While the physical space might not apply, other respondents noted that colleagues provided informal welfare support to their colleagues but that this tended to be delivered by social media or in individuals' private homes. George (police officer, police service area 1) spoke of a WhatsApp group of motorcycle police officers that had been an important source of support following a serious accident he had experienced. Louise (police staff, police service area 3) reported that officers would visit one another at home and that this built a sense of solidarity and loyalty. Just as the police estate is spatially transformed through the closure of stations (and the use of pop-up police stations and small police offices co-located with other agencies, such as a local authority or the fire and rescue service), so too the literal and conceptual 'backstage' spaces. The research evidence indicates how organisational culture is evolving and repositioning online, moving to public places such as cafes or shifting to private/domestic domains. Perhaps police officers have become abstract in traditional terms, but cultural work is completed in other physical and virtual spaces and via other routes.

### **Single-Crewed Deployment**

Health and safety, welfare and operational concerns have been raised in relation to the deployment of officers as single crewed (i.e. solo-working in vehicle or foot patrol). A survey conducted by the Police Federation of England and Wales (PFEW, 2018) found that three-quarters of officers reported that they were 'always or usually' deployed on a single-crew

basis. This suggests a significant degree of abstraction – removing officers from the likelihood of working in the ‘team’ context that is commonly associated with the social and collective nature of police culture. Some officers interviewed in the current study were concerned about the implications of working in this manner, although they provided no firm basis to reach conclusions about the extent or nature of any consequences of single-crewing. Some interviewees noted that the implications of abstract policing were that there was an inevitable reduction in opportunities for officers to engage with one another. Before developing some of the negative perceptions, it is important to record that some welcomed opportunities to work alone. Ben couched these in the following terms:

Potentially, it might just be you on your own all day. I don’t agree with being single-crewed, just because it’s nice to chat with someone in-between dealing with members of the public. But yeah ...

On some days, it’s nice to be on your own because you might have jobs of your own to deal with. I’ve got a job at the minute that I’ve been trying to deal with for two days but I’ve been with someone and we’ve had to go to jobs, and with the horrendous weather, it’s been non-stop with collisions. Some days it is nice just to kind of tidy up your own workload. But yeah, not consistently being on your own, it’s a bit mind-numbing. (Ben, police officer, police service area 1)

Reflecting the earlier discussion about the extent to which the anticipation of danger framed officer perceptions, some officers noted physical risks associated with single-crewing. Respondents were not asked directly about this form of deployment, and so the excerpts presented here arose from more general discussions of the nature of contemporary policing. Jen (who stated that ‘nine times out of ten’ she is deployed in a double crew) and Sarah worked in the same police service area and expressed similar concerns about dangers that might arise from working alone:

You’re very vulnerable when you’re by yourself and especially ... I work in one of the worst areas, so if I’m wandering around by myself, you don’t know who’s going to come out. (Jen, PCSO, police service area 3)

I saw something the other day on a Twitter feed that said that ... It was an officer from somewhere else in the country – that their daughter had hugged them and said, “Look after yourself today, Mummy” and she was only eight, but she obviously knew that there was a certain danger to her mum going out and putting that uniform on. It made it different and that her mum was at risk. And I think that’s quite scary for them. And the fact that they’re not all ... If they’re going out and they’re single crewed or they’ve not got their tasers and they’ve not got their baton, potentially their spray and maybe a taser if they’re trained and it’s like ... It’s not a great deal coming up against a knife or a gun. What’ve they got? (Sarah, police staff, police service area 3)

Several respondents from different police service areas perceived single-crew deployment to be more dangerous. For late shifts, and in some cases also at weekends, standard practice was that officers would be deployed in pairs, as is traditional. Craig’s comments illustrate this wider pattern, and he moved on to describe the isolation from colleagues that inevitably flowed from this method of working:

On a late shift for us, if we’re on say a two – midnight for instance, we’d normally single crew at the start of the shift and then have a meal break maybe about seven and then from



7 o'clock we'd then double crew. That's how it would normally work on most NPT teams.<sup>3</sup> I think the assumption is that it's more dangerous after 7 o'clock ...

(Researcher – But would you happen to meet up with another officer very often?)

Not that often. Usually at mealtime, you sort of arrange to all meet up. I mean I presume the incentive for it is if there's two of you out there single crewed, you're going to double the area that you're seen in and I think that's the philosophy behind it. It gives you an incentive to get into the community and get talking to people because I think the theory is if you're with another officer, you'll just walk around chatting to each other all day long.

(Craig, PCSO, police service area 1)

These extracts suggest that abstract police is increasing through the use of single-crewing. Moreover, this might have an impact in terms of occupational culture where there is a greater sense of risk and danger as officers are more vulnerable when alone. However, there continue to be some opportunities for officers to convene during the quiet periods and meal breaks. Given that these breaks in the fast pace of police activity are inherent to the role (Rowe & Rowe, forthcoming), it seems likely that even in a more abstract environment they will continue to enable cultural (re)production. As the preceding quotes also illustrate, and as developed in the next subsection, social media allows for occupational community to be maintained: perhaps beyond the immediate staff team or shift.

### **Technology**

Over the past decade police staff and officers' contact with people inside and outside of the organisation has been increasingly mediated using technology. As a result, officers and staff have had to develop a close and intimate relationship with technology – including CCTV, body-worn cameras, mobile phones, radios, computers and drones. For example, Craig (PCSO, police service area 1) reported that much of the contact between neighbourhood policing teams and senior ranks above the level of inspector is done via email. This meant that he felt 'a bit siloed off' working in his 'little group'.

Yet other forms of technology were viewed as helping officers and staff to carry out their roles more efficiently and effectively. These included body-worn cameras and police-issued smartphones, seen as their new 'pocket notebook' (Craig). Through technology, policing can be carried out at a distance without having direct contact with other people. This idea was expressed by Ron (police officer, police service area 2) as '... obviously with the introduction of CCTV as well and drones, there are lots of different types of equipment, it could almost make policing invisible'. Officers regarded police-issued smartphones as integral to their job – by using the appropriate police app they can easily conduct searches on specific persons, addresses and car registrations without having to speak to someone through a radio. For Fay (police officer, police service area 1) this was especially important 'if the radio's busy'. Jen also described how she relied on her smartphone on account of its wide-ranging functions as:

if you didn't have your phone on you, you'd be absolutely lost. It's got everything on it. If you name it, it's probably got an app for it on your phone. Obviously, it's how you read all your jobs. It's how you search cars. How you search people. How you search addresses. It's got translate on there. It's got firearms – identification markers on there. It's just your life. If you lost it or if it got in the wrong hands, you'd be in trouble. (Jen, PCSO, police service area 3)

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<sup>3</sup> Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) were introduced across all 43 police services in England and Wales and were responsible for building closer relationships with the communities that they serve in order to be responsive to local perceptions and needs (see e.g. Quinton & Morris, 2008).

Furthermore, technology was perceived as providing officers with feelings of safety and at times preventing them from potential risk and harm. In particular, officers felt reassured when their encounters with citizens were digitally recorded using technology. For example, body-worn cameras were viewed among officers as helping to de-escalate potentially volatile encounters with some citizens. Preliminary research by Ariel et al. (2016) suggests that the impact of body-worn cameras on assaults on police depends on the nature and timing of the deployment of the technology. Craig (PCSO, police service area 1) stated that ‘... people’s demeanour can change once they realise that they’re being recorded ... [meaning that] people sometimes that are a little bit aggressive, can back down a bit’. As a result, he associates body-worn cameras with being ‘there to protect you [the police officer] more than anything’. Ali (police officer, police service area 1) said that ‘we record everything on body cameras’ as this can then provide officers with protection when people attempt to both record and antagonise them during hostile interactions. Craig (PCSO, police service area 1) believed that CCTV is ‘a bit like having an extra pair of eyes’ when officers attend reports of anti-social behaviour and that ‘it’s more reassuring that you’ve got something recorded there to show the situation’.

However, officers also felt that technology – and, in particular, smartphones – could create a barrier between the police and citizens. This coincided with a belief that if officers were seen to be on their smartphone this would be viewed negatively by citizens. As a result, officers attempted to be discrete when they used their phones, implicitly recognising that they represent a problematic ‘abstraction’ from the community. Indeed, Jen (PCSO, police service area 3) described that ‘I’d wait until I got back in a station just to ring them, because I think walking around on your phone looks a bit ... unprofessional’. Similarly, according to Fay:

Sometimes when you’re with people, I think it’s rude. It’s like, you go to the shop and you ... I don’t know, for instance, you go into Costa and you want a cup of coffee but then you might get the person behind the till and their phone rings and they’re on the phone. You know? You get that in a lot of places, like shops, it’s so rude and I can’t stand it. So when you’re talking to a member of the public and you’re like, “Yeah, hang on a minute,” you just look like you’re playing on your phone in front of them, and I don’t think that’s very nice. You’re trying to concentrate because you need to get things right and in the right place, but you’re not talking or interacting with the member of the public. (Fay, police officer, police service area 1)

Technologies of policing, our evidence suggests, compound the issue of officers becoming more abstract from one another and from the public. At the same time, and in relation to occupational culture, these were associated with strategies to ameliorate risk and danger. As was noted in the earlier discussion, respondents spoke of social media as a mechanism to provide mutual support and camaraderie: a form of virtual police culture through which shared understanding and solidarity could be generated. It would be simplistic to assume that the use of technology, while contributing significantly to the development of abstract police, loosened cultural bonds, although it might recast them. The cultural implications of the inclusion of colleagues working out with the immediate shift and possibly in other regions would be worth investigating further.

### **The Police Family and Abstract Police**

Many of the changes in the pattern and delivery of routine police work were discussed by respondents in terms largely consistent with Terpstra et al.’s (2019) model of abstract police. The impact of these changes on occupational culture is not clear cut, however. While officers

often spoke with regret about the loss of time to engage with colleagues and the reduction of opportunities to physically congregate caused by the decline in the use of backstage spaces in canteens, and single-crewing police vehicles, they continued to speak positively about the strength and value of the 'police family'. This, we argue, suggests that the occupational culture of policing continues, if that can be considered as the subjective relations played out within that family environment. Consistent with the wider research literature, our respondents spoke about the nature of camaraderie, loyalty and teamwork. In terms of changing work patterns brought about through single-crewing, changes to the police estate and the use of technology, we found that these aspects of abstract police result in increased isolation for officers. However, this did not seem to detract from the police family ethos, which was regarded as important since it provided informal protective responses in these changed working environments. Importantly, many interviewees noted that they would not tend to seek such support from their 'real' families, as the following extract illustrates:

My other half is in the job ... Now I've got him, he understands it and I can talk to him a bit more than my parents, because I like to go by 'what they don't know can't hurt them' ... If I've had a really bad shift or ... I got spat at the other day and I told my dad, but I don't like telling my mum because she worries a lot ... But having someone else in the job that you can talk to, that isn't in the same department as you, helps a lot because they understand it. Whereas, your parents sometimes they try, bless 'em, but they don't understand what it's like ... and I don't want to worry them. (Jen, PCSO, police service area 3)

Wanting to shield families and friends from worry is a traditional component of the occupational culture. Even in an increasingly abstract working environment, the role of humour was cited as important as a form of 'release' on the basis of shared experience: 'we can all take the mick out of each other, but we know at the end of the day, if there is something wrong, that we can speak to each other. We know when we're being serious and when we're having a laugh,' as Ben (police officer, police service area 1) explained. The 'dark' nature of police humour was noted by several interviewees, as Stephen (police officer, police service area 4) noted that this was a 'shorthand' way of diffusing angst-ridden situations but was a method that would not be appreciated by those outside of the organisation. The characteristic of police work informed much of the interviewees' understanding of the importance of the police family. One officer expressed this in the following terms:

Ninety per cent of the population will never see like a mangled body. A lot of people will see a dead body because they'll see like parents and that before a funeral, but they'll see them dressed up nice, make up and that done, they don't see them before all that. I mean it's good that people are protected from something like that, but, on the flipside, when they're protected from it and they don't understand it, [how it] affects them, affects how they sleep, affects how they interact with other people ... because when you've got your uniform on and you're talking to the public, you wouldn't show that side of you, but when you're home and barriers come down, and your partner doesn't understand what it is that you've went through, or seen, or helped somebody else get through, then it can create barriers and I think that's why ... if you're single you'll probably find your partner in the police. (Shaun, police officer, police service area 4)

Protecting colleagues' well-being was cited by many respondents as a priority in their working environment. This suggests that the machismo and rugged self-reliance identified in some studies of police culture is being transformed (Westmarland, 2000). Impressionistically, at least, problems of stress and trauma are more explicitly recognised (on websites and in policy documents) among the priorities of police organisations – such as the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council – than in earlier periods. Moreover, a recent survey (Miller et al., 2020) found that nearly 90 per cent of officers reported that they had experienced traumatic incidents and that a fifth had experienced some level of post-traumatic stress disorder. Whether this represents an increase in prevalence (and maybe exacerbated by the isolation of abstract police) or a greater propensity to recognise and report such experiences is difficult to ascertain. Our interviewees frequently noted that providing support to colleagues was an important concern in their working practice. Ange, for example, talked about informal means by which she sought to take care of her colleagues. Ange's comments further illustrate that technology (messaging and direct interpersonal 'point-to-point' communications), an assumed contributor to abstract police, is also used to maintain relations and the continued performance of the role of organisational subculture:

it's about helping each other out throughout the shift. Getting everybody through that shift, making sure that everybody is all right at the end of the shift, if they've had some sudden deaths, if they've had a fatality or whatever, and it is about just ... it's weird how you can try and explain it but they do become ... I've gone off shift worrying about a colleague, many times, because they've maybe had three sudden deaths in one night, and I've messaged them the next day and say are you alright because of the crap shift you had yesterday, you know? It's not nice. Sometimes it's just how it happens, and it might be that you're on shift and you see a colleague going to those sudden deaths and you point-to-point them, which is like a personal call, "Do you want me to go with that because you've just finished with one? You can't be going to another one", and that's kind of the way we are. (Ange, police officer, police service area 4)

Mental health and well-being are important considerations in the contemporary workplace. The interviewees highlighted the significance of the police family for mutual support; yet it was notable that many recognised that organisational developments associated with abstract police made it more difficult to find routine opportunities for such conversations. Although those continued, there was clearly a sense for many respondents that these were more difficult to achieve. In relation to single-crewing, technology and the changing nature of the police estate, the pressures of new working practices were seen as detrimental to the protection of staff well-being. Brian, an officer with long experience, contrasted current practices with those he had encountered earlier in his career:

You see very little of your teammates, so that team morale that you've got is subdued a bit, because you only work with someone on a night shift. Because, obviously, in the old way of doing it, you'd deal with your job; you'd come back; you'd have a brew; you'd have some sort of verbal exchange or chat to your team and then you'd go back. (Brian, police officer, police service area 1)

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The material in this chapter has been presented in terms of significant changes that officers and staff identified in the delivery of police services: the perceived increased pace of work, the reliance on single-crew work, changes in the working environment and the centrality of technology to current policing. Collectively, we argue, these changes support the view of

Terpstra et al. (2019) that policing is becoming increasingly ‘abstract’, representing a fundamental shift in the nature of police work. The interviewees’ narratives were often interwoven, with concerns overlapping between different changes to police practices in recent years. The point we wish to develop is that these examples of the increasingly abstract nature of police work – taken together – were often discussed in terms of their negative impact on the formal and informal capacity of officers and staff to protect their mental and physical well-being. Clearly, some technological innovations were regarded as positive in terms of officer safety, as the preceding discussion of body-worn cameras indicates. Taken together, however, technology was also understood to erode interpersonal relations, trust and solidarity since it tended to deny opportunities for informal engagement between colleagues. When combined with changes in the pace of work, deployment as single crew and the changing location and configuration of the physical working environment (all core components of Terpstra et al.’s (2019) conceptualisation of abstract police), opportunities to build trust, solidarity and loyalty – central components of established understandings of police occupational culture – were seen to be less available.

Nonetheless, respondents continued to recognise and endorse the concept of the police family and to regard that as a continuing source of welfare support. This illustrates that occupational culture continued to operate, as did shared recognition of police humour and the risks, danger and excitement integral to ‘the job’. For some, the familial relations with colleagues were maintained via social media, and so the impact of technology is nuanced in terms of welfare, trust and occupational culture. Of course, that might also mean that more negative aspects of police subculture might persist as well. At times, respondents noted that the mutual support that the police family offered was maintained in non-work spaces: in the home or via social events. This further suggests that the backstages of police work environments – the spaces of cultural work – might be changing, away from Waddington’s (1999) canteen or the police car and into more diverse locations. Nonetheless the cultural work performed in those traditional physical environments continues, perhaps in truncated form, in different and emerging formats. Some of this is in different forms of physical space: our respondents spoke of domestic and public locations. At other times virtual social media domains were mentioned. Further research could usefully analyse ways in which the ‘backstage’ of policing could be reconceptualised as transcending particular geographical locations – a broader conception of backstage ‘space’, rather than specific backstage ‘places’ (e.g. Campbell, 2016). If, as Loftus (2010) suggested, police occupational culture is derived from the nature of police work and its associated challenges, then it seems likely that the elements of abstract police identified in our project will not – in and of themselves – reduce its importance. They might, however, reconfigure how it is produced and reproduced in ways that require further research and analysis.

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