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College of Policing

Fair cop 2: Organisational justice, behaviour and ethical policing

An interpretative evidence commentary

Paul Quinton – College of Policing

Andy Myhill – College of Policing

Ben Bradford – University of Oxford

Alistair Fildes – College of Policing

Gillian Porter – Durham Constabulary

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Fair cop 2

Fair decision-making and respectful treatment of the public by the police has previously been shown to foster police legitimacy, which, in turn, encourages people to cooperate with the police and not break the law. This paper provides a commentary around new survey research (Bradford et al 2013 and Bradford and Quinton 2014) that shows fairness and respect, internally within police organisations, can have a similar effect on the attitudes and behaviour of the workforce. Fairness at a supervisory and senior leadership level was associated with officers 'going the extra mile' without personal gain, following work rules, valuing the public, feeling empowered, and supporting ethical policing. These effects were largely brought about by fair treatment encouraging officers to identify with the organisation and its values, rather than a police subculture. The positive impact of fairness on attitudes and behaviour was found to exceed that of the traditional 'carrot and stick' approach, which ran the risk of fostering unthinking compliance with the rules even when officers thought it might be the 'wrong thing' to do. By linking the 'internal' organisational justice and 'external' procedural justice models together, it is possible to see how fairness and respect inside the police could, in the longer term, improve the public's perceptions of, and their voluntary cooperation with, the police. It also highlights the risk to policing of perceived unfairness within police organisations, because of its detrimental effect on staff attitudes and behaviours.

1. Introduction

Winning public 'hearts and minds'

This paper is a follow-up to 'It's a Fair Cop?' (Myhill and Quinton 2011), which provided a commentary on the research evidence about the value of police fairness in public settings. That earlier report described how policing grounded in fair decision-making and respectful treatment could deliver significant benefits because it helped foster police legitimacy, and encouraged people to cooperate with the police and not break the law. Such an approach was highlighted as offering a cost-effective way to reduce crime, because it was preventative, relied on voluntary public cooperation, and avoided the costs associated with law enforcement and reactive investigation. Also, by helping to reduce overall demand on the police, fairness was thought to enable scarce resources to be targeted towards the areas of greatest harm.

The report showed that the strongest influence on the public's willingness to not break the law was police legitimacy – the extent to which people thought the police shared their values and were justified in their role – rather than the perceived risk of being caught and punished (Figure 1 below). It also showed that legitimacy was shaped by the public thinking the police would listen to their views, make fair decisions and take the time to explain them, and were trustworthy and respectful, more than it was by them thinking the police were effective.

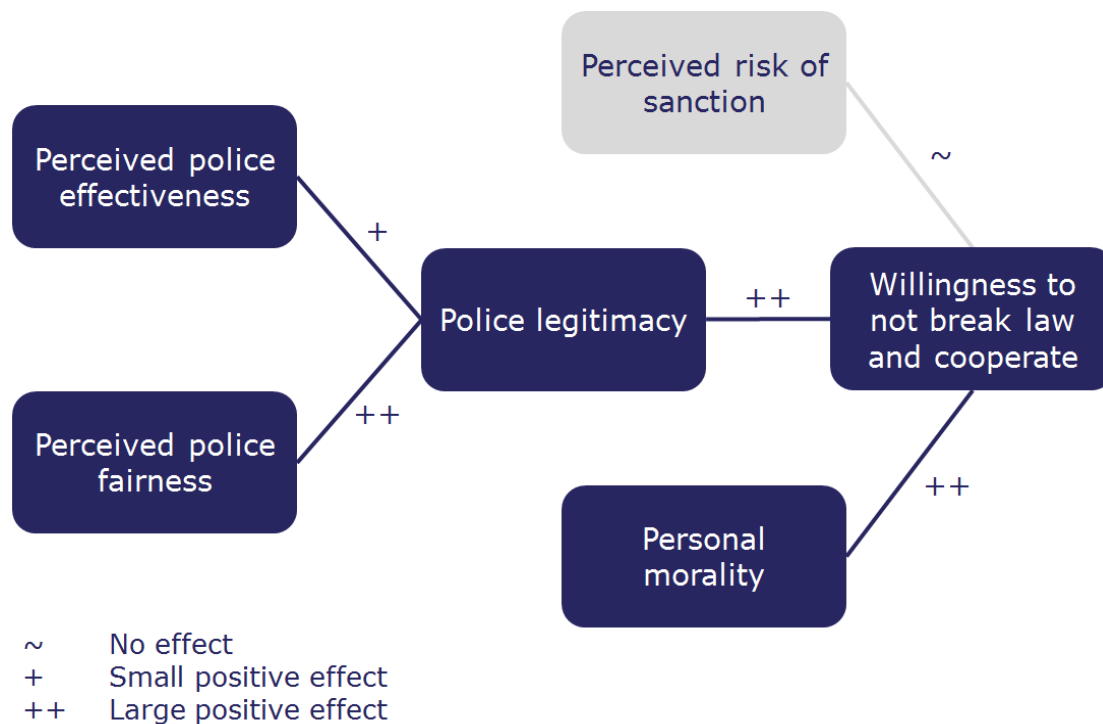
Winning the 'hearts and minds' of officers and staff

This follow-up paper aims to provide further commentary on the evidence about fairness in policing by looking at its role internally within police organisations, rather than in an external public setting. In so doing, the paper seeks to answer two interrelated questions:

- First, how can police officers and staff be encouraged to act in ways that the public perceive to be fair, respectful and ethical, given the importance of these perceptions to police legitimacy and crime reduction?
- Second, might perceptions of fairness and respect inside a police force have a similar effect as they do in the external model, perhaps by fostering shared organisational

values and identities, and encouraging officers and staff to be cooperative and to follow its policies?

Figure 1. The 'external' procedural justice model



These issues have particular resonance in the current climate. Questions have been recently raised here and abroad about officer integrity and the fairness of police practices (e.g. undercover policing, stop and search, and police use of force). However, austerity inevitably makes it more of a challenge for chief officers to implement initiatives aimed at improving public perceptions of police fairness and integrity – which often involve some form of training, even when there is evidence as to their effectiveness (see: Skogan et al, in press; Wheller et al 2013; Mazerolle et al 2013 and 2012). Lower cost alternatives to training-based initiatives may need to be considered instead. At the same time, the continuing pressure to deliver 'the same with less' and the organisational changes that have been introduced rapidly as a result of smaller police budgets may be thought of as unfair by officers and staff, and could have had a detrimental impact on their wellbeing, motivation and morale. The financial climate also means forces are able to offer fewer financial incentives to officers and staff with the aim of increasing productivity and changing behaviour (whatever their effect in practice).

Longer standing features of policing also have some bearing on these issues. First, there is a question as to whether it is even feasible for police organisations to embrace, internally, the ideas of fairness and respectful treatment – with all the implications these ideas have in terms of inclusive decision-making, staff engagement and openness – when forces are traditionally seen as hierarchical and based on a 'command-and-control' style of leadership. In this context, there may be a reluctance to share information as a matter of course, or explain routinely to people why something has to be done. Second, police work has often been described as highly discretionary because, for example, officers have to deal with a wide variety of situations, the legal rules do not always reflect the realities of policing, and their decisions often have 'low visibility' to their supervisors (Goldstein 1960). However, recent reports have suggested that policing has become increasingly rule-bound and bureaucratic, with officers seemingly unwilling or unable to use their discretion due to 'risk aversion' (Flanagan 2007). In this context, it appears that a balance needs to be struck by supporting officers and staff to work within the rules, but preventing them only from working by rule.

2. Organisational justice

The benefits of organisational justice in non-police contexts

A large body of research evidence exists on 'organisational justice', collected from a wide range of non-policing contexts and settings (see: Colquitt et al. 2001; Colquitt 2008; Greenberg 2011). This body of research tends to show that perceptions of fairness and respect within organisations have a significant positive impact on the attitudes and work behaviours of employees. A range of benefits have been reported (see: Tyler and Blader 2000; Colquitt et al. 2001; Colquitt 2008; Greenberg 2011; Tyler 2011a), including the following:

- Greater commitment to the organisation.
- Increased job satisfaction and work performance.
- Increased organisational citizenship behaviours (i.e. employees willing to 'go the extra mile' to benefit the organisation and the public).
- Reduced counter-productive work behaviours (e.g. withdrawal of effort, theft).

Notably the research on organisational justice suggests that the positive impact of fairness on employees is stronger than that of more instrumental incentives – those traditional 'carrots and sticks' (such as performance management regimes, bonus payments, disciplinary action) that are used to reward good performance and increase the cost of poor behaviour.

What is organisational justice?

The literature talks about organisational justice being comprised of a number of key elements, which can each have direct and indirect influences on the attitudes and behaviours of employees:

- **Distributive justice** – How fairly employees feel that inputs (e.g. workload, resources) and rewards (e.g. pay, recognition) are allocated across the organisation.
- **Procedural justice** – Perceptions of procedural justice can be seen to consist of the following three elements:¹
 - How fairly employees feel decision-making processes are in the organisation (e.g. the extent to which decisions are seen to be impartial, consistent, ethical, and informed by those affected by them).
 - 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.

In short, distributive justice taps into ideas about 'how much' employees think they give or receive relative to other people, while procedural justice refers more to 'how well' they feel treated in the organisation. Across a wide range of non-policing contexts, previous research has generally found that procedural justice has more of positive impact on attitudes and behaviours at work than distributive justice (Greenberg 2011; Tyler 2011a).

The prior research in this field also tends to suggest that people distinguish between 'formal' and 'informal' sources of fairness at work (Tyler and Blader 2000). Employees are likely to

¹ These elements are often combined into a single measure in survey analysis, but are sometimes described as entirely separate concepts (i.e. procedural, informational and interpersonal justice).

make a distinction between how they are treated by their immediate supervisors on a day-to-day basis, and how fairly organisational decisions are made and communicated by senior leaders.

What counts as 'fair' in these contexts is not objective, but largely dependent on the subjective perceptions of employees, both individually and as a group. These perceptions may involve employees making comparisons with others inside the organisation (e.g. officers/staff, men/women) or even people in other organisations (e.g. the private sector). Also, their perceptions may be informed by external decisions that have been taken elsewhere, over which the organisation has had little control (e.g. budgets, pensions).

Organisational justice, social identity and police cultures

Why should fair decision-making and respectful treatment by supervisors and senior leaders encourage employees to think and behave more positively, thereby delivering wider benefits for the organisation and its 'customers', in this case the public?

While some studies have pointed to organisational justice having a direct impact on employee attitudes and behaviours, there is evidence to suggest it has the effect it does because it helps employees to identify more with the organisation (Blader and Tyler 2003; Tyler and Blader 2009). Put simply, experiences of fairness and respect at work send out signals to employees about their status in, and worth to, the organisation. They help to foster a greater sense of inclusion and pride in the wider work group, as well as greater attachment and commitment to the organisation. These experiences also act as 'teachable moments' (Tyler 2011b), helping employees to understand and internalise the organisation's values. In these situations, employees are more likely to act in the interests of the organisation and the people it serves. Experiences of unfairness, however, are likely to have the opposite effect by signalling to employees that they are not valued and that the organisation's own rules do not apply to them.

What impact does a strong organisational identity have in a policing context? Research on the police cultures might suggest that the effect could be 'double-edged'.

- First, there is the potential for officers in particular to identify with, and to gain confidence from, an occupational police subculture. This subculture, as commonly depicted in the wider policing literature, is described as having a number of largely negative characteristics that are at odds with the idea of public service (e.g. cynicism, authoritarianism, prejudice), although there is debate as to whether these features are 'universal' in policing and shape officer behaviour outside the canteen (see, for example: Waddington, 1999; Reiner 2010; Loftus 2009).
- Second, there is potential for employees, who very strongly identify with the organisation, to comply with the instructions and rules without fail, even though they think they may be doing wrong (Kelman and Hamilton 1989).

In other words, while fair decision-making and respectful treatment internally within many organisations is unlikely to be problematic and is likely to have wider benefits, it is an open question as to whether they will have a similar positive effect in a police context.

3. Assessing organisational justice in a police context

The College carried out survey research in collaboration with Durham Constabulary and the University of Oxford to assess the impact and influence of organisational justice in a specific police setting. It did so by fielding two surveys of all police officers and staff in Durham:

- The first survey, administered by the force online in 2011, explored the relationship between organisational justice and social identity, and their effect on cooperative work behaviours and rule following (n=479 officers, response rate = 31%). See Bradford et al. (2013) for greater detail on the theory, methods and results.
- The second survey, administered by the force online in 2012, looked at the effect organisational justice and other factors had on police culture, officers' sense of their authority, and their commitment to ethical policing (n=438 officers, 30% response rate). See Bradford and Quinton (2014) for further details.

The analysis typically involved combining several survey questions to form a better measure of each concept (e.g. procedural justice), and then testing whether there were statistically significant associations between them, based on the underlying theory. As each survey only looked at one point in time, the analysis could only be suggestive of any cause-and-effect relationships. Furthermore, the surveys measured self-reported behaviour, not actual behaviour. The analysis presented below focused on police officers, because the concepts had greater relevance to those in law enforcement roles, though replicated analysis for police staff produced similar results.

The effect of organisational justice on work attitudes and behaviours

Measures

The first survey aimed to explore the relationship between perceptions of organisational justice, identification with the force, and a series of work attitudes and behaviours:

- Work attitudes and behaviours
 - Cooperative attitudes and behaviour – specifically willingness to 'go the extra mile' and help others without personal gain, valuing the public, and feelings of empowerment.
 - Rule following – willingness to follow instructions and organisational policies.
 - 'Blind obedience' – willingness to follow instructions and organisational policies even if they are thought to be wrong.
- The potential 'drivers' of these attitudes and behaviours
 - Risk of sanction – the perceived likelihood of being caught and punished if work standards were not met.
 - Organisational identification – loyalty and attachment to the force.
- The potential 'drivers' of organisational identification
 - Distributive justice – the perceived fairness of pay and reward relative to others.
 - Procedural justice – the perceived fairness of supervisors and senior leaders within the organisation.

Results on cooperative work attitudes and behaviour

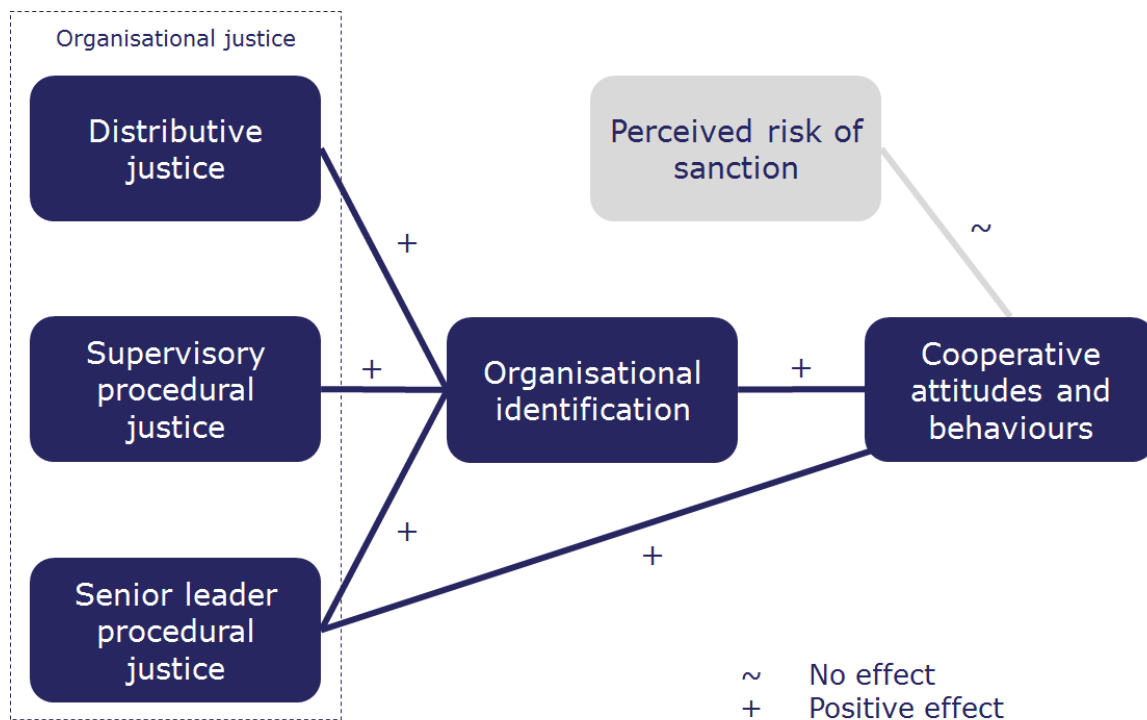
The analysis presented in summary in Figure 2 below pointed to four key, statistically significant relationships:

- Officers were more likely to engage in discretionary effort, feel empowered, and value the public when they identified with the force.
- Identification with the force was strongly predicted by both perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness.

- Procedural and distributive justice had various direct effects on the different outcome measures (not depicted in Figure 2), the most consist of which was the influence of procedural justice at a senior leadership level.
- The perceived risk of sanction had no effect on these outcomes. In other words, officers did not 'do the right thing' because they thought they would get caught and punished if they did not do so.

Overall, therefore, fair decision-making and respectful treatment by supervisors and senior leaders had a strong, positive effect on cooperative work behaviours, largely as a result of them fostering a stronger organisational identity.

Figure 2. The influence of organisational justice on cooperative work attitudes and behaviours



Results on rule following and 'blind obedience'

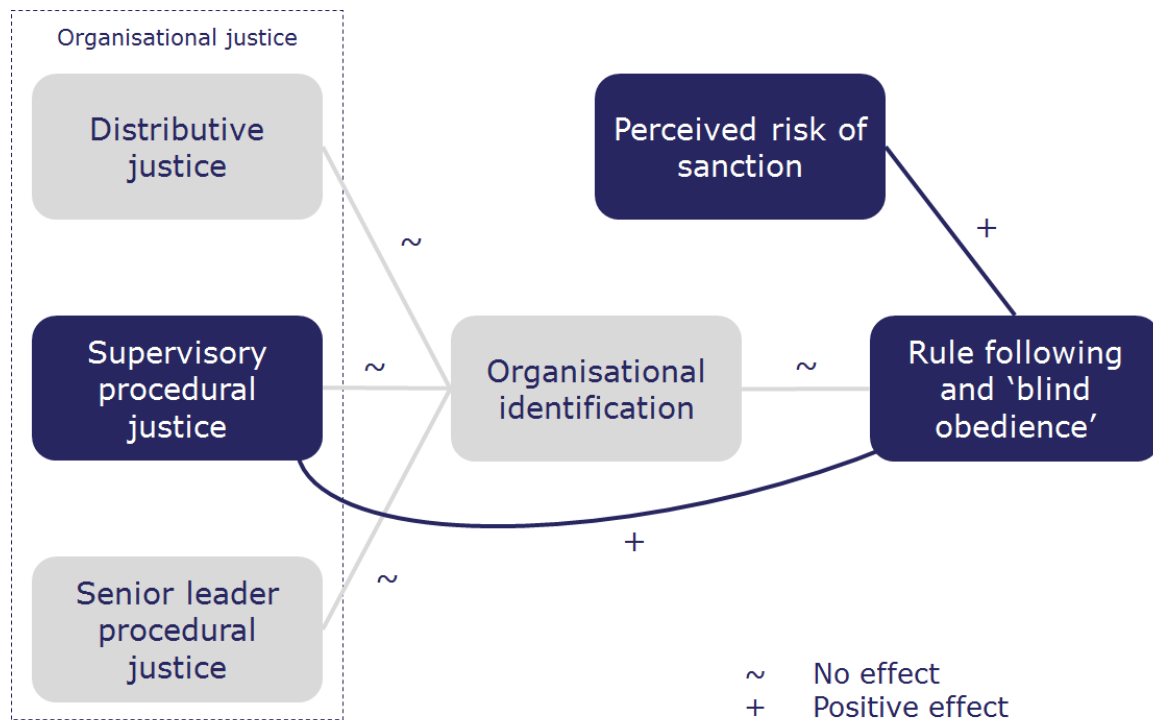
The analysis presented in summary in Figures 3 below pointed to a series of different, statistically significant relationships:

- Perhaps unsurprisingly, officers were more likely to say they followed supervisory instructions and organisational policies if they thought they would get into trouble if they did not. Rule following was also predicted by perceived fairness of supervisors.
- Identifying with the force was not associated with officers reportedly following the rules.
- Like rule following, 'unthinking' compliance was also predicted by the perceived risk of sanction and procedural justice at the supervisory level.

These findings suggest that the use of sanctions to incentivise particular behaviours needs to be done with care. While there was some evidence to suggest the perceived risk of sanction can encourage officer to follow the rules, it also had the effect of encouraging them to do so in an unthinking manner. A hypothetical example could be an officer who carries out a stop and search without reasonable grounds for suspicion because of the pressure they might feel to search more people to achieve a quantitative performance target.

While organisational identification did not encourage rule following behaviour, equally it did not appear to foster blind obedience among officers either – which would have been serious cause for concern given previous research on occupational police subcultures. Procedural justice at a supervisory level was found to predict both rule following and blind obedience, although its effect on the former was much stronger suggesting that fairness has more of a positive effect overall.

Figure 3. The influence of organisational justice on rule following and blind obedience



The effect of organisational justice on police culture, self-legitimacy and ethical policing

The second survey aimed to build on these findings by exploring a different set of relationships. The analysis was carried out in response to a challenge laid down by Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) for legitimacy to be explored from the police as well as the public perspective, because research had tended to ignore the former even though, in practice, the police and public perspective were in constant 'dialogue'. The analysis, thus, focused on exploring the influences on, and consequences of, officers' sense of their own legitimacy:

- The analysis sought to investigate the effect that perceived organisational justice had on the extent to which officers:
 - identified with the organisation; and
 - identified with a cynical and authoritarian occupational subculture.
- The analysis then explored the influence that these and other factors had on officer's own self-legitimacy. The concept of 'self-legitimacy' flows from the idea that legitimacy cannot only be seen from the public perspective and that, to be legitimate, the police must also see themselves as having the right to exercise authority (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012). Therefore, in broad terms, the survey aimed to measure the confidence that officers had in their own authority. In theory, this sense of self-legitimacy might have a number of 'drivers', including the extent to which officers:

- identified with the organisation or, conversely, their adoption of a cynical occupational police subculture;
 - felt the public supported, and cooperated with, the police;
 - felt that the police represented the 'thin blue line' and that without the police there would be more crime; and
 - thought they had a duty to enforce the law regardless of public opinion.
- Finally, the analysis examined the influence that self-legitimacy had on officers' commitment to ethical policing, which was measured in terms of support for:
 - suspects' rights
 - procedural justice policing; and
 - the police using force proportionately and only when necessary.

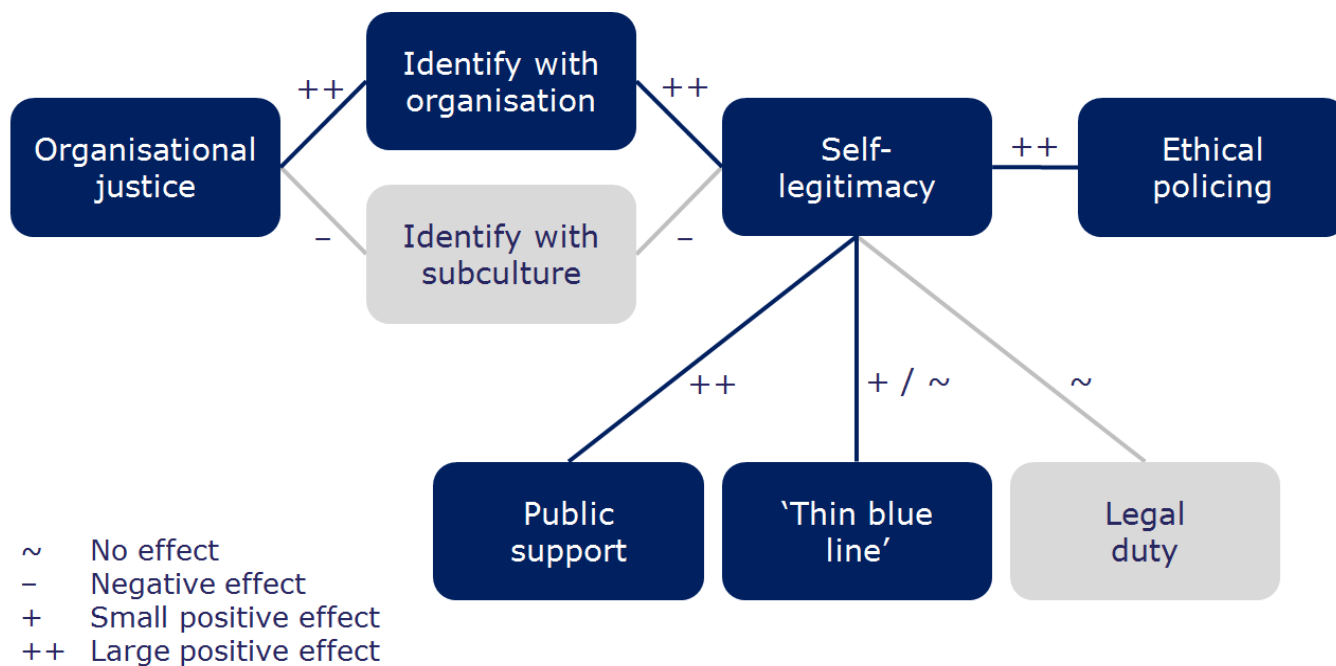
It is important to note that self-legitimacy could potentially support or undermine ethical policing; officers lacking in self-confidence might need to resort to force to manage confrontational situations, while those who are overly confident may feel they are 'above the law'.

Results

The analysis presented in summary in Figures 4 (below) pointed to a series of different, statistically significant relationships:

- Perceived organisational justice was very strongly associated with officers' identity in the workplace:
 - Those who perceived the organisation to be fair were much more likely to identify with the organisation.
 - Perceptions of unfairness were consistently associated with officers identifying with a cynical and authoritarian subculture.
- Social identity was associated with officers' sense of the own self-legitimacy
 - Officers who identified with the organisation were much more likely to be confident in their authority.
 - Conversely, there was a strong negative association between officer cynicism and self-legitimacy.
- Other factors also appeared to shape how confident officers were in their own authority:
 - Officers who felt they were supported by the public were more likely to be confident in their authority.
 - The association between seeing the police as essential in fighting crime and self-legitimacy was weak and inconsistent across different statistical analyses.
 - There was no association between legal duty and self-legitimacy.
- Self-legitimacy shaped the commitment officers showed to ethical policing:
 - Officers who were confident in their own authority were more likely to support suspects' rights, procedurally just policing, and the proportionate use of force.

Figure 4. The influence of organisational justice on social identity, self-legitimacy and commitment to ethical policing



4. Concluding thoughts

Discussion

The survey research carried out in Durham Constabulary (Bradford et al 2013 and Bradford et al 2014) has shown that the impact and influence that organisational justice can have in other occupational settings can also be found in a police context.

In short, the evidence suggests that perceptions of fairness and respect within police organisations have an important and consistently positive effect on the attitudes and reported behaviours of the workforce. Moreover, the impact of organisational justice has been shown to be stronger than that of the 'carrots and sticks' that police forces traditionally used to incentivise particular behaviour. When officers and staff feel that their supervisor and senior leaders in the force make decisions fairly and treat people with respect, they are more likely to take on additional work voluntarily to help others, see value in delivering a good quality of service to the public, and feel empowered to use their own professional judgement. Organisational justice seemed to have these positive effects because it encouraged officers and staff to feel part of, and valued by the organisation, and to internalise the values of the force.

The research also showed that fairness and respect – particularly that shown by supervisors – had a crucial role, alongside the perceived risk of organisational sanctions, in encouraging officers and staff to follow instructions and policies. For this reason, fairness and respect were included as policing principles in the Code of Ethics for policing (College of Policing 2014). The findings is also supported by recent qualitative work which suggests supervisors have an important influence of the frontline because they act as 'everyday' role models and deliver the most immediate feedback on behaviour (see Porter et al. 2015). Notably, the survey research found that the effect of fairness and respect on rule following was direct, and not a result of officers and staff identifying with the organisation. While supervisory procedural justice and organisational sanctions both had a positive influence in supporting greater compliance with the rules, they were also associated with 'slavish' or unthinking rule following. The risk of 'blind obedience' was found to much stronger with the perceived risk of

sanction than with supervisory fairness, and any potentially negative effects from fairness was far outweighed by its wider benefits.

Organisational justice was found to be central to officers' identity at work. There was evidence to suggest that perceptions of fair decision-making and respectful treatment in the workplace were very strongly associated with officers 'buying into' the mainstream work culture and the organisation's values. Experiences of fairness also seemed to prevent officers from taking on the cynical and authoritarian views seen as typical of some police subcultures. Organisational justice - directly and working through these workplace identities - also had a strong influence on officers' confidence in their own authority. This sense of self-legitimacy was also shaped by officers thinking the public supported the police and having personally experienced public cooperation. Officers did not seem to draw confidence in their authority by believing the police were essential in fighting crime or that they had a legal duty to enforce the law. Self-legitimacy was found to have a positive association with officers' commitment to ethical policing. When officers felt confident in their authority, they were more likely to support suspects' rights, procedurally just policing, and the proportionate use of force. Similar research from the US by Wolfe and Piquero (2011) has shown that perceptions of organisational justice were associated with officers being subject to fewer complaints.

Overall, therefore, fair decision-making and respectful treatment by supervisors and senior leaders was found to be linked with a wide range of benefits for the organisation and the public.

Implications

The results of the survey research carried on Durham has a number of important implications for the police service in England and Wales.

There appears to be significant value in forces adopting management practices that are perceived by officers and staff to be fair. It is not clear 'what works' in this respect because of a lack of evaluation studies, and there is plenty of scope for forces develop and test new initiatives using staff surveys. Despite this lack of 'what works' evidence, the research on organisational justice suggests the following may be useful for forces to adopt (and which relate to the nine policing principles in the Code of Ethics²):

- Ensuring employees receive, and think they receive, a fair share of the 'organisational pie' in terms of resources, workload, pay and other rewards.
- Involving officers and staff in decision-making processes by giving them a 'voice' and listening to their concerns
- Making sure decisions are consistent, reviewable, accurate and impartial.
- Communicating openly and honestly with employees - telling them about decisions and explaining how they were reached as a matter of course; perhaps even working on the basis that information will be shared unless there is good reason not to.
- Recognising that treating employees with dignity and respect on an interpersonal level is necessary but, without fair decision-making processes, unlikely to be sufficient on its own to engender trust.
- Adopting a transformational style of leadership as a default, and switching to a more transactional approach when necessary.

² The principles in the Code of Ethics for policing (College of Policing 2014) are: accountability, fairness, honesty, integrity, leadership, objectivity, openness, respect, and selflessness.

- Having clear organisational goals and values, consistent with the Code of Ethics (College of Policing 2014) that, itself, underlines the need for fairness and respect.

As forces set out on further organisational change, the mechanisms they will inevitably introduce for staff engagement offer an opportunity for senior leaders and managers in the organisation to demonstrate they are listening and taking into the account the views of officers and staff, and are communicating in an open and honest way.

Unfairness within police forces represents a significant organisational risk. The evidence suggests that officers and staff who feel they have been unfairly treated are likely to disengage, see less value in delivering a quality service to the public, become more cynical in their views, and be less committed to ethical policing. Research in other occupational settings also suggests unfairness could also increase sickness rates and employee theft. In addition to ensuring that management practices are fair, inclusive and open, there may be value in forces trying to identify where their greatest vulnerabilities are in respect of organisational justice from an employee perspective. Poorly handled organisational change programmes, promotion opportunities, not dealing with under-performance, and access to leave and flexible working are likely to be raised in some forces.

The research highlighted the level of care forces are required to take when they use traditional and more instrumental incentives – such as performance management and discipline – to motivate particular behaviours. While the ‘carrot and stick’ approach was important and found to encourage rule-following, its effect was small compared to that of organisational justice, which also had the added benefit of motivating other positive work attitudes and behaviours. Instrumental incentives were found to carry with them significant risks, which forces need to attend to, in that they also encouraged employees to follow the rules unthinkingly and not do the ‘right thing’. Furthermore, if the use of the ‘carrot and stick’ approach is perceived by officers and staff to be unfair – perhaps in terms of rewarding the ‘wrong people’ or taking a disproportionately hard line on under-performance – it is likely to have an adverse effect on attitudes and behaviours in the workplace and, potentially, be counter-productive.

Bringing together the ‘internal’ organisational justice model and the ‘external’ procedural justice model, it is possible to see how fairness and respect within a force could open up important ‘feedback loops’ in policing at relatively low cost. The evidence suggests that when officers feel they have been treated fairly and with respect, they are more likely to say they value the public and support ethical policing. Assuming that these views translate into action, and members of the public are themselves treated with greater fairness and respect by officers, police legitimacy is likely to be enhanced and people more likely to offer their voluntary support to the police longer term. This public support could help to ‘close the loop’ in as far as the research suggests that perceived public support and cooperation are important factors in officers feeling confident in their own authority and showing commitment to ethical policing. Of course, negative ‘feedback loops’ are equally possible where unfairness internally fosters unfair treatment of the public, a process that could become compounded by the public withdrawing their support from the police and disengaging from positive contact.

Finally, it is important to note that the relationships described throughout the report largely relate to one particular force and it is not known to what extent they will also be found in other police organisations. The consistency of research evidence on the ‘external’ procedural model and ‘internal’ organisational model in other contexts perhaps suggests that similar results will be found elsewhere, although it is an open question as to whether that is the case. Little is known about the causes and consequences of self-legitimacy in policing, a subject that merits further qualitative and quantitative research, particularly as it is possible that, in other police organisations, officers’ confidence in their authority has other sources and a less benevolent effect on attitudes and behaviour.

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