

Processes of risk and blame in a police organisation.



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Abstract

This thesis will concentrate on Stonecastle Police (a pseudonym) and the processes of risk and blame that take place within the organisation. Over recent years claims have been made that risk aversion permeates police practice, with the central focus of policing continuing to be the management and minimisation of risk (Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019; Black and Lumsden, 2019). A frequently cited source for the perpetuation of risk aversion is the existence of a 'blame culture'. It has been reported within this type of culture, 'blaming, suspicion and finger pointing' pervade (Thomas, 2017). The thesis considers how officers, and the policing organisation approach matters of risk, blame and scrutiny, the attitudes they develop towards such concerns and how their perspectives are maintained. It will examine what working practices influence these attitudes, and if such practices are designed and encouraged by the organisation, or whether they are devised by officers to control their unpredictable working environment.

The thesis argues, raising issues of risk aversion allows both parties to account for problems they perceive as being beyond their control. By painting officers as risk averse, organisations are placing the burden of responsibility for managing risk onto the officers themselves. Equally, by identifying the organisation as risk averse in its approach to policing tasks, officers claim they have no agency over the processes of risk aversion to which they are subjected. The thesis will then discuss how many activities labelled as risk averse are in fact forms of blame avoidance. Once we start looking at

behaviours through the lens of blame avoidance, it makes sense the noted difficulty in tackling instances of supposed risk aversion, may stem not from reluctance to do so, but instead flows from inadequately identifying the root cause of problems which need to be addressed.

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Abstract..... | iii |
| List of statutes..... | viii |
| List of Abbreviations..... | ix |
| Acknowledgements..... | x |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1: Situating risk and blame in policing..... | 10 |
| The rise of risk in the criminal justice arena..... | 11 |
| The rise of risk in policing..... | 14 |
| Is it really risk aversion? To which forms of risk are officers averse?.. | 20 |
| Matters of scrutiny, blame and accountability..... | 27 |
| Accountability and blame culture..... | 29 |
| The existence of a blame culture in policing?..... | 34 |
| Conclusion..... | 38 |
| Chapter 2: Conceptualising risk and blame..... | 41 |
| ‘Where’s the risk?’ The meaning of risk as a concept..... | 42 |
| The social construction of risk..... | 45 |
| The precautionary principle: the perils of probabilistic thinking..... | 48 |
| A precautionary approach to the organisational and individual management of risk..... | 52 |
| Accountability, blame and responsibility..... | 56 |
| Blame in policing: matters of intention, obligation and capacity..... | 59 |
| Blame: a social and cognitive explanation..... | 63 |
| Blame avoidance behaviour: Anticipating and reacting to blame..... | 68 |
| Conclusion..... | 73 |
| Chapter 3: Conducting ethnographic research with Stonecastle | |
| Police..... | 75 |
| Why ethnography?..... | 75 |
| Getting into - and staying in - police organisations..... | 81 |
| The preliminary stages of access and the formal negotiation process..... | 81 |
| Obtaining informal access: Getting alongside the participants..... | 82 |
| The importance of trust..... | 86 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Gaining the admission and approval of the rank-and-file..... | 91 |
| Key considerations in reflexive ethnography: Researcher characteristics and personal biography..... | 95 |
| Observing, recording, and interpreting data in the field..... | 97 |
| Personal impact of the fieldwork..... | 98 |
| Questions of ethics..... | 100 |
| Limitations..... | 105 |
| Conclusion..... | 106 |
| Chapter 4: Risk averse or risk aware? Constructing attitudes towards risk and blame in policing..... | 108 |
| What is risk? How officers conceptualise and understand the idea of danger | 110 |
| How do police policies and procedures shape officer perceptions of risk? | 116 |
| Matters of precaution, discretion, and autonomy: To what degree do officers have agency?..... | 127 |
| Partnership working and responsibility for risk..... | 134 |
| Conclusion..... | 139 |
| Chapter 5: The ‘risk burden’: How staff respond to threat, risk, and harm..... | 142 |
| How officers mitigate risk to the role..... | 143 |
| The continual requirement for documentation: ‘If it wasn’t written down, then it didn’t happen’..... | 144 |
| ‘Cover your arse’: A potential defence against inaction?..... | 151 |
| Active engagement with risk: Risk as a tool..... | 155 |
| The ‘risk burdens’ of distinct roles: The RIT, risk, and the specialist investigation of high-harm offences..... | 160 |
| A different and unique approach to risk..... | 161 |
| Risk to results, and why this matters to officers..... | 166 |
| Conclusion..... | 176 |
| Chapter 6: Blame culture: The line between blame and accountability in Stonecastle Police..... | 177 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Blame or responsibility? Centring officer experience of accountability frameworks..... | 178 |
| Perceptions of a blame culture by rank..... | 183 |
| Blaming as a social and political process..... | 186 |
| Blaming as an organisational contest..... | 196 |
| The blaming practices of the middle ranks..... | 197 |
| The lower ranks and the blame games they play..... | 202 |
| Blame and its interaction with the public-police relationship..... | 205 |
| Conclusion..... | 210 |
| Chapter 7: Narratives of blame: Cultural messages regarding blame and scrutiny..... | 213 |
| Organisational blame..... | 214 |
| External investigations and the ever-present threat of the IOPC..... | 222 |
| ‘Storytelling’: Telling a tale of institutional myths in policing..... | 225 |
| Storytelling in training..... | 226 |
| Storytelling and cultural scripts across the policing organisation..... | 229 |
| Blame avoidance behaviours..... | 231 |
| Protocolisation: ‘following the process’..... | 233 |
| The jobsworth strategy: a natural consequence of protocolisation?.. | 238 |
| Herding..... | 242 |
| Conclusion..... | 245 |
| Conclusion..... | 248 |
| Overview of findings..... | 250 |
| How do officers make sense of the concepts of risk, blame and scrutiny? | 255 |
| Research contributions and their implications for policing..... | 258 |
| Contribution to debates about police accountability..... | 258 |
| Contributions to the police sociology literature..... | 260 |
| Future research directions..... | 263 |
| Final remarks..... | 264 |
| Reference list..... | 266 |

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February 2024).....157

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2024).....259

List of abbreviations

APP – Approved Professional Practice.

BAB – Blame avoidance behaviour.

BCU – Basic Command Unit.

BWV – Body worn video.

CID – Criminal Investigation Department.

CPS – Crown Prosecution Service.

CSEW – Crime Survey for England and Wales.

HILP – High impact, low probability.

IPCC – Independent Police Complaints Commission, now IOPC.

IOPC – Independent Office for Police Conduct.

NAIRA – No Apparent or Immediate Risk Assessment.

NFA – No further action.

NPCC – National Police Chiefs Association.

OEL – Occurrence Inquiry Log.

PEQF - Police Education and Qualification Framework.

PPN – Public Protection Notice.

PPU – Public Protection Unit.

PSC – Public Service Centre.

PSD – Professional Standards Unit.

RIT – Rape Investigation Team.

SPOC – Single Point of Contact.

THRIVE – Threat, risk, harm, investigation, vulnerability, and engagement.

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Introduction

Policing is intrinsically a risky occupation, and officers are frequently faced with situations in which they are expected to make quick and informed decisions, often with insufficient knowledge to shape such judgements. There has been a noticeable shift from ready acceptance of the presence of danger, to an active fixation with how risk can be identified and managed in every possible scenario officers may face (Johnston, 2000). The rise of the 'risk society' additionally highlights the increasing tendency for society to be organised around the principles of hazard and danger (Beck, 1992), which in turn shapes the institutional response to the presence of risk. At the turn of the new millennium, concerns began to be raised about the unnecessary bureaucracy to which officers were subject. The resulting Flanagan Report (2008) highlighted the relationship between the decrease in officer discretion, the subsequent increase in bureaucracy and the developing tendency for officers to be overly directed by prescriptive practices. This, Flanagan claimed, encouraged a 'growing culture of rule following' within the service (Flanagan, 2008:49, 99). Flanagan identified two main 'drivers' behind this supposed risk aversion: firstly, the presence of an internal 'just in case mentality' present in most if not all police forces, which led to the creation of processes designed to cater to the worst-case scenario. Second, external public pressure applied by the media and politicians for more positive policing outcomes. Despite promises by the government to tackle these obstacles, no commitment to addressing the underlying causes of risk aversion was forthcoming, nor have policing organisations proposed any workable solution themselves (Heaton, 2011: 84).

As a result, the problem of risk aversion does not appear to have been addressed, and claims continue to be made by police actors that risk aversion permeates all aspects of their practice, with a key focal point of contemporary policing continuing to be the management and minimisation of risk (Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019: 155; Black and Lumsden, 2020: 65). Additionally, many officers perceive individual culpability has increased at the expense of organisational responsibility for any errors made (Front Line Review, 2019, 54 - 55; Metcalfe, 2017), attributed to increasingly extensive systems of both internal and external accountability. Several of these institutions, such as force Professional Standards Departments (PSDs) and the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), operate in the policing sphere, but other external mechanisms such as the media and citizen journalism are identified by police as undermining their authority and straining their relationship with the public (see Dobrin et al, 2021). The claim subsequently made by officers is that responsibility for the identification and management of potential instances of risk lies primarily with them, seemingly independent of the influence and direction of the organisations for whom they work.

A frequently cited source by police actors for the perpetuation of risk aversion within policing organisations is the existence of a 'blame culture.' It has been reported this type of internal culture within policing is characterised by an environment of suspicion and hostility (Thomas, 2017; HOC, 2018:69). This is bolstered by an informal ethos that supports organisational norms and attitudes such as defensiveness and solidarity, leading to a reluctance to be responsible for risk or acknowledge mistakes (Douglas, 1992). Such sentiment is further amplified by a focus on assigning individual

blame to staff for organisational shortcomings (Khatri et al 2009: 312). As a result, when critical situations arise, the response of officers operating within such a culture is to become defensive to limit their liability for potential failings. This overarching fear of blaming is, it is claimed, the source of the increased risk aversion we see in the police today (Metcalf, 2017: 153, HOC, 2018).

When considering the influence of society's preoccupation with risk, alongside prescriptive internal policy, and a genuine fear of making mistakes, we can see how officers and organisations perceive these concepts to loom ever present in the policing sphere. To examine this problem in-depth, new research is required to challenge existing understandings of how officers interact with, and interpret risk, blame and scrutiny. In this thesis, I undertake a thorough exploration of officers' sensemaking and interpretation of these particular notions, the meaning they subsequently attach to them, and what influences these interpretations. This appraisal of police sense-making will allow us to explore how risk and blame influence staff attitudes and behaviour, and ultimately their fulfilment of the police mandate. I will explore these questions via a case study of one UK policing organisation, which I call Stonecastle Police.

Research questions.

This thesis will establish an understanding of what risk, blame and scrutiny mean to both officers and the organisations for which they work. To do so, we first must understand the context in which policing operates, as this will inevitably shape how officers make sense of such terms. There have been many ethnographic studies examining the internal environment of the police, and how this interacts with their

relationship with the outside world (Holdaway, 1983; Hoyle, 1996; Loftus, 2010; Cram, 2011; Campeau, 2015). Since most of these studies were conducted, policing has operated against the backdrop of great deal of economic, social, and political change. In 2010, a programme of austerity was introduced by the government (Millie and Bullock, 2012: 16), which resulted in a 20% decrease to police budgets and a 15% drop in officers (NAO, 2018). This, inevitably, led to challenges for the police as they attempted to deliver 'more with less.' Another important change to policing has been the expansion of their remit, representing a shift from crime-fighting to public protection. Officers assert they are expected to take on an increasing array of tasks, with more time being spent responding to demand traditionally not within their remit (FLR: 2019: 35). Such a shift results in the perception police officers and staff are having to extend themselves into areas of which they have little to no experience. As previously mentioned, policing organisations have been expected to shrink their workforce as part of the austerity programme. The Police Uplift Programme has since been introduced to rectify the impact of this, with over 20,000 officers being recruited in an attempt to meet ever-increasing demand (Home Office, 2023). As a result, nearly 40% of police officers have fewer than five years' experience (compared with 12% in 2014-15; NAO, 2020; Home Office, 2023). This lack of experience is often felt to give rise to a lack of confidence in decision making (Front Line Review, 2019: 18), which leads to instances of supposed risk aversion.

Prior to formulating the research questions, the assumptions surrounding the behaviour under examination must first be critically examined. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, is the fact that the risk aversion thesis is mainly promoted by authors who

are either police officers, or close to the police itself. It is not, in other words, a thesis that has any degree of support in police sociology proper – it is a product of a sociology *for* the police, not *of* the police. This is an important distinction to make, as the positioning of those who make these claims may affect the reasons for such assertions being made. Several academic scholars (see Manning, 2010; Loader, 2011) believe this is problematic as the study of policing has become too close to its subject. As a result, it cannot be relied upon to produce verifiable results and may lack the necessary theory to underpin any observations made (Manning, p. 106). Consequently, it is imperative research is conducted upon policing by those who do not sit inside the policing sphere. The idea of a blame culture, similarly, typically finds support in the practitioner literature, rather than the academic evidence base. An examination of this is therefore critical to understand the degree to which the phenomenon actually exists.

To investigate the degree to which such behaviours exist in policing, I explore how officers themselves conceptualise and understand the terms under investigation. Observing the attitudes and values of officers first hand allows me to develop an understanding of the claims made above, and to what extent, if at all, they exist in policing. As previously mentioned, there has been much discussion in the policing practitioner literature regarding risk aversion and blame culture, but these particular notions have not been explored in any great depth and it is assumed they exist without any critical exploration of these assumptions. This thesis therefore aims to provide important insight by shining a light on the potential reasons for such behaviours, and exploring whether such actions have been appropriately identified, or whether they are better described using alternative means.

To do so, this thesis explores how both the internal working environment of policing, alongside the external influences mentioned here, impacts upon officers' understanding and interaction with blame, risk, and scrutiny. When considering the environment in which officers operate, we begin to understand the need to revisit what these concepts mean - both immediately to officers, and more widely in terms of how they fulfil their duties. My thesis sets out to challenge the commonplace notion that officers are risk averse, while exploring the claim that a blame culture currently operates within policing. Instead, I argue officers are particularly concerned with their place in the occupational order, which due to the influences mentioned above, they now perceive to be under threat. While this has been characterised as a form of risk aversion, it is in fact fear of blame that drives these concerns, rather than anxieties regarding the appropriate handling of risk, also such concerns certainly feature in the preoccupation with blame. The behaviours that are conceptualised as risk aversion can therefore be better explained as blame avoidance. This explanation is informed by – and will in turn contribute to - both sociological and psychological theory to explain the existence and requirement for such behaviour. Throughout the thesis, I draw on a range of examples taken from the fieldwork to illustrate and make good this argument.

To investigate the existence of potential risk aversion and blame culture, the research questions are as follows:

- How do officers make sense of the concepts of risk, blame and scrutiny?
- What meaning does these concepts have for officers and staff?
- How does this understanding influence their attitudes and behaviour?

- How is their understanding of these concepts reflected in policing practice?

The structure of the thesis is as follows: in Chapter one, I conceptualise the key terminology used throughout this thesis. In doing so, I rely on Douglas's (1992) depiction of risk as a social construction, coupled with Furedi's (2009) exploration of the precautionary principle, and how utilising these theories can help understand staff conceptualisations of risk. I will also explore the psychological blame literature, identifying how the key notions of capacity, intention and obligation can help us understand the assigning of blame. This exploration will allow me to build a theoretical framework through which I can illuminate staff's attitudes, values and beliefs regarding risk and blame.

In the second chapter, the existing literature around risk, blame and scrutiny is considered. I draw attention here to the prevalence of the policy and police practitioner literature regarding matters of blame and risk aversion in policing, as well as identifying where further academic scholarship is required to thoroughly investigate the problems raised. The effects of the external environment are examined regarding how they shape the occupational environment in which officers work. Internal pressures are then considered regarding the strict boundaries created for staff in terms of how they are expected to approach their policing tasks. This literature will be used as the context against which the research questions will be explored.

In Chapter three, I provide justification for undertaking an ethnographic approach, using previous ethnographic studies such as that of Loftus (2010) and Campeau (2015) to highlight previous instances of successful participant observation. I discuss gaining

access to the field, both informally and formally, drawing attention to the importance of gaining trust in both instances. I also consider the degree to which I was accepted by the research participants during the fieldwork. I reflect upon my positionality in the field, as well as the personal impact the fieldwork had on me. I also note the importance of accurately recording the field, particularly with regards to notetaking and maintaining participant confidentiality and anonymity.

The first two empirical chapters examine my findings in relation to the presence of risk in policing, and the form subsequent risk aversion takes, if it exists at all. Chapter four focuses on the environment in which officers operate, and how this influences their understanding of risk, while the fifth chapter discusses how officers themselves interact with the concept of risk. In both chapters, I explore the meaning officers assign to risk, and how they then incorporate this understanding into their daily practices. I also explore how officers selectively address potential risks in their environment, and the extent to which so-called 'risk averse' processes are sustained informally between officers.

Chapters six and seven address the empirical research with respect to blaming practices. I explore the operation of such processes within Stonecastle Police, analysing the social and psychological elements of this particular practice. In Chapter six, I will explore the 'organisational contest' regarding the allocation of blame, using Hood's notion of 'blame games' to do so. I will also examine the psychological underpinnings of blaming practice's using Malle's path theory of blame. In Chapter seven, I examine the extent to which officers sustain such practices themselves, by their use of cultural scripts and stories.

The thesis concludes by arguing that an awareness of heightened accountability leads both officers and organisations to anticipate future problems and to tailor their actions accordingly. The likelihood of attracting blame heavily influences both organisational and staff approaches to risk management - which can be interpreted by each party as risk averse behaviour. I argue these practices represent attempts to control uncertainty on both the part of the organisation as well as the officers; the organisation introduces such techniques as attempts to design out risk wherever possible, while workers use these to justify and document why actions have been taken. In both scenarios, these actions are driven by the desire to avoid blame. This section of the thesis will also return to the theoretical framework to discuss the implications of the research findings for two key areas of policing research. There, I discuss how my findings add to our understanding regarding the impact police accountability frameworks have on those who are subjected to them. I also examine how my research adds to the wider police sociology literature, particularly in relation to how staff attitudes regarding risk, blame and scrutiny influence how they achieve their mandate.

Chapter one: Situating risk and blame in policing.

Introduction

Mythen (2014: 51) has suggested that 'risk has become increasingly central to the ways in which crime, policing and punishment are organised and performed in the modern age' (see also Lee and McGovern, 2016: 1291), with the criminal justice sphere becoming increasingly centred around risk analysis, prediction, and management (O'Malley, 2016: 17). Policing is no exception to this: discussions regarding how the police manage and minimise risk have come to the fore in recent years, with debates often focusing upon whether the police are able to appropriately manage risk. Charges of risk aversion are frequently levelled at policing, particularly in relation to the operational effectiveness of police institutions (Flanagan, 2008; Berry, 2009; Home Office, 2018) and it is often difficult to ascertain to what extent the behaviours referred to are indeed risk averse; nor whether these charges relate to policing organisations or their employees. In this chapter, I review the existing literature on concepts of risk and blame, and how they may operate in the world of policing. My argument is that the notion police officers and organisations are risk-averse requires challenge. Police forces are frequently conceptualised as being reluctant to address matters of risk and blame (Flanagan, 2008; Berry, 2009; Home Office, 2019). However, this is an unduly narrow way of interpreting a relevant phenomenon. In fact, behaviours that are typified as risk aversion are often best characterised as a variety of protective measures designed to shield institutional players from blame and its attendant negative consequences. I subsequently examine the literature that outlines the existence of such practices in

policing and outline how they potentially stem from officers' fear of consequences if risk is perceived as being inappropriately handled.

The rise of risk in the criminal justice arena.

The introduction of risk as a central organising principle for the management of perceived hazards first rose to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. Beck (1992: 29) identified this new focus on risk as a byproduct of the shift from industrial society to a new form of civilization, one which placed risk at the heart of its activities. He identifies this change in society's relationship to risk, as originating from a transformation in the apparent dangers that characterised this new world. Whereas the hazards of the first modernity were foreseeable, bounded, and governable, the new type of society generated unforeseeable consequences that threatened the cohesion of the social system (Beck 1992: 5). This led to an intensive concentration on how best to approach these new forms of global and potentially unmanageable danger. Garland (2001: 12) identifies this novel approach to risk as 'a new and urgent emphasis upon the need for security, the containment of danger, through the identification and management of any kind of risk'. Furedi (1997:18) notes that due to the changes in the way society is structured, institutions now pursue safety at all costs; avoidable risk is unacceptable, and today, the weighing up of likely outcomes when considering risk has been replaced by a perspective where only potential dangers are accounted for. Cockcroft (2020: 92) notes that this heightened awareness of risk refers not to an objective increase in the amount of danger present in society, but a change in the level of risk that society is prepared to tolerate, representing a movement towards the persistent avoidance of

harm. Society has not become objectively more dangerous, and is on some accounts, safer than ever (Pinker, 2017). What has changed is our orientation towards the potential dangers we encounter. It seems inevitable that this focus upon the continual and constant management of risk would impact upon the police.

The topic of risk has produced an extensive body of criminological literature, especially regarding the control of potential hazards in the criminal justice arena. This wider reorientation to risk became increasingly apparent over the latter half of the twentieth century. Feeley and Simon (1992: 452) note how the notion of risk was increasingly used to identify hazards, with discussion of possible outcomes replacing previous assumptions around 'clinical diagnosis and retributive judgement', which they labelled 'the new penology'. Ericson and Haggerty (1997: 12) in turn identified the rise of actuarial justice tools, designed to manage not only the existing risk each case presented, but the potential outcomes of each scenario should it arise. As the notion of risk began to take centre stage, O'Malley (2010: 14) notes the centralisation of risk led to the introduction of precautionary procedures, for instance anti-social behaviour orders, which intervened in matters of potential criminal behaviour by utilising probabilistic risk rhetoric (Zedner, 2009, 84 - 85), rather than any objective assessment of threat. Consequently, the criminal justice system came to be increasingly shaped around potential future risk, with actuarial forms of risk assessment progressively employed as a justification for controlling the activities of problematic populations. This led to an increasing focus on the possible over the probable, influenced by the wider reorientation in society towards preventing all and any kinds of risk should it arise.

Rose (2000: 332) provides a useful perspective regarding the usage of risk language in relation to matters of crime and justice. They note the techniques of prediction that characterise these institutions may at first glance appear to be probabilistic, but these approaches lack the calculation of actuarial methods and there is little objective logic and reasoning behind them. Instead, such techniques are better thought of as being in tandem with the emergence of what Rose terms 'risk thinking'. For Rose, risk thinking is concerned with placing potential future events at the forefront when making risk calculations; the aim being to avoid all and any forms of risk that may be present in decision-making processes, instead of undertaking a rational assessment of risk. Crucially, this approach differs from actuarialism in its lack of scientific calculation. It is instead underpinned by a potentialistic assessment of risk, rather than a probabilistic analysis of any objective danger. Understood in this way, risk thinking has become central to the criminal justice system, and in turn policing, as it attempts to deflect potential risk. Risk practices that place future and unknowable risk at the centre of all activities are now ubiquitous across the criminal justice sphere: Shearing and Johnston (2005:31) note how the management of crime now focuses upon continually predicting and eluding dangerousness through the various techniques risk management possesses. Consequently, risk management has become an essential feature of the criminal justice sector (Baker, 2004, 2008; Dugmore, 2006; Whyte, 2009). This reorientation has inevitably influenced the way policing approaches matters of crime prevention and public protection, which are now organised predominantly around the management and containment of risk. The remainder of this chapter will explore the

extent to which this approach is employed in policing, and whether this affects the behaviour of those in its employ.

The rise of risk in policing

By the 1990s, the idea that risk was something to be regulated, governed, and contained had become a fundamental principle of policing (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 302), with much policing activity shaped around the identification and management of risk. Ericson and Haggerty argue that policing institutions were then required to gather and disseminate risk knowledge for other central institutions in society. O'Malley (2015: 427) notes that policing institutions were then characterised as 'knowledge brokers' in the risk society, having been consistently organised to obtain security-related information in the past. These demands increased with the changing nature of policing as it grappled with new additions to its mandate, including the rise of high-risk, high-harm cases, the expansion of its perceived remit, for instance in the policing of mental health matters (Turnbull and Wass, 2015; Caveney et al, 2020; Cummins, 2023), and the increasing visibility of policing in the public domain. Maguire (2000: 316) claims that the police now chiefly operate with a view to targeting and preventing future crime, focusing upon the management and control of patterns of risk over the investigation of crime, chiefly via the prism of risk management. This preoccupation with risk has led to a noticeable shift from ready acceptance of the presence of danger, to an active fixation with how risk can be identified and managed in every possible scenario that officers may be faced with (Johnston, 2000). When applied to the world of policing, as with other institutions, risk is synonymous with anticipation of unfavourable events or unacceptable

danger (Douglas, 1992:39, Furedi, 1997:18). Such a mindset has inevitably influenced the way policing has been conducted as these institutions attempt to control all risk they face, regardless of the practicalities of doing so. With such a future-oriented approach, consideration must always be given to what could potentially happen in any given scenario.

As a result of these changes, the concepts of threat, harm, risk, and vulnerability are increasingly being recognised as sitting at the heart of what policing seeks to achieve - which is primarily to protect those in danger of significant harm (Maguire, 2000; Garland, 2003; Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019; Police Foundation, 2019: 25). Although risk is mentioned many times in the myriad guidance issued to officers and staff, the College of Policing's approved professional practice (APP) on risks does not provide a definition of risk. Instead, this guidance states that 'Making decisions in an operational context is a form of risk taking Risk relates to anything uncertain in the future. It is everywhere – at work, at home, at play, in both activity and inactivity.' Other APPs are a little more precise. The APP on major investigation and public protection (2023) states that 'risk assessment is the process of establishing the following: likelihood of a behaviour or event occurring, frequency with which it may occur, whom it will or may affect, extent to which that behaviour will cause harm'. When paired with the prior APP issued in 2013, it is easy to see how risk can be viewed by officers as pervasive and difficult to manage. Such guidance does not provide decisive information on how to identify and tackle risk, and only serves to highlight the importance of controlling and managing potential hazards without providing instruction to officers on how to do so.

One of the ways policing organisations have attempted to demonstrate their ability to appropriately handle risk is via detailed bureaucratic practices, which can offer staff a resource to demonstrate they are attempting to thoroughly control risk (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997; Huey, Ricciardelli and Ferguson, 2022; Leach, 2023). This is achieved most notably via a formalised risk assessment process, which is ubiquitous throughout the policing organisation. Risk assessment offers the most tangible representation of the organisation's attempts to offer staff the appropriate tools to deal with risk, whilst also providing the opportunity for staff to demonstrate robust engagement with these systems. These documents are used to detail all actions taken, with the intention of demonstrating that the requisite information has been passed to the relevant authorities. Such documentation can also be used to provide justification to an outsider, usually at some unknown point in the future, that all courses of action were considered when risk decisions are made. As highlighted by Black and Lumsden (2020), although these risk management tools are primarily designed to solve problems, in practice they often create a sense of threat, fear, and blame for those who use them (Fischer and McGivern, 2016). The adoption of strategies that are ostensibly designed to control risk, paradoxically serve to heighten existing anxieties (Rhodes, 2019:1); rather than providing a sense of security for these individuals, they instead perpetuate the need for risk averse practices to be continually engaged in. Such tools also act as a continual reminder to staff that it is imperative for them to accurately control risk, thus ensuring that staff are aware of the need to always control potential hazards.

Alongside the rise of risk management in policing, there is also a corresponding increase in claims of extensive risk averse practices taking place in the organisation.

Concerns have been repeatedly raised about the unnecessary bureaucracy to which officers are subjected (see Berry, 2009, May 2011; Rhodes, 2019), leading to supposed risk aversion among officers in the form of reluctance to make decisions, resulting in an overreliance on already established methods. Initially commissioned by the government to examine this problem, the Flanagan Report (2008) identified drivers behind the phenomenon it named as risk aversion: namely a combination of restrictive policing processes alongside pervasive external calls for accountability. Despite promises by the government to tackle these problems, no commitment to addressing the underlying causes of risk aversion was ever forthcoming, and no workable solution has ever been proposed by policing organisations themselves (Heaton, 2011: 82). Like other investigations into extensive police bureaucracy, such as that conducted by Berry (2009), Flanagan (2008: 51) argues that following the process in itself is not inherently negative, and for staff with fewer years of service, this process can allow them to develop confidence as they learn the tools of their craft. The danger arises where personnel feel they must follow such procedures regardless of the situation. For Flanagan, the problem arises when officers unthinkingly adhere to prescriptive policies, even in circumstances where this may not be required, which leads to such processes becoming self-sustaining forms of bureaucracy, which he describes as a form of risk aversion occurring within policing (Flanagan, 2008: 52). In this instance risk aversion appears to refer to a reliance upon formal procedures, which becomes problematic when they are used unwittingly and without consideration for the unique situations faced. The accusation here seems to be that rather than assisting policing to meet its mandate, bureaucratic systems are in fact distracting them from doing so, by

encouraging officers to focus on a form of performative accountability over genuine risk management.

At first glance, it is puzzling that officers are seen to be risk averse when much of their job involves dealing with danger on a daily basis. Leach (2023) offers an interesting perspective in relation to such a claim. He argues the dangers that can arise during decision making have become particularly troublesome for officers, most notably for those in the commanding ranks. He (p. 62) draws particular attention to the differences between what Waddington (1994:6) conceptualises as ‘on-the-job’ and ‘in-the-job’ trouble. From this perspective, on-the-job trouble refers to the occupational stressors and problems that arise from everyday policing, in which officers have several resources on which to draw to tackle these. However, in-the-job trouble refers to the unwanted consequences that arise from these incidents should they not be managed correctly. The effects of in-the-job trouble range from minor inconvenience to dismissal or in the most serious cases, criminal sanction, and officers feel it is imperative to avoid this form of risk at all costs. Such a preoccupation is reflected elsewhere in the extant literature, for instance the notion of ‘covering your ass’ which is regularly discussed in the policing literature as a self-protective mechanism against unwanted consequences (Van Maanen, 1974). The fact this term has long existed demonstrates that officers have long felt the need to manage in-the-job risks way before the rise of risk discourse and practices in the police. However, what this thesis intends to explore is why these problems have become particularly pressing for policing in recent years.

According to Leach, in-the-job dangers are far greater for officers than those posed by everyday policing activities. Expectations of high scrutiny led officers to

continually anticipate being held to account for perceived failings. While accountability is a worthwhile pursuit in policing, particularly if the notion of policing by consent is to be maintained, staff appear to experience this as intensive and unpleasant (see Metcalfe, 2017), leading them to fear such processes. Leach (2023: 73) goes on to argue those in senior leadership positions feel they will be held responsible for the potential 'fallout' resulting from any incidents that occur and argues one of their most pertinent concerns is to minimise potential scrutiny should there be an inquiry into events. Leach argues what looks like risk aversion is in fact a realistic appreciation of what could go wrong should important aspects of the situation be overlooked. For Leach, at senior leadership level, accountability pressure is likely to be high, and consequently risk assessments are more likely to be motivated by a desire to evade on-the job trouble than those on the front line. Leach's assessment is arguably coloured by the fact that he is a serving inspector who has an appreciation of the demands that such a position brings, highlighting the significant chance of bias in the 'by-policing' literature. However, such a perspective neglects to explain or understand similar problems that are found within the rank and file, with fears around being held to account being reflected in the extant literature. Research by the Risk and Regulation Advisory Council (2009) found that when a serious matter occurs, staff who have played a role in the incident perceive they are held accountable for any errors that may arise. The government's Front Line Review (2019: 54) report also states that supervisors feel they are not trusted to rely on their professional judgement, because they fear they will be held responsible for any negative consequences that may arise. Officers perceive themselves to be at risk when things go wrong, and it makes sense that to address such concerns, officers may

indulge in protective behaviours that are interpreted by outsiders as risk averse behaviours.

Is it really risk aversion? To which forms of risk are officers averse?

Policing currently faces an interesting dichotomy - it has become increasingly centred around risk but is simultaneously portrayed as being averse to dealing with that risk, in part due to a supposed rise in rule following. In other words, officers have become more focused upon mitigating the risks they face from in-the-job trouble, than that which arises from the policing tasks they undertake as part of their remit to manage risk. The existing literature has focused on claims that risk aversion now permeates all aspects of police practice, with a key focal point of contemporary policing continuing to be the management and minimisation of risk (Heaton, 2010; Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019: 155; Black and Lumsden, 2020: 65). It should be noted that much of this literature emanates from those who sit within policing, although there are some notable exceptions, such as Black and Lumsden's research on control room staff. As previously mentioned, there have been several government reviews relating to risk in policing, but these have been commissioned to establish the drivers behind supposed risk aversion, rather than investigating whether such a phenomenon exists in the first place. What is striking here is that such claims assume the police are inherently risk averse, with little exploration as to why such behaviours occur. This may be a feature of the extant literature - much of this consists of policy documentation generated by those within the governance of policing more widely, and little critical academic literature exists that examines this predicament in any great depth. Consequently, the debate becomes

underpinned by the assumption that policing has become risk averse, with very little examination of this claim. There is a need to establish whether police officers (and by extension, policing organisations) have become more risk averse, or whether such behaviours may be explained by an alternative interpretation.

It is important to note that officers and staff do not typically identify with the notion of being risk averse. Instead, they are quick to identify the bureaucratic procedures to which they are subjected as the central cause of supposed risk averse practices, outlining the bureaucratic requirements of both the policing profession, and external accountability institutions as the cause of this (Flanagan, 2008). The concerns raised in the Flanagan report regarding risk aversion continue to be mirrored in the lived reality of policing on the ground, with officers highlighting that the inflexible requirements of bureaucracy hamper their ability to effectively conduct their role (Rhodes, 2019; Front Line Review, 2019: 12). The College of Policing and its predecessor bodies have created guidance designed to reduce risk and provide some form of direction to officers (Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019: 155). It is these policies that officers claim stifles their ability to effectively utilise their decision-making skills by providing overly prescriptive directives (Butterfield, Woodall, and Edwards, 2005: 339). Heaton, Bryant, and Tong (2019:155) highlighted the voluminous nature of procedures cause difficulties for officers when applying them to their occupational roles. Such policies make officers reluctant to take action or undertake decisions that could have negative consequences for themselves, when they find themselves unable to rely on unclear guidelines that only state what they are prohibited from doing. This generates tensions for officers as they attempt to apply the guidelines to the scenarios they face and goes some way to

explaining the difficulty in reducing what has been named as risk aversion that continues to permeate policing.

Ericson and Haggerty (1997: 7) note how rationalities of risk are designed to reduce uncertainty to the point where the actor feels confident in acting. Instead, as highlighted above, risk technologies serve to heat up concerns (Fischer and McGovern, 2016) rather than cool them as intended. Such policies are ostensibly designed to guide staff but ultimately cause them to feel limited in the options they have available to them. Ericson and Haggerty (1997: 296) highlight how such technologies are imperfect, and cannot always adequately control risk, and as a result their use leads officers to feel they have failed to use such technologies appropriately, whilst simultaneously creating an impression that innovative technologies are needed to further improve matters. In other words, such technologies create a desire on the part of officers to control all and any aspects of risk they encounter, regardless of the chances of realistically being able to do so. Officers and organisations then become trapped in a spiral of using policies because they feel beholden to such practices, rather than choosing to utilise these for the benefits such practices are likely to bring. Staff subsequently fear the effects of such technologies more than the actual risks they were designed to govern (McGivern & Ferlie, 2007; McGivern & Fischer, 2010, 2012). The claim officers make here is that they act in a risk averse manner, not due to their own decisions, but because of policies created by the organisation that do not allow them to utilise their professional abilities. As a result, these policies do not appear to accomplish what they were ostensibly designed for, which is to effectively manage risk. Instead, the worst-case scenario is

continuously catered to, fear of danger is continuously stoked, and risk is carefully avoided rather than studiously managed.

It is worth thinking about the expectations that surround such definitive procedures in the first instance, and what policing organisations hope to achieve by utilising these practices. One of the most cited reasons in the extant literature is to manage potential reputational risk on the part of the organisation (Heaton, 2010; Goldsmith, 2015, Leach, 2023). For Goldsmith (2015: 253) policing has historically been at the centre of numerous scandals, which has led to various investigations, prosecutions and calls for reform. Such events have impacted upon the perceived legitimacy of the police and have led to fractures in the police-public relationship. The potential ramifications that arise when controversial decisions are taken are evident and may have significant ramifications for public trust in policing (Heaton, 2010: 76). It is also problematic that such costs are often only realised after the fact, making potential harms incredibly difficult to predict, and for police authorities to subsequently protect themselves from the fallout once they have occurred (Carson et al, 2013; Goldsmith, 2015: 263). Heaton (ibid.) goes on to note that the positives of such decisions tend to be diluted and are not always immediately apparent to onlookers. As a result of consequences that are uncertain in prediction but large in scope, the service, and by extension those it employs, works to minimise, and ultimately remove risk to reputation at all costs. The result of this preoccupation is that safeguarding the reputation of the policing institution ultimately becomes the underlying purpose of the organisation as an increasing number of policies and procedures are directed towards having such an effect. This particular problem is highlighted in the recent activities of the Metropolitan

Police, who have come under fire as a result of a plethora of scandals, and who are now undertaking a wide array of tasks designed to regain public trust (Harper, 2022; Muir, 2023; Tudor, 2023). Nonetheless, the increased visibility of policing (Goldsmith, 2010), shaped by the fallout of past negative incidences has inevitably had an impact upon the way the job is conducted and may provide insight into why the worst-case scenario is continually catered for above all else.

However, it is important to avoid depicting police employees as passive slaves to such processes, despite claims to the contrary. Instead, we should consider how officers and staff frequently use these policies to achieve their own ends. It is in the interests of both officers and staff to demonstrate they can manage risk well, as the 'risk experts' the College of Policing deems them to be (College of Policing, 2013). We can see this particularly in the practices of custody staff. For instance, Williams, Norman and Sondhi (2019: 453) found custody staff tended to utilise a 'catch-all' approach to risk assessments, even when they were unsure as to its utility. The authors found such risk assessments are deployed by staff not only to measure the risk detainees present, but also as a method of insurance against risk that arises from the situation itself as well as the wider organisation. The policies thus serve to protect both the organisation, and the officers themselves; such processes can be useful to officers seeking to avoid external scrutiny and the avoidance of doubt by demonstrating they used all tools available to manage the situation. It appears on some level both staff and the organisations they work for welcome such rule following, yet there also appear to be downsides to this in the form of apparent risk aversion and a lack of flexible thinking. Instances of aversion to risk can be seen in the custody environment, for instance in the frequent use of anti-

rip clothing to prevent the potential fashioning of a ligature whilst in custody, despite no information to suggest there is any likelihood of this occurring (IOPC, 2023). We can see how this form of risk thinking, as mentioned earlier by Rose (2000), permeates staff behaviour, with a 'just in case' mentality being deployed when risk decisions are made, even when the decision made is unsuitable for the circumstances in question.

Although staff are undoubtedly influenced by the occupational environment, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, we should remember that officers possess a degree of agency. Therefore, staff may actively contribute to the apparent risk averse behaviour discussed here, rather than being merely subjected to organisational norms. A sense of risk aversion can be maintained by informal practices that staff undertake, seemingly independently of the prescriptive policies of the organisation. Black and Lumsden (2020: 76) highlight one such instance of these, via the use of 'cautionary tales' in maintaining risk averse approaches. Such stories are told in relation to incidents that have led to high-profile investigations, where forces and individuals were often publicly held to account for their perceived failure. Such stories act as folk tales or urban legends, and are passed between staff, serving to act as cautionary scripts for similar situations that may occur in future. Such stories also align with the precautionary principle, the belief that risk can only be handled by 'playing it safe' (Furedi, 1997: 107), by having unknown potential risk at the centre of these narratives. By adhering to this principle, such stories highlight the continual presence of risk and draw attention to the need for staff to be continually cautious, thus ensuring the continued presence of risk averse behaviours in the informal policing climate. These techniques may operate as a defence mechanism against the tensions of a risk averse occupational culture by providing unofficial

guidance on how staff might behave in potentially risky situations. Black and Lumsden (2020: 77) note that while such narratives act as a form of precaution, like the technologies utilised by staff to manage the risks present, they also maintain the presence of risk averse practices in policing by ensuring the notion of risk remains at the forefront of staff considerations.

Campeau's (2015) ethnographic study of policing also provides support for the notion that employees draw on previous experience and existing cultural knowledge to provide a rationale for the ways they choose to act. She discovered that officers operating in a context of perceived high scrutiny prefer to shun the lure of 'mission-action', highlighted in the traditional police culture literature as a particularly appealing aspect of the role (p. 680). Instead, officers choose to carefully manage the risks they face, opting for risk avoidance in many instances. There also existed a widespread suspicion amongst staff that organisational policies were designed to discharge risk at the individual level, ultimately removing institutional-level responsibility should wrongdoing occur (p. 683). For officers in this study, as with Leach's work, avoiding 'in-the-job' trouble was paramount, which they achieved by drawing on 'cultural scripts' relating to how to best manage risk. Such behaviour suggests that an adherence to cautious rule following leads to alterations of existing police cultural norms, as staff adapt to the levels of accountability required and eschew excitement in favour of the avoidance of potential danger.

As we have seen, risk thinking is evident in many policing practices, with the drivers behind these appearing to be more complex than the result of a risk averse organisation, or employees that are simply afraid of attracting unwanted hazards. There

has been a notable escalation in complexity of the cases police have to contend with, for instance in the increased reporting of sexual and other high-harm offences (Muir, 2016), and these cases are typically accompanied by varying forms of risk that are increasingly difficult to manage. Alongside these requirements, officers also identify feeling overwhelmed by ever-increasing demands for accountability from external institutions (Shane, 2010; Turnbull and Wass, 2015; Ricciardelli, Carbonell and Huey, 2023), which may lead them towards more tried-and-tested policing methods. We will now examine the potential influence that accountability systems, and accompanying feelings of blame and scrutiny, may have on these instances of supposed risk aversion, and how this may feed into wider concerns around staff attitudes and behaviours.

Matters of scrutiny, blame and accountability.

One of the ways accountability has been most consistently demonstrated and achieved in the policing organisation is through the aforementioned bureaucratic feature of the police hierarchy. As subordinates in the bureaucratic policing organisation, police officers and staff are expected to account for any decisions they have taken (Zacka, 2017: 179). Although there appears to be a degree of acceptance of the need for some form of accountability, the government's Front Line Review noted this can 'go too far' and can have a detrimental effect on officers (Home Office: 2019: 40). The balance between reasonable accountability standards and overbearing scrutiny may be a difficult one to achieve, and it may be this which leads staff to feel they are operating under heightened levels of oversight. It is worth remembering, however, that this bureaucratic feature of answerability is not a new phenomenon and has always existed

in police organisations. This section will now explore to what extent accountability is linked into the notion of increased scrutiny and accompanying processes of blame.

It is both the internal and external forms of scrutiny to which officers are now subjected, ostensibly in the name of transparent policing, that Flanagan highlighted as being particularly problematic for officers. This sentiment was later reflected in the Front Line Review (2019 :45), where participants reiterated the perception their behaviour was under constant scrutiny, leading them to fear potential repercussions should things go awry. Reiner (2010: 211) notes how the current model of accountability is appealing to citizens and policymakers alike, as it allows the unmistakable allocation of blame for errors to an identifiable and a culpable individual, but also acts to provide reassurance to officers and staff by exempting them from personal responsibility for their actions where policy was followed, regardless of the outcome of doing so. Despite this, staff have a persistent and overarching fear that even if they do follow policy, they will be blamed for any adverse incidents that arise. Any responsibility held by the organisation is not considered when matters of accountability arise; there is only discussion of the potential liability for officers and staff. This stance is influenced by the arrangements of existing accountability systems, and their search for a culpable other over examining wider organisational failings.

There is a widespread sentiment among officers that they are expected to assume culpability for wrongdoing, a requirement they feel has increased over the years, at the expense of organisational responsibility (Campeau, 2015; Metcalfe, 2017; Home Office, 2019). The claim made by officers is that responsibility for the identification and management of potential instances of risk lies primarily with staff, who

are portrayed as responsible autonomous actors when matters go awry. This is reflected in wider societal trends: Mythen and Walklate (2006: 385) highlight how from a Foucauldian point of view, neo-liberal institutions seek to shift responsibility from themselves to individuals, so they become answerable for any risks or uncertainties that occur. Instead of being brought into line by the direct force of the state, individuals are encouraged to become self-policing (Dupont and Pearce 2001: 125). The effects of responsabilisation officers subsequently feel, frequently labelled as risk aversion, stem from a belief policing organisations tend to pass responsibility to officers regarding risk identification and management. This is reflected in the extant research: Campeau (2015: 681) found in her study many officers perceived organisational training represented efforts to transfer liability to staff, thereby lessening their responsibility for failings. For staff, what was previously felt at the organisational level is instead felt at that of the individual, and it is this perception which has impacted upon the increase in so-called 'risk averse' behaviour policing is currently experiencing.

Accountability and 'blame culture'

As we have seen, questions of blame are inextricably linked to matters of accountability and responsibility on the part of officers, and by extension policing authorities themselves. When examining potential scrutiny of policing, the political and social context in which they operate also needs to be given due consideration. The wider environment inevitably shapes the responses of both government and the public to apparent police misdemeanours, which in turn influences the level of blame and scrutiny to which officers are likely to be subjected. In recent years, high-profile incidents have

drawn negative attention to the activities of various police authorities. The Metropolitan Police in particular has recently been subjected to high levels of scrutiny as a result of public wrongdoing, particularly in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving officer. In such cases, public accountability by these forces is considered to be fundamental in securing public trust, leading to policing organisations being subjected to the necessary processes of enquiry in an attempt to remedy these failings (Heaton, 2010: 83). As a result, there is now an increasing level of public intolerance for service failure, which in turn has led to demands officers need to fulfil their occupational role with more accountability and transparency (Christopher, 2015: 327; May 2014: Leach: 2023). In more recent years external surveillance also takes place via citizen filming (Goldsmith, 2010; Coudert et al, 2015; Spencer and Cheshire, 2017), and represents a further strain in public/police relations that creates an additional source of scrutiny for officers. More broadly, the number of Britons who believe the police are doing a good job has fallen significantly (YouGov, 2022; ONS, 2022; More in Common, 2023), attributed to the aftereffects of these aforementioned scandals. This represents another aspect of the risks brought by damage to reputation, the consequences of which are felt by both policing organisations and their employees alike.

In actual fact, the chances of receiving the ultimate sanction that officers are afraid of, which is that of dismissal, is highly unlikely to occur. Government statistics show there are currently 147,000 serving officers in the UK (UK Government, 2023). In the year leading up to March 2022, 1,442 of these were referred to misconduct proceedings, with around 394 officers either being dismissed as a result (or would have been dismissed for those who had resigned from the force whilst proceedings were

ongoing; UK Government, 2022; College of Policing, 2023). Such numbers show that the likelihood of officers finding themselves on the wrong end of a misconduct matter are reasonably small, particularly where dismissal is likely to be the outcome of such proceedings. Unfortunately, the government only began collecting such statistics in 2022, so it is difficult to compare current numbers against pre-existing trends. There is some feeling amongst officers that they are subjected to higher levels of scrutiny than ever before. One potential reason may be that officers are merely objecting to being held to account, and it is the prospect of this that they find uncomfortable rather than the prospect of being unfairly scrutinised. Being under investigation, often for a protracted period, may also be experienced by officers as a form of punishment, and it is partially this to which they may object. It may be that despite these protestations, the accountability frameworks surrounding the police have been reasonably consistent for several years, but these are increasingly being experienced by officers as a forum for blame rather than being held to account.

It is worthwhile noting that the requirement for other public sector organisations, for instance the NHS, and social work, to demonstrate increased transparency has also been increased in recent years. Such movements can be seen as increasing the chances of attracting blame as their performance becomes subjected to heightened levels of scrutiny (Ellerman, 2006; Van Erp, 2011; De Boer et al, 2018). As previously mentioned, Heaton in particular notes that policing has come under intense observation in recent years, in part due to the number of high-profile 'near misses', with emphasis placed upon the fact that police should have taken more care with the risks they faced (Heaton, 2010:76). McLaughlin (2007:195) notes that because of such scandals,

policing bodies have been required to submit to more intensive oversight, alongside public commitments to improving transparency and accountability, with an intention to safeguard their relationships with the public. The policing oversight body, the IOPC, has also been bestowed with greater powers than its predecessor to investigate and intervene in matters of police misconduct. The organisation now has the ability to initiate investigations without receiving a referral from police forces (IOPC, 2017; IOPC, 2020), which was previously a requirement for the initiation of any misconduct investigation. The definition of a recordable complaint has also been widened, with the IOPC anticipating more complaints because of this alteration (IOPC, 2022). Such changes symbolise a form of 'net-widening' to officers, as they anticipate increased chances of becoming subjected to complaints by members of the public. However, whilst there may be more mechanisms for unacceptable conduct to be investigated, the standards of behaviour officers are expected to adhere to remain consistent. Standards such as honesty, integrity, and fitness for duty have long been mainstays of expected police behaviour, and there has not been a movement towards increasing current standards.

Whilst it is worth noting the factors discussed here have always existed, there has been a notable increase in the negative attention that policing has drawn, which may be linked to so-called 'risk averse' behaviour as they become increasingly aware of this. Further, Dobrin et al (2021: 36) conducted their research in the wake of the Ferguson shooting, and found officers perceived both news and social media as inciting negativity and blame towards them, stating this created an obstacle to effectively fulfilling their mandate in terms of protecting the public. Additionally, media analysis conducted by the Angiolini Inquiry (2024) has also demonstrated that increased

attention is being paid to matters of police misconduct. The research (p. 279) shows there was over a 600% increase between 2019 to 2022 in the volume of articles dedicated to this topic, although as Lawence (2023: 42) notes, most cases of misconduct receive little to no media attention. It may be that officers feel that while they are still exposed to the same accountability systems as previously, they are more likely to attract negative attention if potential misconduct arises, which may fuel their fear of blame.

It is worth noting that officers have always demonstrated an awareness of potential scrutiny. Early 'cop culture' research, for instance that by Skolnick (1966) in his depiction of the 'working personality' of officers, found that officers have always exhibited the characteristics of suspicion and distrust of both outsiders and management figures and subsequently acted to contain the risk such threats present. These features of supposed risk avoidant behaviour existed long before the recent charges of risk aversion, and there appear to be other factors that contribute towards the continuing existence of risk aversion in policing organisations external to these institutions. Nonetheless, there does seem to be a grain of truth in the claim that there has been a trend towards higher levels of scrutiny for officers. For instance, McLaughlin (2007:176) notes that in the 1980s, the burden of proof in police discipline cases was the same as that of a criminal trial, requiring the threshold of proof beyond reasonable doubt to be met before a case could be brought against an officer, as opposed to that of the balance of probabilities typically found in current misconduct arrangements. Additionally, the introduction of various monitoring technologies, for instance the 'IR3' (a device used in police vehicles that identifies the officer using the vehicle, the speed they

are driving at, and whether they use lights and sirens) contribute towards a feeling of increased surveillance. Although the current policing environment is one contributory factor towards the current blame averse approach, it does not provide a complete explanation as to its existence. Further contributing factors to this phenomenon will be discussed in the following section.

The existence of a blame culture in policing?

A frequently cited claim by police actors is that a blame culture operates within policing. Central to the conceptualisation of this type of internal culture are features of suspicion and hostility (Flanagan, 2008; Thomas, 2017; HOC, 2018: 69); bolstered by an informal ethos of defensiveness and solidarity, which leads to a reluctance to be responsible for risk or the acknowledgement of potential mistakes (Douglas, 1992). Metcalfe (2017: 154) describes how this culture, typified by a distrust of others and a persistent fear of reprimand prevents recognition of shortcomings (Jehn, 1995) and instead leads to officers adopting a defensive stance as they anticipate liability for potential failings. It is this constant and persistent fear of blaming that police actors identify as contributing to the increased risk aversion we see today (Metcalfe, 2017: 154; HOC, 2018) as officers anticipate such blaming practices to occur with some frequency. Such an ethos is further amplified by a focus on assigning individual responsibility to staff for organisational shortcomings (Khatri et al 2009: 312), as a substitute for examining wider organisational structures when wrongdoing arises. Such an environment may lead officers and staff to anticipate increased likelihood of attracting blame should a significant incident go awry.

The Berry Report, commissioned to examine the rise of bureaucracy in policing, in part because of the questions raised in the earlier Flanagan Report, noted the existence of an ‘institutionalised blame culture’ within policing (Berry, 2009: 8). The report builds upon Flanagan’s findings and identifies an occupational ethos that focuses more on blame than learning lessons when negative incidents arise. This finding has been replicated in subsequent reports into policing (for instance, the Front Line Review, 2019, see also Heaton and Tong, 2019), with officers voicing concern about the lack of differentiation between blame and accountability. When examining accountability frameworks, this fear of blame sharply contrasts with the sentiment expressed by accountability bodies that they encourage lesson learning over assigning blame. For instance, the IOPC’s statement of values outlines that they ‘discourage a blame culture amongst the police’ (IPCC¹, 2010), instead stating that mistakes present unique moments for staff to learn and develop, with the misconduct system being best placed for more serious instances of wrongdoing (Lockwood, 2018). However, officers experience the misconduct system differently: Metcalfe (2017: 156) notes ‘there is an unresolved tension between the desire for a no blame culture and the demand for transparency and accountability’. It may be this tension which causes officers to be overly preoccupied with the notion of blame, as they fear that to be held accountable is also to be held responsible for negative consequences. The contrast between accountability and blame has never been distinguished in the world of policing (Heaton, 2010: 83), and for officers, to be held accountable runs the risk of attracting unwanted blame.

¹ Previously known as the Independent Police Complaints Commission until 2018, IPCC.

It should be noted that movements have been made to balance police accountability with lesson learning in recent years. In February 2020, new conduct regulations were introduced, designed to ensure that police misconduct was investigated with the appropriate degree of scrutiny. One of the most notable changes was the introduction of the 'practice requiring improvement' procedure, anticipated to encourage lesson learning rather than punishment when minor infractions occur, as a replacement for seeking to apportion blame via the formal disciplinary process (Heaton and Tong, 2022: 3). Home Office statistics (Home Office 2022; 2023) demonstrate the 'practice requiring improvement' outcome is being increasingly utilised for lower-level misconduct cases, with 23% of officers subjected to misconduct procedures receiving this outcome in 2021, rising to 29% in 2022. Meanwhile, Heaton, Bryant, and Tong (2019: 151) note how there has been an increase in the number of misconduct cases, particularly in relation to 'neglect of duty' brought against individual officers since the start of the millennium. IOPC figures note that misconduct cases sat at 16,654 in 2000/01, increasing to 28,223 by 2019/20 (IOPC, 2020). Despite this, nearly 90% of such complaints are not upheld, suggesting that officer concerns regarding negative sanctions are not in the main, grounded in reality. It may be the likelihood of being placed under investigation has increased, leading officers to fear they too will be subjected to such proceedings, even though the likelihood of being dismissed or receiving other serious sanctions is still minimal.

The IOPC is often referred to as a significant negative force in relation to matters of blame. Although policing organisations reinforce the notion of the IOPC as an ominous other, this perception is bolstered by the perpetual retelling of stories and

myths that constitute a significant part of the informal working culture, highlighted by Black and Lumsden (2020) earlier in this chapter. An example of this can be found in the Chris Kaba case, which is regularly cited as a 'cautionary tale' that heightens feelings of risk aversion among officers. One officer is currently awaiting trial for murder due to their role in the situation (Gecsoyler, 2023). This has led to officers threatening they will no longer be prepared to use firearms for fear of reprisals for using this form of force. As previously discussed, instances of officers finding themselves on the wrong end of misconduct proceedings are rare. Despite this, such stories serve to reinforce the 'availability bias' of such events in the minds of officers, leading them to consistently overestimate the probability of dramatic events which may arise from their own conduct (Kahneman, 2012: 203 - 204). This consequently serves to have a restricting effect on their behaviour as they anticipate such negative events in future.

It is worth noting policing may not be particularly exceptional in respect of a potential blame culture. Concerns in relation to the allocation of blame have been replicated in other public bodies, for instance the NHS (Wise, 2018), social work (Ravalier, 2018) and the health and social care sector (Aughterson et al, 2021). Members from these organisations claim they operate in a culture that continually prioritises individual fault finding over genuine lesson learning and reflection, with staff feeling this represents a danger to their place in their respective organisations. In this respect, it appears several public sector organisations share these concerns regarding the attraction of unwanted blame. However, policing is unique in that it is typically characterised by high stakes, uncertain outcomes, and decisions often taken in an environment of high scrutiny and external pressure; features which do not appear with

regularity in all public sector organisations. Qin (2022: 8) found front line staff exhibit concerns regarding blame only in situations characterised by a significant degree of urgency and threat, rather than as a response to everyday concerns. Many policing situations, particularly those characterised by high pressure circumstances contain such factors and this may go some way to explaining why fear of blame, and accompanying risk-averse behaviour, is prevalent in policing.

Conclusion

This chapter has mapped out the extant literature with regards to how officer attitudes towards risk and blame are developed and maintained. In doing so, it has discussed how the language of risk has become the dominant mode through which danger is assessed in the modern world, with policing becoming increasingly characterised by supposed risk aversion, more specifically by a desire to avoid the attraction of unnecessary hazards. Policing organisations attempt to handle these risks by the introduction of detailed bureaucratic practices, which many officers perceive as stifling much needed discretion. Risk thinking is now a key consideration in officer and organisational responsibilities, alongside the suggestion that the worst-case scenario is continually catered to regardless of the circumstances faced. Whilst it is unavoidable given the increased focus on risk in wider society (Beck, 1992) this would impact on the way policing activity is conducted, we must also consider the extent to which policing organisations have embedded such processes into their way of working, independently of external forces.

We have also examined the literature regarding the concept of blame, and how fear of criticism manifests itself within the policing arena. Despite evidence to suggest that the chances of coming to be blamed for significant failings are low, officers continue to be concerned with attracting unwanted attention as they attempt to fulfil their mandate. Such a preoccupation with external investigations represents fear of an adverse outcome, even if it appears highly unlikely to happen, and at first glance it appears unclear why this occurs. In this instance, the fear of a negative sanction is not always proportionate to the likelihood of it occurring. This fear of potential sanction is further heightened by the perceived blame culture within the organisation. The fact that accountability mechanisms are typically applied in a backwards-facing manner (Metcalf, 2017: 159) adds to the fear that such danger may present itself at any time. Officers perceive it is they who are at risk because of such processes, and that they become constrained by the rules and regulations set out in an attempt to manage their reputation. This thesis will explore the extent to which this claim is played out in the lived reality on the ground by aiming to develop an understanding of why officers perceive attracting blame risk represents a significant danger to their position in the occupational order.

The concept of risk has myriad meanings and deep roots in societal and political factors; police officers as risk experts are expected to grapple with this in all its various forms. However, it is this particular form of sociopolitical risk, which is characterised as representing a significant danger to the security of their livelihood, with which they are particularly concerned, due to the fear of being blamed should they be found to be at

fault for any errors or omissions that occur. It is this matter the thesis will discuss in depth in the following chapters.

Chapter Two: Conceptualizing risk and blame

The previous chapter discussed the wider literature that exists in relation to matters of risk and blame in policing. I discussed how the concept of risk is recognised by both officers and organisations as central to how policing is conducted, and by extension affects how blame is apportioned (or avoided) when things go wrong. In this chapter, I will establish the theoretical underpinnings of the two concepts of risk and blame. The two ideas will be explored in depth here to gain a fuller understanding of their usage, meanings, and significance. I will evaluate potential conceptual approaches that shed light on police handling of risk, before moving on to consider theories that discuss how blame practices may operate in policing. This thesis draws upon several theories to understand how officers make sense of the concepts of risk and blame, and the meaning they attach to these notions. Essential works from theorists such as Douglas and Furedi and their constructivist theories of risk perception create the theoretical underpinning of this research, alongside the work of Malle and Hood, and their work on blame and its avoidance. Utilising their theories allows me to demonstrate in subsequent chapters how attitudes and behaviours are formed around these concepts, and how they subsequently influence policing practice.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the topic of risk has already had a notable degree of attention paid to it in relation to the criminal justice system. There has been some work undertaken regarding blame in relation to policing, specifically relating to police blaming of victims, but for the most part, blame remains an underexplored topic in policing occupational practices. Questions of blame – which I will show is also a socially

constructed concept – will be explored in relation to how blame operates on both a cognitive and social level, and what the key effects of this process are. I am particularly concerned with how staff understanding of blame influences attitudes and behaviours. Throughout this thesis I argue the ‘risk averse’ behaviours demonstrated by officers are in fact methods deployed to manage the levels of blame they confront in their daily work. In this vein, they are better described as ‘blame avoidance’ behaviours rather than being risk averse practices. I will demonstrate that police ideas of risk and blame are both socially constructed, in the way that potential risks are selectively identified and addressed by officers. Additionally, officer perceptions of risk are inextricably related to their perceptions of blame because it is this persistent fear of blame that influences their handling of risk – therefore worries about risk handling are a manifestation of a persistent fear of blame. Due to this concern, I will be using an interpretivist perspective, by centring the experience of research participants when exploring the concepts of risk and blame, to fully understand the lived experiences of officers and staff. The chapter will aim to formulate a theoretical framework that can shed new light on how we can best make sense of police attitudes to risk and blame.

‘Where’s the risk?’ The meaning of risk as a concept

Through taking a constructivist approach throughout this thesis, I hope to demonstrate that risk is not an objective creation but is a ‘way of thinking’, as Douglas suggests (1992: 46). Whilst doing so, it is worth determining which of the various definitions of risk that currently exist within policing are of relevance to this work, and how these risks are selectively attended to by officers. Mythen (2014:4) identifies that first and foremost,

there is the risk that officers face 'in the line of duty'. Secondly, there are the myriad hazards to which the public are exposed, from which the police are duty bound to protect them from. Thirdly, there is risk to the policing institution itself, which principally takes the form of potential legal liability and accompanying risk to reputation. This particular danger presents a risk to the officer in terms of attracting blame for failing to manage such hazards accordingly, which they fear being held responsible for should they bring the organisation into disrepute (Ellis, 2023). This form of risk is linked to the fourth and final type of danger that officers face, and it is this that I argue is particularly pertinent for officers. This form of risk arises when they fail, or are perceived to have done so, to manage the forms of risk presented to them when undertaking their role and is therefore best described as 'risk to self'. It is important to note here that it is not the notion of risk itself that officers are concerned with, rather it is the potential aftermath they face should these dangers not be appropriately managed. Officers fear this danger due to the consequences that arise when this occurs, chiefly in relation to the threat it creates to their place in their occupational world, particularly concerning loss of employment, and in more extreme cases, the potential for criminal sanction. I am particularly interested in this form of socio-political risk, and I will explore officer attitudes towards such hazards to explain how these practices influence behaviours around risk and blame. In this respect the concept of risk is multi-layered: although it is risk to self in terms of their professional reputation that officers fear, this primarily arises from the hazards of not adequately managing the risk with which they are charged, and the consequences that arise when this occurs. Within the context of this thesis, risk can be therefore understood as the likelihood of officers being blamed for failing to manage risk

appropriately (O'Malley, 2010; Mythen, 2014), and it is this form of danger that I will primarily focus on throughout the thesis.

Relatedly, there is the more problematic notion of risk aversion that is discussed in the literature, numerous instances of which are said to exist within policing. In this instance, the term is applied primarily to individual, and occasionally organisational, behaviour when exposed to uncertainty, and subsequent attempts to control this uncertainty through tried-and-tested techniques. Alternatively, someone is said to be risk averse if they are reluctant to pursue activities that have a significant chance of resulting in a loss, or whose benefits are not entirely assured or protected (Stefansson and Bradley, 2019:77). As discussed in the previous chapter, staff anxieties regarding the prospect of danger have been labelled as an aversion to risk, although there is little academic analysis regarding exactly what risk aversion is in the policing context. The exception to this is Heaton (Heaton, 2009; Heaton, 2010; Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2018), who focuses on supposed risk aversion, which he sees as arising from the impossible nature of the policies officers are expected to implement. The government report 'Front Line Review' (2019) is more specific: the report refers to a 'culture of blame and risk aversion existing in some forces', attributed to a feeling of constant scrutiny by external accountability agencies (Home Office, 2019: 54). There is also mention in the report of 'risk' not being to the organisation but discharged to individual staff members if something goes wrong. In this instance, the contributing factors that influence perceived risk to self are a little clearer, with the notion of scrutiny playing a significant role in officer perceptions of how risk and blame should best be handled.

It is important not to conflate risk aversion with the notion of risk itself, and I will discuss the two terms separately throughout this thesis to avoid potential confusion. Throughout this research, I argue that so-called risk aversion is in fact a form of blame avoidance, an assertion which will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. Although attention should be paid to the specific forms of risk the police encounter, it is less important what risk actually is. I am more concerned with how potential risk is interpreted and experienced by staff and policing organisations alike. As such, attention will be paid to what officers, as well as policing organisations themselves, understand and recognise as risk, both in this chapter and throughout the thesis, how they react to and attempt to manage risk, and how this relates to their concerns regarding perceived hazards. It is therefore crucial to think about this form of risk in a constructivist manner, to examine how perceptions of risk are influenced by the occupational environment in which officers work, and how some risks are consequently attended to, whilst others are disregarded. Overall, I view such concern about risk as a condition shaped by the unique pressures officers face, which will be fully explored in the following sections.

The social construction of risk.

Mary Douglas was a British social anthropologist, best known for her writings on human culture, more specifically the notion of risk. Central to her theorizing of risk was the idea that risk perception is a social process; consequently, the social aspects of risk must be considered when identifying what constitutes a hazard and what does not (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983: 6). Persson et al. (2022: 287) discuss how Douglas posed an analysis of risk as a shared, abstract process; that is socially constructed by specific social

groups who seek to assign meaning to certain concepts. Douglas argues that 'risk is not a thing; it is a way of thinking and a highly artificial contrivance at that' (1992: 46).

Though Douglas does not specifically allude to this, her thesis suggests there is no direct relationship between subjective risk perception and the objective presence of danger (Scott, 2000: 46), and to consider something as a risk is to make a choice to do so. Douglas specifically draws attention to the clear differences between danger and risk, and how modern discussion of 'risk' has replaced conversations about danger - to take a risk is now conceptualised as foolish, as an activity that invites unnecessary danger (Douglas, 1992: 24). She noted that while all social groups must deal with a range of dangers, constraints of time and resources mean individuals can only concern themselves with some of these problems, and it is these select difficulties which come to be perceived as risks (Douglas, 2002, p. xix). Douglas goes on to note how the categorisation of risk primarily relates to 'trying to turn uncertainties into probabilities' (Douglas 1986: 42; see also Hollway and Jefferson, 1997). Once such processes have taken place, risks become discernible, and individuals are then able to minimise potential ambiguity.

Through utilising Douglas' constructivist lens, we can see how policing employees selectively attend to what they consider to be dangers - chiefly obstacles that present a risk to their occupational position. Such hazards do not necessarily present a significant risk to officers - what matters is their perception of such risks and the potential impact of these should they come to fruition. These anxieties are further maintained by others in the social group who share similar concerns and reflect existing anxieties. Douglas' theory is particularly useful when we consider the uncertainty with

which policing must grapple on a regular basis. Carson et al (2013: 315) highlight how much of police work involves making decisions with incomplete knowledge, which represents a significant risk to officers and their position as they are expected to undertake potentially controversial actions with very little information. They (ibid.: 310) note that every 'wicked problem' policing must contend with is different, and scientific calculations of risk may not be able to assess such situations correctly, ultimately making the outcome difficult to predict. In this instance, what is labelled risk aversion may be in fact an awareness that uncertainty is a large feature of policing, and this naturally presents a concern for officers, who have an awareness of the potential consequences they face should they fail to manage risk appropriately.

Alaszewski (2015: 217) highlights how Douglas presented a competently argued case that risk perception is not merely a case of observing objective hazards in the environment, nor merely a result of individual differences in cognition, but that the process of risk identification is primarily social in nature, producing support for the constructivist element of her work (see also Lupton, 1999). Like Douglas, he argues that calculations of risk are heavily influenced by systems of meaning that surround the social group. Such systems are often taken for granted elements of the social world, with the effect that the underlying meanings of these are best identified through intensive ethnographic study to uncover such perceptions. However, there are some limitations to Douglas' analyses of risk. Alaszewski (ibid.) draws attention to Douglas' overarching focus on hidden systems of meaning, with individual agency being somewhat neglected in such explanations. Scott (2000: 46) also states that Douglas does not explore the relationship between risk, blame and individualism, and assumes

an affiliation between the three concepts rather than exploring whether this is indeed the case. While her analysis seems to rest on an assumption that there is an inherent relationship between the three concepts, how this relationship is sustained is not examined in any great depth. Despite these concerns, Douglas's work can be used to shine a light on how police employees selectively attend to risks that they consider present a particular threat to their position, particularly in relation to how 'risk thinking' is a subjective mode of understanding the world, rather than an objective assessment of potential danger. This type of 'risk thinking' will be further elaborated on when discussing the work of Furedi in the following section.

The precautionary principle: the perils of probabilistic thinking

Another scholar that has concentrated upon the social construction of risk is Frank Furedi, primarily through his work 'culture of fear' (1997), which examines the attitude that Western modernity now takes towards matters of fear and risk. In this, he notes that speculation has replaced any objective assessment of risk, alongside the increasing influence that possibilistic thinking has on how such dangers are approached. Due to this, there has been an introduction of a risk-oriented doctrine known as the precautionary principle; the main objective of which is the avoidance of unnecessary risk by playing it safe. The precautionary principle was first identified as the 'Vorsorgeprinzip' (the 'foresight principle') in German law (Bourguignon, 2015: 4). Advocates of the precautionary principle state that as many dangers are unknown, there is rarely enough information to make a realistic forecast of probabilities, thus the only solution remaining is to abide by the worst-case scenario (Furedi; 1997:107). For Furedi

(1997: 9), the principle has now extended into the wider arena of social experience, with much of society being organised around the careful handling of risk. Above all, the precautionary principle represents an adherence to erring on the side of caution over any evidence of actual risk (Ransley and Mazerolle, 2009). As already touched upon by Douglas, Furedi (1997:18) highlights how the previously clinical nature of risk has come to be redefined as a particularly problematic concept in the modern world. Risk is now conceptualised as something to be avoided, with those adhering to such an approach being likely to attempt to avoid unnecessary risk at all costs. This movement is reflected in various policing practices, from continually operating to the worst-case scenario, to consistently ratifying and documenting actions taken to demonstrate continual accountability, as this thesis will demonstrate.

Hemphill (2020) elaborates on the utility of the precautionary principle, which he argues varies greatly by the way it is enacted, whether a 'strong' form of the principle is used, or a 'weak' adaptation of this. For Hemphill, the former version of the principle is used when there is a full understanding of the risks faced, whereas the weak instance is utilised in conjunction with a 'just in case' mentality. He elaborates that:

The strong precautionary principle "should presumptively be applied when an activity or product poses serious threats...even if scientific uncertainty provides a full understanding of the nature or extent of the threats." (Sachs, 2011: 1288).

Whereas a weak precautionary principle stands "for the proposition that regulators should be empowered to address risk in contexts of scientific uncertainty – that is, even before regulators fully understand the nature or extent

of risk.” (Sachs, p. 1292) Further, critics claim that the weak variant does not “tell us exactly how and when to apply precautionary measures, or how to evaluate the trade-offs associated with precaution (Thierer, 2017).” – (Hemphill, 2020, p. 2).

For Hemphill, the strong precautionary principle should be utilised when the stakes are high, and potential uncertainty cannot be justified. Whereas the weak precautionary principle is implemented pre-emptively, prior to any assessment of potential risk-taking place. In line with Furedi’s discussion of the perceived need to continually abide by the worst-case scenario, we can safely assume the weakened version of the principle is intricately linked to claims of risk avoidance in policing. Indeed, Furedi (1997:170) noted how the precautionary principle removes the need for human agency in any meaningful sense, depicting individuals as fundamentally defenceless against risk, the only remedy for this being to evade potential hazards wherever possible. There are a numerous examples of the precautionary principle existing in policing, notably highlighted by Black and Lumsden’s (2019) research with police control room staff. The researchers found a shift towards precautionary policing practices which do not follow the scientific rationality of risk management approaches, but instead rely on planning for the worst-case scenario. Their findings focused particularly on use of ‘organisational technologies of risk’, which guided staff actions and decision-making; yet ultimately had the effect of increasing their awareness of potential risks rather than dampening their concerns. They discovered in most instances, tangible action was required to address the risk such situations presented, even where little information existed to inform such decisions

(see also Campbell, 2004). Although Black and Lumsden's conclusions are based on a singular ethnographic study in one force control room, they provide useful insight into such a mindset: that inaction is unacceptable, with worst case thinking representing the tool of choice to demonstrate accountability; logic that represents the essence of the precautionary principle.

There are some significant differences between the accounts of Douglas and Furedi which merit consideration. While Douglas maintains those who are guided by uncertainty are attempting to avoid accountability (Douglas, 1992: 30), it is an essential underpinning of the precautionary approach that ambivalence is an inescapable aspect of modern risk management. As this thesis will demonstrate, 'what if' remains a guiding principle in police decision making, and the worst-case scenario must therefore be continually catered for as a safeguard against danger. Conversely, to recognise uncertainty is a central facet of risk thinking, and to consequently attempt to control for this, is to assume accountability for the unclear situations they potentially face. In contrast to Douglas' assertion, Furedi notes that when utilising a precautionary approach, the weighing up of likely outcomes when considering risk has been replaced by a perspective where only potential dangers are accounted for (Furedi, 1997:18). This is reflected in a variety of policing practices, for instance that there are no low-risk options for most high-harm offences, with only standard, medium, and high being presented as viable options when assessing danger (College of Policing, 2023), demonstrating that assuming little to no risk in such instances is unacceptable. Overall, Douglas' idea of how risk is selectively attended to, depending on the unique pressures

that particular social group faces, alongside the influence of the precautionary principle, details how risk must continually be catered to in policing.

A precautionary approach to the organisational and individual management of risk

As discussed in the preceding chapter, risk to self is a key concern for officers, arising primarily from perceived failure to manage risk to the public in the first instance. This thesis will demonstrate that there is a perception among the rank-and-file that responsibility for risk has become increasingly individualised and as a result, there is a need to protect the self from dangers that threaten their position in the occupational world. It is this form of risk which is the most pertinent, with concerns around this particular hazard being labelled as risk aversion, as officers feel a need to continually and proactively manage risk to self. This section will explore some of the theoretical literature regarding how the requirement for risk avoidance influences officer behaviour, and how the notion of risk avoidance often translates to officers behaving in a manner that principally avoids risk to self.

As dictated by the precautionary approach, worst case scenarios need to be anticipated wherever possible, in order to minimise potential risks. Bureaucratic practices are a crucial method of achieving this, and these represent a distinctive approach to documenting the management of risk on the part of officers. Such practices are regularly portrayed as a negative aspect of policing for officers, as they divert resources away from operational activities to time-consuming bureaucratic processes (Flanagan, 2008; Home Office Affairs Committee, 2018; Home Office, 2019). However,

Campbell (2004: 700) documents many instances of policing researchers detailing how officers appreciate the beneficial aspects of bureaucratic procedures for ensuring accountability, despite typically displaying scornful and derisive attitudes towards such work. Such accounts are typically used to endorse 'police versions of events', whilst also tending to 'insulate action from critical review' (McConville et al. 1991: 98; see also Shapland and Hobbs, 1989). This should not be particularly surprising: Furedi (1997: 18) notes that as risk becomes synonymous with danger, a penchant arises for creating informal systems that are primarily concerned with avoiding risk. This propensity for risk avoidance explains how officers use these narrative accounts to prevent potential risk to self. Carson et al (2013: 314) note that these policies can minimise staff anxieties because if they adhere to such processes, even if they are not appropriate for the task at hand, they are perceived as offering immunity against blame. While such policies can place a significant 'paper burden' on officers, there is a reluctance to deviate from these processes even when they are viewed as cumbersome or unnecessary, as they are perceived as providing a crucial layer of defence for staff. This suggests that despite such drawbacks, these techniques also provide critical protection for officers against potential recourse.

It is worth examining the other important form of risk here: risk to the organisation, and how policing institutions attempt to offset potential hazards they encounter. This is achieved in several ways: Campbell (2004: 710) notes that media relations are typically centred around mitigating risk to the organisation, by controlling the narrative when controversial incidents occur. This method represents a presentational strategy (Hood, 2013) undertaken on the part of the organisation, by

demonstrating to the outside world that they can be held accountable for the sensible management of risk. Paperwork, which as discussed previously, provides a useful accountability function for officers, also serves a similar purpose for the organisation, by demonstrating the organisation prepares officers effectively for the types of risk they encounter. Another method utilised by the organisation to control risk is by restricting staff opportunities for discretion. Discretion can be described as 'the power of a public official or employee to act and make decisions based on his or her own judgment or conscience within the bounds of reason and the law' . Zacka (2017: 39) notes how staff within bureaucratic organisations are now expected to comply with policies and procedures that heavily contribute towards the curbing and controlling of their actions. Policing organisations attempt to deflect risk in part by controlling the actions staff can take, minimising the chances of poor behaviour that may draw the organisation into disrepute. There are notable similarities in the ways staff and the organisation utilise policies and procedures to avoid risk - Hood (2013) labels this approach the policy strategy, where adherence to process is continually maintained in order to ward off unwanted criticism. Both have a performative element in the way risk practices are used, with both utilising organisational policies to demonstrate accountability to the outside world.

Such a performance on the part of policing organisations and their staff represents an attempt to abate the various sources of scrutiny policing faces. It is worth reiterating here that such scrutiny has not necessarily increased, but the perception of this occurring outside policing may have done so. The term scrutiny can be difficult to characterise, and studies examining scrutiny often fail to define what the concept

means, although the term is often accompanied by notions of inspection and accountability. There are various mentions of 'holding to account' in the literature (Cheung, 2005; Harris, 2012; Henry, Malik and Aitchison, 2016), whilst some scholars discuss the appropriate investigation of complaints (Jefferson and Grimshaw, 2023) alongside the requirement chief constables to provide explanations for local policing practices, drawing attention to the effect that such arrangements can have. Some commentators have suggested that police effort has been reduced in response to perceived high public scrutiny from the community and media, widely known as 'the Ferguson Effect', whereby discretionary policing is removed, typically as a response to perceived fractures in the public-police relationship (Comey, 2015; MacDonald, 2015, in Premkumar, 2022). The relationship between increased (perceived) scrutiny and lower police activity has a degree of support (Gau, Paoline and Paul, 2021: 540). Premkumar (2022: 38) found that after potentially controversial incidents officers tend to decrease discretionary effort. Other studies (Adams 2019; Deuchar, Fallik, and Crichlow 2019) found that interviewees expressed reluctance to carry out certain tasks, expressing concerns over the misconduct process, accusations, and potentially being dismissed from the organisation itself (see also MacDonald, 2015; Wolfe, and Nix, 2016). As a result, some officers felt unwilling to be proactive because doing so attracts many opportunities for unfair criticism (Comey 2015; MacDonald 2015, 2016). It appears that perceived scrutiny may lead to reluctance on the part of officers to carry out certain aspects of their role, leading them to adopt defensive positions as they anticipate further negative reactions from the communities they serve.

As this section has demonstrated, I will conceptualise risk, not as a detached and independent calculation, but as a socially situated process where officers interpret perceived hazards (Douglas, 1966; Lupton, 1999, 2013; Rhodes, 1997; Wilkinson, 2010). It is this lens through which police attitudes to risk will be explored, to determine how officers make sense of the concept of risk, and what they do or do not determine to be a danger. In particular, I wish to draw attention to perceived risk to self, and why officers are particularly concerned with this, which is in part due to external tensions, as well as an increased emphasis on personal responsibility and accountability and perceived heightened scrutiny. What matters here is the meaning officers assign to the various forms of risk they encounter, and how this meaning subsequently influences their attitudes and behaviours regarding risk. Utilising an interpretivist lens will allow me to understand the subjective experiences of officers, by placing their understanding of these concepts at the centre of my analysis, allowing me to examine how these experiences subsequently influence their behaviour. How officers understand risk inevitably impacts how they view accountability and scrutiny as well as blame, which will be discussed in the following section.

Accountability, blame and responsibility.

Much of the literature in relation to blame in public facing roles is concerned with what Lipsky (2010) terms 'street level bureaucrats'. For Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats are 'government employees called upon to interact with citizens in the course of their jobs; have independence in decision-making; and potentially have extensive impact on the lives of their clients' (2010: 3). This definition is reflected in the policing role, which is

characterised by significant discretion and regular interaction with members of the public, alongside officers' unique ability to use force. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) and Kiser (2010) emphasise that street-level bureaucrats are heavily guided by their colleagues, as well as the social context in which they operate. This is particularly important when we consider the concept of blame and how it can be a powerful resource in the police occupational setting, which is known for its isolation and in-group solidarity (Skolnik, 1966; Van Maanen, 1988; Reiner, 2010). Zacka (2017:42) notes that due to the characteristics of the organisation street level bureaucrats work in, which is typically defined by the form of hierarchical accountability mentioned earlier in this chapter, that if wrongdoing occurs, it is possible to identify the individual who acted beyond the bounds of their role or failed to adhere to directives issued by the organisation. Such an environment represents the perfect conditions for blame to take place. Firstly, the potential culprit is easily identifiable in the hierarchical organisation, which makes it more likely that repercussions will arise for that individual. Additionally, it cannot be ignored that officers are unique in their ability to use coercive power during their duties (Brodeur, 2003). As a result of this ability, they operate in a system that demands answerability and places a high degree of accountability upon officers when things go awry. We can see how blame can quickly spread in such a setting, and how what ostensibly looks like much-needed accountability can be experienced as a form of blaming practice by officers when they find themselves on the receiving end of such systems.

At this point, it is essential to differentiate between responsibility, accountability, and the related concept of blame. The College of Policing's Ethical Policing Principles

(2024) dictate the standards officers and staff should strive to adhere to. The principle of accountability is defined as 'being open, honest and accountable', and is further elaborated on to state how 'we demonstrate integrity and understand the need to be truthful in accounting for our decisions and actions.' The notion of responsibility underpins much of the code, with officers being reminded that 'we are responsible for doing the right thing, even when the circumstances are difficult.' There is, understandably, no mention of blame in the Code of Ethics. However, for many officers and staff, the two concepts are synonymous, and there is little evidence of the distinction between the two in the policing environment (Heaton, 2011). The College of Policing's 'Risk Principles' (2013) are more concrete. The guidance acknowledges that 'making risk decisions has become associated with blame, fear, internal and external inquiries and, therefore, something to be avoided'. It should be remembered that the threshold for misconduct investigation sits at the 'balance of probabilities' level of proof, and the circumstances of an adverse incident may need to be investigated before such a conclusion of no further action can be reached. During this time, staff will be subjected to misconduct procedures, and even if they have no case to answer, may still experience this as being subjected to processes of blame.

The effects of blame can be seen in the recent scandals enveloping the police, most recently in relation to the activities surrounding the Sarah Everard protests, and the arrest of Wayne Couzens (Greer and McLaughlin, 2023; Katz, 2023; Murji, 2023). Such acts of blame have had a noticeable impact upon trust and confidence in policing. According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), the number of adults that reported having overall confidence in their local police force fell from 78% in

2017/18 to 69% in 2021/2022, which has been attributed to the recent scandals enveloping the police (ONS, 2022). This outlines the potentially damaging impact that blame can have upon the fragile reputation of policing, and it is understandable that forces are particularly keen to protect this. Being the target of blame can create a deep chasm between said target and those who attribute blame (Malle et al, 2022: 172). This is reflected in extant research by Dobrin et al (2021, 36; see also Adams, 2019; Deuchar, Fallik and Critchlow, 2019; Premkumar, 2022) who found that in the post-Ferguson era, officers blamed members of the community for encouraging a lack of respect for policing, subsequently developing an 'adversarial mentality' towards the communities they policed. The presence of blame in the policing environment has the potential to significantly strain the public-police relationship, and for this reason it requires further investigation.

Blame in policing: Matters of intention, obligation, and capacity.

Conceptualisation of blame ultimately depends on the purpose and intention of the researcher when they undertake the study of this process. Hansson (2018a: 549) notes how the concept of blame can be viewed through either a philosophical, psychological, or sociological lens. He (ibid.: 550) notes how the philosophical approach typically engages in hypothetical discussion around the notion of 'blameworthiness' and moral agency, rather than concentrating on the collection of empirical data. This presents limited utility for the ethnographic study of policing and allows for little exploration of the meaning officers assign to this concept. Hansson then suggests studying blame through a psychological lens. He (ibid. 550) outlines how psychologically informed blame studies

aim to evaluate assumptions regarding how cognitive processes contribute towards forming judgements of morality. I am interested in how moral judgements are made by officers to understand the mental processes behind risk averse or blame avoidant behaviours, should they be found to exist. Thirdly, he discusses the sociological approach to understanding blame (ibid. 551). Under this approach, there is a focus upon understanding how blaming practices arise as a byproduct of informal social interaction, particularly within groups. I am particularly concerned with the sensemaking aspect of blame, and the way officers interpret and understand such processes, and how this is affected by their social surroundings. To fully answer the research questions, this thesis will investigate this concept by using a symbolic interactionist perspective. This approach 'conceive[s] the individual as agentic, autonomous, and integral in creating their social world' (Carter and Fuller, 2015: 1). Using this perspective allows for the thorough investigation of blame and how this arises through attempts at meaning making, with blaming practices being understood as resulting from interactions between individuals who then allocate meaning to such exchanges. Therefore, both psychological and sociological theories of blame will be used to understand this phenomenon; utilising a psychological lens will allow for an appreciation of the mental processes that underpin the act of blaming, whilst a sociological study of the actions that arise from this will allow me to connect attitudes and values with observable behaviours.

The concept of blame is inherently connected to the notion of risk in policing, as the correct or incorrect handling of risk affects the amount of blame officers anticipate when conducting their role. In general, the term blame refers to the act of attributing an

action considered to be bad or wrongful to an identified cause, be that an individual or organisation (Hood, 2013: 6). Scholars such as Hood (2013: 6), have shown that for blame to occur, there is typically an element of avoidable harm, where the outcome is seen as being worse than it could have been if matters were managed in a more appropriate manner. There is also generally some attribution of agency to that individual or institution, that harm was caused by acts of omission or commission by them, and therefore ultimately was avoidable, placing responsibility for the act at the door of that particular entity (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005: 3). Hood argues that the management of 'blame risk' - the chance of being held to account for perceived failings - has a strong influence upon how the organisation operates (Hood, 2013: 6), but that this is rarely acknowledged by the organisations themselves, with such processes instead being pursued ostensibly in the name of effectiveness and efficiency.

Hood (ibid.) refers to two main types of blame avoidance – anticipatory strategies, which are utilised to deflect potential blame before it arises, and reactive methods, which are deployed after blame has been attributed to the individual in question. The fieldwork uncovered many instances of anticipatory blame strategies, which will be discussed in greater depth in chapter six. Conversely, there was little evidence of reactive strategies being utilised by officers, limiting the utility of this aspect of Hood's theory. Although Hood's work is specifically formulated for the study of central government institutions, in many respects, policing institutions are no different from other institutions in society: Hood (2013: 5) highlights that many organisations are characterised by a desire for blame avoidance.

As discussed above, it is important to consider the psychological processes that underpin blame to understand the motivation behind blame-related behaviours. We need to discern how an act, committed by an officer in the course of their duties, comes to be judged as wrong, and how the officer or officers in question (and by extension, the organisation itself) are attributed responsibility for such failings. To do so, I will utilise the Path Model proposed by Bertram Malle, a social psychologist, specialising in the study of blame allocation. Cushman (2014: 201) notes that this theory is particularly strong in its ability to accurately evaluate how processes of blame operate, whilst distinguishing this from wrongness judgements, which are related but separate processes. Malle's theory utilises the concepts of capacity, intent, and obligation to explain how some actors come to be blamed, whilst others escape this form of judgement. He theorised that:

Blame emerges if the perceiver detects that an event or outcome violated a norm; and subsequently determines that an agent caused the event (Malle et al, 2014: 151).

According to the Path Model, 'only when moral perceivers explicitly ascribe or implicitly assume an agent's obligation and capacity to prevent the event will they blame the agent for the unintentional norm violation (p. 155)'. The model proposes that individuals who knowingly cause a 'norm-violating event' that they were able to prevent are liable to attract more blame than those who are unable to precipitate such an event. What we will subsequently explore is how the conditions surrounding policing influence the extent officers are blamed, particularly in relation to intention, obligation, and capacity, and why these concepts are important when making judgements of blame.

Blame: A social and cognitive explanation

Blame 'has a power and poignancy for human life unparalleled by other moral concepts' (Beardsley, 1970: 176). In more specific terms, 'both cognitive and social; it regulates behaviour; it fundamentally relies on social cognition; and, as a social act, it requires warrant' (Malle et al, 2014: 147). In later work, Malle et al. (2022: 169) go on to elaborate that blame functions to administer the standards and norms of appropriate behaviour by criticising an individual's conduct, with the goal of ultimately preventing such acts from occurring in future. The authors state that to develop a strong understanding of blame, we first need to understand its social purpose, alongside the cognitive elements underpinning this behaviour (p. 169). Blame can play a particularly significant role in an organisation where conformity and recognising one's place in the hierarchy is central to the operation of the organisation. They (Malle et al, 2014: 148) state the main purpose of blame is to control the behaviour of actors within a social group; to that end blame is attributed to an individual when they have either been the cause of, or behaved in a manner that violates existing group norms (Scanlon, 2008; Sher, 2006). They note that as blame is primarily conducted via censuring the intended target, it has the potential to cause considerable damage (p. 149). When applied to policing, officers will want to avoid blame wherever possible, as attracting unwanted criticism could have significant consequences both for them and the organisations for which they work. Weaver (1986) notes that the most serious outcome arising from blame could be potential loss of employment, which officers are understandably keen to avoid.

Weaver's contribution to the literature regarding blame focuses on those in political positions and their behaviours regarding anticipated criticism. He argues that above all, office holders are motivated by blame avoidance rather than credit claiming; they are more interested in avoiding negative consequences than actively pursuing positive outcomes. Weaver believes this arises from voters' tendency to be more sensitive to negative outcomes than they are to positive situations (Weaver, 1986: 371 - 373), thereby requiring these to be catered to above all else. We can see how a similar dynamic exists between the public and the police, and how the public are generally more aware of policing failures than they are its successes, with attention frequently being drawn to their shortcomings rather than their achievements. Although this thesis was initially designed for office holders, it can usefully be applied to policing with which public facing officials share several characteristics, for instance, the requirement that they regularly interact with – and are seen as being answerable to – the public. Similar to Weaver's observations that positive outcomes are often difficult to discern in the political context, Carson et al. (2013: 310) note how any positive benefits of risk taking in a policing context are often diffuse, primarily seen in the absence of crime and disorder, rather than any tangible outcome. We can see how Weaver's theory is suited to policing in the way it identifies how public facing officials are likely to pivot towards blame avoidance behaviours as they anticipate significant levels of blame risk should things go awry – an observation which can also be made in policing. Hinterleitner (2017: 245) notes how Weaver's analysis provides useful insight into the macro level phenomenon of how blame is assigned, by producing a detailed description of the behaviours underpinning this at the microlevel. This allows us to connect the world of

policing to the wider context in which it sits, and to understand how these external influences impact upon how officers come to anticipate blame when potential wrongdoing arises.

Malle et al. (2014: 153) note that a judgement of wrongness is not necessarily synonymous with a judgement of blame (Pomerantz, 1978). Blame arises when meaning and interpretation are attached to a particular event, as 'blame judgments target an agent, wrongness judgments target a behaviour, typically an intentional one' (Malle et al, 2014: 150). De Ruiter and Kuipers (2022: 2) note how in this respect, the identification of a blameworthy incident, and who should be held responsible for this, is socially constructed. Policing events may be susceptible to these types of blaming practices precisely because it is often difficult to make sense of what happened. Carson et al. (2013: 312) note that the decisions that arise from the 'wicked problems' policing faces are typically more difficult to evaluate and draw lesson learning from. This leaves officers more susceptible to being blamed when no other obvious avenue for assigning responsibility exists. It may be this aspect of accountability systems that present a particular problem in policing; although it is often easy to determine when an adverse situation arises, identifying the cause of such circumstances is markedly more difficult. In investigations into these matters, the individual's culpability is focused on, to determine whether they are to blame. Although there is usually some aspect of behavioural change required, this investigation also serves to highlight to the community that such behaviour is not acceptable, and this is often achieved by drawing attention to the conduct of the individual said to be at fault. Such practices are not merely pointing

out wrongdoing, but blame is also clearly assigned in such scenarios to discourage further instances of such behaviour.

Alicke (2014: 188) challenges Malle's theory by drawing attention to the lack of emphasis Malle places upon the concept of foreseeability. For Alicke, judgements relating to foreseeability tend to be made with the benefit of hindsight, after the negative event has already occurred. Instead, he argues that 'outcome information' plays a more significant role in the allocation of blame, suggesting that blaming is a less rational process than Malle suggests, and is instead more focused upon confirmation of existing information. This tendency is reflected in the accountability systems surrounding policing, where officer actions are considered with the benefit of hindsight when assessing whether their conduct fell below the required standard. It also plays out in media coverage of high-profile policing failures, for instance in the focus upon the delays to investigate allegations made against Wayne Couzens, which contributed towards his remaining as a serving police officer (Angiolini, 2024: 96). However, Malle et al. (2014: 155) notes that: 'Critical for the notion of capacity is not only which particular factors are seen to have caused the negative event, but which alternative options were reasonably available to prevent the event'. Malle places a degree of emphasis upon the capacity to utilise the correct action, rather than the foreseeability of any negative events. Policing activity often involves several potential outcomes, not all of which can be accounted for, and it is likely, if utilising Malle's path model, that if a wrong outcome occurs and potential blame arises, perceivers are likely to believe that the officers could - or should have - acted in a different manner. Police officers and staff, with their status as 'risk experts' may be seen as possessing both the capacity, as well

as the obligation, to prevent risk, thus increasing their chances of receiving blame if they do not manage risk appropriately.

Cushman (2006) provides an alternative model of blame. He notes that an individual who does not possess the necessary intention to commit wrongdoing, and whose behaviour unintentionally results in a negative outcome will receive less blame than an individual who possesses the necessary intention to cause that situation. Whilst Cushman's model and Malle's Path Model share similar attributes, Cushman's model does not explore how individuals come to be blamed for unintentional negative outcomes. Instead, his model states that where there is a lack of ill-intention, blame will be unlikely to occur. Malle et al (2014: 159) note that blame still occurs in such cases, and awareness of the individual's 'obligations and capacities are critical in blaming unintentional behaviour'. Many actors in policing often state they are blamed for unintentional behaviours by design of the misconduct system seeking to identify a culpable individual above all else. However, it appears that these formal blaming systems do not necessarily require intention. The required standard is whether the behaviour fell below expectations, and intention is not mentioned in the conduct regulations (Home Office, 2023; 15). It is therefore likely that a police employee is assumed to have the obligation and capacity to manage risk effectively by nature of their role, with the assumption being that intention does not need to be considered when weighing up officer conduct.

The Path Model provides a useful insight into the psychological underpinnings of blaming practices, and how the notions of capacity, intention and obligation potentially affect judgements of blame. In particular, it shines a light on how blame can be a

powerful resource for guiding officer behaviour, and how officers come to be blamed with a degree of frequency. Under the model, it is assumed by external actors, such as the public, press and accountability bodies, as well as policing organisations themselves - that officers have both the capability and obligation to prevent blameworthy events from occurring. Their assumed capacity for handling risk, as an extension of their position strengthens the chances of them receiving blame for an error made. When a norm violation occurs, due to this, officers are more likely to face blame for wrongdoing, even when that wrongdoing is unintentional. Additionally, as Alicke (2014) suggests, the notion of 'outcome information' must also be considered when assessing the blaming practices to which officers are subjected, as officer actions are frequently assessed with this bias in mind, particularly in the context of a misconduct investigation. Officers generally have a range of options to choose from when tackling problematic scenarios, and this is also likely to be considered when blame judgements are made. With this in mind, we will now turn to examining how the potential for blame may affect staff behaviour.

Blame avoidance behaviour: Anticipating and reacting to blame.

So far, we have examined the cognitive underpinnings of blaming practices, alongside instances of how they operate within policing. However, further examination of the behaviours that stem from the desire to avoid blame is required. Hinterleitner (2017) distinguishes between two types of blame avoidance behaviour (BAB): anticipatory BAB, and reactive BAB. He states that anticipatory BAB is deployed when an individual wishes to prepare for a potentially blameworthy event that may occur, whereas reactive

BAB occurs after the blameworthy event has arisen and is designed to publicly confront any accompanying criticism (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015: 588). Weaver (1986) also notes how in the political sphere, when professional goals are jeopardised by blame, politicians will typically prioritise blame avoidance, since 'blame avoiding behaviour in situations that mandate such behaviour is a precondition for pursuing other policy motivations in situations that do not compel that behaviour' (Weaver, 1986: 377–378, 1988). The authors note that as with behaviours concerning risk, it is potential criticism that motivates individuals to avoid blame (Wenzelburger, 2011; 2014). For police employees, what matters is the perception that they will come to be blamed, which then motivates them to minimise the chance of being attributed blame.

Although Weaver's research was conducted with those occupying political roles, these theories can still be applied to policing institutions. There are clear examples of similar situations arising within the policing sphere; what has been typified as risk averse behaviour (for instance by Flanagan 2008, Berry, 2009, Home Office, 2019), is in fact a form of anticipatory BAB designed to diffuse potential problems before they arise. Instances of such behaviour can be found in the literature; for instance, Black and Lumsden's aforementioned 'organisational technologies of risk', which act as blame avoidance tools by minimising the risk present to the staff member utilising them. In fact, many instances of anticipatory BAB have long existed within policing organisations, and a number of these have been raised as risk avoidance behaviours previously (see Van Maanen's (1978) mention of 'covering your ass' in the policing literature for one instance of this). Such behaviours anticipate potential blame and subsequently minimise the chances of this by demonstrating that organisational policy was rigidly followed. Policing

organisations play their part in this, chiefly via the provision of policies designed to demonstrate that officers are given all tools necessary to fulfil their roles, which also doubles as a peremptory method of blame shifting should wrongdoing arise. As mentioned previously, it is the perception of criticism, rather than the reality of the situation that is particularly important when thinking about concerns regarding blame. As discussed earlier in this chapter, officers frequently state they are more likely to be blamed and have a higher chance of facing misconduct proceedings than before (see Premkumar, 2022). Although this is not borne out in the evidence (IOPC, 2022), when utilising a constructivist perspective, it is the perception, rather than the reality that takes precedence when discussing fear of blame. Weaver (1986: 380) notes that officeholders were less likely to feel threatened by blameworthy events if they felt their place in the political system to be safe. It may be the case that officers no longer feel secure in a world where there is an expectation of enhanced accountability and heightened scrutiny, which demands responsibility for all decisions taken.

The extant research demonstrates how actors anticipate and subsequently prepare for potentially blameworthy situations (Arnold, 1990; McGraw, 1991). Hinterleitner and Sager (2015: 592) note how 'anticipatory BAB...is directed at decreasing the probability of a blameworthy event appearing on the political agenda and attracting blame'. To achieve this, those in the organisation in positions of power can deploy what Hood (2013) labels policy strategies that delegate responsibility for potentially blameworthy situations elsewhere in the organisation. Such policies give the senior leadership team an opportunity to deploy anticipatory BAB themselves, chiefly by claiming they were unaware of the activities of the rank-and-file. Recent examples of

this can be identified in the Operation Hotton report (IOPC, 2021), which concerned the exchange of inappropriate messages between officers. In the report, management stated they saw very little of the team itself and were unaware of its activities, thus removing themselves from any potentially blameworthy knowledge of their behaviour. Anticipatory BAB is thus deployed on behalf of the organisation to protect their own position, by claiming they have equipped officers to conduct their roles in a professional manner and remain unaware of any potential wrongdoing. Once the service has provided them with instructions, they have discharged their responsibility if anything goes wrong and responsibility to avoid wrongdoing falls to the individuals in question. Hinterleitner and Sager (2015: 593) go on to note that anticipatory BAB is also deployed in preparation for a potentially blameworthy event should it arise, particularly if prior attempts to prevent this have failed. For the authors (2017: 594), blame risk is 'determined by the anticipated reactions of external actors. The stronger the expected feedback effect from the public, the more these actors will invest to exploit the issue and blame the responsible individual' (see also Soss and Schram, 2007).

For officers facing such situations, justifications regarding their actions are particularly important, to shield themselves from the external gaze. We can see that 'reactive BAB' is designed to withstand accusations of blame (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015: 588) and is only utilised after the event is recognised as being blameworthy, despite anticipatory strategies often also having been deployed beforehand (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015: 595). Such behaviours typically involve minimising their part in the situation, or claiming they had little opportunity to do otherwise. For example, policing organisations who become involved in such situations will often release public

statements in an attempt to control the dominant narrative. Hinterleitner and Sager (2015: 595) note that reactive BAB is differentiated from anticipatory blame games by its 'public visibility'. Such games are of particular importance in an era of 'policing's new visibility' (Goldsmith, 2010), and both officers and policing organisations need to show they took all steps possible to minimise blameworthy events from occurring.

There exists a significant degree of support for the idea of BAB in the extant literature. Hinterleitner (2017:249) notes that Hood's concept of the blame game discusses both forms of BAB in depth, although they are not explicitly described as such. However, Konig and Wenzelburger (2014: 403) note that the failure to conceptualise the notion of blame avoidance has resulted in the term becoming vague and unclear, both in relation to its theoretical underpinnings and its potential consequences for those undertaking these behaviours. They (ibid.) argue such intensive discussion of immediate behaviours has inevitably led to an ignorance of macro-level phenomena, particularly regarding the wider social and political influences that may affect these actions. However, as discussed earlier, Hinterleitner (2017: 245) maintains that focusing on micro-level phenomena can shed light on these processes also operating at the macro-level by considering the environments in which such behaviours occur. My work also attempts to add to the existing blame avoidance literature by offering a consideration of the wider contextual pressures that shape anticipation of, and responses to blame. Hinterleitner (2017: 251) suggests the problems raised here relate to a lack of research regarding the matters at hand; a problem which can be addressed by further research in the field, specifically applied to relevant social and occupational contexts, which my work attempts.

Conclusion

This chapter has established the foundation for exploring how staff understand and interpret the two interrelated concepts of risk and blame. I began by examining the meaning of risk, both more broadly, as well as in the specific policing context. By conducting an exploration of the various hazards that occur in policing, this provides the basis for examining how officers and staff socially construct the idea of risk by selectively attending to perceived dangers in their environment. I also detail how there has been a move towards possibilistic thinking and the idea that the worst-case scenario must be continually catered for when engaging in risk thinking. I highlight what matters is not the objective prevalence of these risks, but the perception of this amongst officers and staff, and the importance of understanding what factors influence awareness of risk. This chapter contemplates how risk perception relies on the occupational pressures that policing currently faces, with such an understanding reminding us of the importance of situating interpretations of risk and blame in the wider context in which they occur.

The chapter then discussed the concept of blame. I began by providing a definition of blame, which allows us to recognise instances of blaming occurring more accurately within policing. Blame is particularly under-theorised in relation to policing, so an in-depth analysis of this idea is important when attempting to identify why blaming behaviours occur, and how they affect the ability of police employees to effectively fulfil their mandate. While researchers have typically focused upon practices of blame in political circles and other officeholders, such practices do not appear to have been well

studied in the policing context and little work regarding blame exists in this regard. I attempt to correct this by utilising Malle's path theory, to highlight how the matters of capacity, intent and obligation affect the likelihood of staff both receiving and perceiving blame for adverse incidents. Hinterleitner's notion of BAB also allows us to develop an understanding of how certain behaviours are deployed, both when blame is anticipated, as well as after blameworthy incidents have occurred. I have also taken care to differentiate between the concepts of blame, accountability, and responsibility, as all three may be experienced differently by police employees and have varying connotations attached to them. While blame can be recognised as a symptom of the search for accountability; these two concepts are not synonymous, and it should not be an automatic assumption that where there is accountability, there inevitably will be blame.

This chapter has attempted to establish the theoretical underpinnings that will allow me to sufficiently explore the attitudes and behaviours discussed throughout this thesis. In doing so, the concepts described here aid our understanding of how officers and staff approach matters of blame and risk, and how their understanding of these influences their behaviour in the policing sphere. These concepts will be further elaborated upon in the following four empirical chapters.

Chapter Three: Conducting ethnographic research with Stonecastle Police

This study focuses on discovering how officers understand the concepts of risk, blame and scrutiny, what meaning officers attach to such notions, and how this subsequently influences attitudes and behaviours. The ethnographic method of study aims to discover what contributes towards such an understanding, by aiming to penetrate the professional veneer of their occupational world, and examining the informal behaviour of its staff as they go about their daily business (Chan, 1997; Marks, 2004; Loftus, 2010; Manning, 2014). This chapter is concerned with the methodology utilised during the research with Stonecastle Police. It has three purposes. First, the settings of the research will be introduced and its selection as a research site justified, alongside an exploration of the rationale for using the ethnographic method. After this, the methods used in the project, including both formal and informal access to the field, as well as the ways in which trust was built with participants, will be discussed. Finally, attention will be paid to relevant ethical concerns that arose during the research, and how these concerns were addressed. Through exploring these points, I will demonstrate how this method is particularly suited to answering the questions posed at the start of this project.

Why ethnography?

The research informing this thesis was carried out across the entire Stonecastle force area. Stonecastle Police is a medium-sized police organisation; as of September 2023, the force has over 3,500 police officers, nearly 100 special constables, over 400 police

community support officers (PCSO), nearly 400 police support volunteers, and over 2,300 staff (UK Government, 2024). The organisation polices a population of 1.3 million people (Stonecastle Police, 2022) across 812 square miles, including the capital city of the region, which the most urbanised part of the area, containing a population of over 300,000 people (ONS, 2022). The region is also home to several smaller cities and towns, as well as a large rural district and coastal region. The demand that Stonecastle receives is wide and varied, and their remit involves tackling a range of criminal matters, as well as dealing with safeguarding matters concerning members of the public, and the overall prevention of civil disorder. The fieldwork was conducted between January 2021 and November 2022, although this period was not solely dedicated to the research, as other tasks associated with a doctorate were undertaken alongside the project. It was agreed with Stonecastle Police that observations would be undertaken across the three Basic Command Units (BCUs), which covered the following three areas: the city area, which surrounds the capital city of the region, the rural district, and the coastal region. Between one to two months was spent at each site, as this was felt to be ample time to allow the officers to become familiar with the researcher's presence, as well as to cover multiple teams within Stonecastle to gain an accurate picture of their work. The following teams were observed to provide a cross section of the force business:

January and February 2021 - Initial officer training

August 2021 - The Public Service Centre (PSC) - responsible for dealing with all incoming emergency and non-emergency contacts from the public.

September and October 2021 – City BCU - Incident response team

November and December 2021 – City BCU - Criminal Investigation Department (CID)

February and March 2022 – Rural BCU - Safeguarding team

April and May 2022 - Rural BCU - incident response team

June and September 2022 – City custody suite

October and November 2022 – Coastal BCU - Rape investigation team (RIT).

In total, I undertook around 700 hours of observation with Stonecastle Police. Fieldwork was initially scheduled to commence in October 2020; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic this was delayed, and the interview and focus group aspects of the study took place online via Microsoft Teams in the latter part of 2020. This element of the fieldwork was intended to supplement the observational aspect of the project via group discussions and interviews with staff across the various areas of business. Discussions were primarily focused on staff experiences of risk aversion and perceived blaming practices during the pandemic period, for instance whether they perceived the risks they faced had changed with the advent of COVID-19.

Online interviews were undertaken with two key groups in the force: those in senior management, and those who had undertaken work for the temporary mortuary and 'COVID car' which dealt with sudden deaths related to the virus during the height of the pandemic. Interviews were the chosen method for the supervisory ranks as it was felt this would obtain more fruitful responses than a group discussion, as prior research demonstrates this method is unlikely to obtain candid responses from senior officers (Reiner, 1991; Rainquet and Dodge, 2001; Caless and Tong, 2011). This method was also utilised for the temporary mortuary and COVID car groups, as no participants

attended the focus group I initially arranged; therefore, interviews took place with some of the intended participants at an alternative time. Focus groups were conducted with members of the rank and file and were chosen via the representatives Superintendent A had identified for each of the three BCUs, and consisted of a response/neighbourhood policing group, an investigations group, and safeguarding group for each BCU. The aim of the online research was to familiarise myself with staff perceptions of their role and immediate policing environment, and any accompanying problems they highlighted relating to this. By doing this, I hoped to become what Westmarland (2010: 11) calls an 'informed stranger' prior to the in-person element of the fieldwork commencing.

However, interviews and focus groups are said to suffer from desirability bias (Bergen and Labonte, 2019: 783), increasing the possibility that participants will give socially acceptable answers rather than an honest account of the matter under discussion. Therefore, participant observation (Norris, 1993:126) was identified as the most likely research method which would be most likely to answer the intended research questions. As noted by Reiner (2000b: 219), 'participant observation has been the main technique adopted by researchers wishing to analyse the practices and cultures of policing. All other methods rely on some sort of account offered by the police themselves ... the veracity of which is often precisely the question being studied.' Additionally, Westmarland (2010: 12) notes that to accept individuals' beliefs at face value, which other forms of data collection, such as interviewing would require, can lead to false impressions of the situation and the work officers do. Ethnography allows us to understand occupational culture and how people use it to make sense of the world they inhabit. By observing officers at work (and occasionally off-duty), we can observe first-

hand how this culture is used and how it influences interactions between officers and staff. This method aims to provide new knowledge to outsiders studying the field, which members can't necessarily express about the occupational worlds they inhabit (Fielding, 2006: 290). Ethnography ultimately seeks to evade the police's public presentation to seek the underlying reality behind their professional exterior (Young, 1991: 24).

Ethnography typically involves protracted, in-depth observations of a particular social group in their natural environment, with the intention of identifying the underlying norms and values that inform the culture of the group. This method aims to ensure that the researcher understands the 'symbolic world' the researched occupy (Fielding, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, i). Although this method was popular in the early years of police sociology (see Skolnik, 1996, and Holdaway, 1983, as an example), it then decreased in popularity in the 1990s and 2000s. There has in recent years, however, been an upsurge of interest in police ethnography, much of it generated by the anthropology of the police (i.e. Fassin, 2017, Fleming and Charman, 2023). By immersing themselves in the daily routines and rituals of the organisation, the aim of the ethnographer is to gain an understanding of the informal structures beneath the policing institution (Van Maanen, 1973). This requires developing a deeper relationship with participants to access their 'backstage performances' (Holdaway, 1980; Goffman, 1990) and discover information about the attitudes, norms and values that shape their behaviour. Mac Giollabhuí, Goold and Loftus (2016: 633) argue that given the tendency of policing towards secrecy and isolationism, using the ethnographic method to study such an institution is required to adequately understand policing.

However, Lamont and Swidler (2014: 159) are critical of the claim ethnography consistently produces authentic and genuine data, arguing such claims may be somewhat exaggerated. They state the belief ethnography can capture more natural aspects of informal interaction, but research conducted in an 'artificial' interview cannot, exaggerates the supposed advantages of ethnography. They highlight how participant observation itself is somewhat artificially created by the researcher just as other forms of qualitative research are, and the effect of researcher presence on the data cannot be ignored. Although ethnographic methods are often justified as a useful method for researching 'real policing,' it is still possible officers are performing to some sort of external audience. Additionally, though the methodological approach implements long term access and interaction with a wide variety of members within the organisation, it does not lend itself to broad generalisability, particularly if only one social group is studied. Instead, the primary aim of the research should be to use the research as an 'analytical platform' from which to explore key concepts identified in the research question, to learn lessons about the ways in which the organisation itself operates (see Campeau, 2015: 676).

Additionally, participant observation is a research method that requires the researcher to consider potential obstacles that may arise while fieldwork is being conducted. As Reiner (2000b: 220) notes, questions of access and trust are important to this form of research and are particularly pertinent when researching policing organisations. This is primarily due to the nature of the subjects being studied, who are often difficult to access, both on a formal as well as an informal level, and who are naturally wary of outsiders (Westmarland, 2012; Terpstra and Schaap, 2013; Neill and

McCarthy, 2014). As a result of these factors, Reiner identifies that the main methodological considerations are 'how to get information from people who are (often rightly) suspicious of your motives, have much to hide, and much to lose from its discovery' (ibid. 225). An important distinction should be made between the process of the researcher being granted formal access, and the subsequent negotiation of informal access on an everyday, interpersonal level with those being studied. In policing ethnography, the latter can be just as hard to accomplish as the former, and I will now outline the degree to which I felt each of these was individually achieved during the fieldwork.

Getting into – and staying in – police organisations

The preliminary stages of access and the formal negotiation process.

Gaining formal access was simplified by the collaborative studentship between myself and Stonecastle Police that had led to me undertaking the PhD, and formalised by a contract signed between myself, Stonecastle Police, and the University. This contract was particularly useful in setting out the standard of behaviour expected of me: I would not involve myself in police operational work, I would report any significant instances of wrongdoing, and I would be required to wear a high-visibility jacket marking me out as a 'police staff observer' when outside of the station. The contract also stated that the officers would have the final say in whether activities could be observed. In practice, these occasions were extremely rare and therefore had little effect on the data collected. There were not many areas of business that were formally considered off limits to me, aside from firearms units, on the grounds it would be too dangerous for me

to shadow officers potentially undertaking live firearms deployments. However, this formal stage of access represented only the first step in the continual negotiation for access to participants (see Loftus, 2010: 15). It was an agreement that was essential to set out the intended parameters of the research but provided little guidance in terms of securing the ongoing participation of subjects, which called for a more considered approach and was arguably of greater importance. A separate process of informal acceptance from the rank and file was required to gain their trust to the extent that they would share their thoughts and feelings with me honestly. The extant ethnographic research notes that obtaining formal entry to the organisation can rouse the suspicions of the rank-and-file, and the researcher runs the risk of being accused of having ulterior motives for their research (Loftus, 2010: 203; Ericson, 1982; Reiner, 1978, 2000b). I would therefore need to carefully consider how I presented myself to intended research participants to secure their trust. Informally, access was an ongoing matter throughout the study (Rowe, 2007: 43), and required more effort on my part than gaining formal approval did. I will detail here the ways in which I attempted to achieve this access, as well as the extent to which I felt this was achieved.

Obtaining informal access: Getting alongside the participants

In a slightly different vein to most other policing ethnographies, which typically focus on frontline policing, my research involved observing several different departments across the force. Due to this singular focus on uniformed policing in the extant literature, other areas of the business are much under-researched; Bayley (1984: 114) notes how most police research focuses on uniformed patrol officers, spawning broad generalisations

with regards to what constitutes policing, yet based on a narrow conceptualisation of what policing is (Brodeur, 2010). There are some researchers who have conducted specific research into both uniformed and non-uniformed policing and have contributed to widening preconceived notions of policing (Manning, 1977, 2004, and 2006; Ericson 1981/1993 and 1982; Klockars, 1985; Reiner 2000b). Since the classic ethnographic studies were conducted, policing has expanded in remit, most notably in terms of its increased focus on threat, risk, and harm. While uniformed policing is still seen as the 'bread and butter' of the institution, there are other aspects of the role that have become equally important in terms of the policing mission, for instance the safeguarding element of the role. This focus is gradually widening, with ethnographies such as that of Lumsden and Black (2018) focusing on control room dispatchers, and Mac Giollabhui, Loftus and Goold's (2016) study into the activities of covert investigation teams. Despite these advances, more work is still required to ensure policing ethnographies remain accurate and up to date with the current problems policing faces.

The teams I observed were identified by the point of contact I had for each individual BCU. The way I was able to shadow officers varied between placements. With some teams, the sergeant identified suitable officers for me to accompany, whereas with other teams it was left to me to identify what (and who) I was interested in observing, and then discuss with the officers or staff as to whether I could accompany them as they went about their business. Accompanying a wide range of teams also meant shadowing vastly different types of policing. When shadowing response teams, this involved attending various 999 calls akin to those portrayed in the classic policing ethnographies, typically focusing on domestic violence matters and other emergency

situations. With other teams such as CID and safeguarding, this more often took the form of accompanying them to meetings and appointments with members of the public and shadowing them as they completed their investigative tasks. Conversely, in custody and the PSC, I often sat with one or two staff members for the entire shift and observed them as they went about their role.

One of the obstacles that arose in relation to gaining access was obtaining entry to each individual police station. More often than not, despite emailing to seek the relevant permission and to confirm my attachment with the shift ahead of time, the team often seemed surprised to see me on my first day, and I managed to gain access to many of the secure buildings via sheer luck (often by tailgating and hanging around outside the station, usually in the pouring rain, waiting for a moment of opportunity), rather than by prior arrangement. However, several officers were incredibly accommodating in ensuring I had a point of contact as well as the ability to access the necessary research sites ahead of time. Once I had gained access, it was not uncommon for me to be stopped and challenged by other officers to whom I had not been introduced, and many of them seemed suspicious when I said I was a research student attached to a particular shift. I would often be asked to 'prove' this by naming the sergeant in charge of the team, or specific members of the team themselves, to pass by the individual and access the building.

At each research site, I would begin by attempting to make myself 'part of the furniture' (Martin, 1980: 225). To ensure this, I attended shifts regularly, accompanying teams on weekend and evening shifts where applicable, to establish my presence around the station. As Westmarland (2001: 524) notes, this had several advantages. By

behaving in this manner, the researcher was demonstrating an interest in the occupational world of the participants, as well as showing willingness to learn about the trials and tribulations officers faced when undertaking the role. By doing this, I hoped to prove that I was prepared to continue persevering with the unsocial shift pattern to achieve an understanding of the work they did. As a result, officers then became more used to my presence, which granted me a deeper level of access to the group dynamics, having observed their behaviour and activities over a longer period of time. Upon initially meeting officers, I aimed to convey interest in the problems they faced. I also sought to demonstrate an interest in what they thought about their roles and more widely, their place in the wider social world. Fine (1993: 275) notes that this is desirable in most research settings, particularly when the group feels underappreciated and undervalued, as many of the officers I met throughout the course of my research did.

Access was eased with some teams via an informal 'research bargain' (Becker, 1970) - in return for the relative ease with which I obtained access to the world of the rank and file, I gave something back that they might find useful. Most of the response officers I observed were fairly new in service, and as a result were going through the newly implemented Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF), which requires probationary officers to undergo either a two-year diploma programme if they did not have a degree, or a three-year degree programme if they were not already in possession of one. The PEQF was deeply unpopular with officers, who felt they were not given ample time to draft the essays required for the course, and that a degree should not be a prerequisite for undertaking professional policing. For those who were grappling with the academic element of the programme, I offered to read their essays in

my own time, giving them written feedback on their written work, for which they appeared to be grateful. In turn, my relationship with those officers was strengthened, and they tended to be particularly helpful when I undertook observations with them.

As my placements were selected for me by the SPOC for each individual BCU, I do not know the decision process that took place within the confines of the organisation, and I cannot discount the fact some teams were chosen for me because they were considered to be one of the 'better teams' of that particular division. While undertaking my fieldwork, several teams took it upon themselves to inform me they had clearly been chosen for me because they were the 'best' in their respective area, citing the number of arrests made or cases solved to highlight this point. I was also told by one team that they were the most ethnically diverse in the BCU, and that spending time with them would make the force 'look good'. Conversely, I was also made aware that one individual team had been chosen for me as they had been identified as being particularly problematic in their use of force, and the SPOC was interested in obtaining more information about this - more of which will be discussed in the ethics section of this chapter.

The importance of trust

Holdaway (1983: 6) remarks that in the world of ethnographic study, those who are being researched ultimately control the situation, with the researcher taking a more passive stance than initially intended. I was aware that my behaviour, and the way in which I presented myself, would have to pass the 'protective shield' of those I was observing, for me to be allowed to access the 'inner world' of policing (Holdaway, 1983:

5). As a student of police culture, I was aware of the established ethnographic literature that identifies one of the central characteristics of officers' attitudes as suspicion of outsiders, which is often identified as a significant barrier for researchers to overcome. Consequently, cultivating trust is particularly important to maximise the chances of gathering authentic and meaningful data. In the words of Fielding (2006: 286), 'trust is a dynamic quality that grows incrementally, can evaporate suddenly, and has to be carefully worked at', and I found that obtaining the trust of staff was something that I needed to continually renegotiate, throughout the course of the research (Loftus, 2010: 203). This process was repeated with each separate team I shadowed, and I cannot say with certainty that this was fully achieved with some of the teams I observed. Reiner (2000b: 358) highlights how the researcher's relationship with the researched, alongside this delicate and careful negotiation, requires a constant appreciation of how officer perceptions can affect the information the researcher is able to obtain. In short, the subjects of the research need to feel they can trust the researcher with the information they choose to impart. He (ibid.) concludes that despite this, many police officers are usually keen to discuss their perspectives once such barriers have been surmounted, which I generally found to be the case.

To cultivate trust with officers, I would regularly reiterate that nothing I saw or heard would be reported back to senior officers, nor would it find its way into my fieldnotes or final thesis without full anonymisation. However, this assertion was merely a formality, and was largely irrelevant to the trust-building process. I found throughout the course of the fieldwork that trust was built in other ways. as Loftus (2010: 204) found, as I became more familiar with each team, matters of trust usually became less

of an obstacle. Officers frequently asked me if there was anything in particular that I wanted to observe during the shift, often assuming that I wanted to see the more 'exciting' aspects of policing. When asked, I usually explained that I wanted to see what officers did on a typical working day. Particularly in the incident response teams that I observed, people would ask me if I wanted to go out to calls with them, and if I were in the immediate vicinity when an interesting call came out, they would often ask me if I wanted to attend. Despite these indicators that I had won the trust of those I was observing, Reiner (2000b: 219) highlights that the level of trust achieved is only ever likely to be partial, and Westmarland (2001: 528) recognises that several factors can hinder the ability of the ethnographer to capture a 'true' set of findings. Meanwhile, Reiner noted that while the notion of trust is central to most participant observation, it is especially acute in the context of policing, due to the nature of the participants under observation. A good relationship with officers, one that is built on trust, is necessary to access the inner workings of policing, and I feel that this was achieved with most teams in the main.

I was conscious that the way I presented myself while in the field would inevitably impact upon the information officers would choose to trust me with. I was careful to ask open questions and not to appear critical of the actions officers undertook. I also attempted to adopt an attitude of a 'curious incompetent,' but also tried to be interested and engaged in my discussions with officers. I aimed to make the research role almost imperceptible to the researched, instead emphasising similarity and solidarity with the officers being observed; although I was aware that this was not likely to be fully achieved, it felt like a useful maxim to adopt. (Fine 1993: 272) additionally recommends

that the researcher should not overtly dislike any group members, and while this proved challenging at times, I ensured that I did not involve myself in any team discussion of personal animosity regarding officers. I would occasionally be asked what I thought of a particular officer, and I tried to remain as noncommittal as possible when providing a response to such questions. I tried to dress casually and practically, and heeded any advice provided me by officers regarding how to present myself. For instance, it was suggested to me during observing officer training that I might want to invest in a pair of black sturdy boots prior to accompanying officers on operational duties.

Additionally, I tried to avoid talking to management in front of the rank and file wherever possible. However, I was regularly singled out by those on the senior leadership team who recognised my connection with Superintendent A. On the occasions where this happened, I could feel the gaze of the officers as I conversed with the individual in question, and afterwards there would inevitably be questions about how I knew the person. Such encounters inevitably raised suspicions amongst staff that I was a 'management spy' (see also Hunt, 1984, Reiner, 1987, Mac Giollaíbhúí, Goold, and Loftus, 2016). To deal with this, I tried to provide additional information that demonstrated I was an independent researcher – for instance, one officer who was familiar with the University of Oxford would repeatedly quiz me about my college and the nature of my course. During such instances, I aimed to provide enough detail to prove that Stonecastle Police did not employ me to spy upon its workers, and that I was merely there to gather data for my research project. Fundamentally, I tried to follow the advice of Mason (2017), who advises that feeling and showing respect for the people with whom the ethnographer is working is paramount.

Several police researchers (Rowe, 2007; Loftus 2010; Fassin 2017) advise that just as policing can be monotonous and banal, the experiences of the police researcher can also be somewhat boring at times. I found this particularly salient in the roles that involved more 'sitting around,' typically desk-based roles, which were understandably less action based than incident response placements typically were. However, occasionally the 'hanging around waiting for something to happen' times became good opportunities to find out what the officers thought, did and said when no-one was looking. Indeed, meal breaks in particular were opportune moments to observe the 'backstage performances' of officers (Goffman, 1989), chiefly through their informal conversations with one another. These exchanges also presented opportune moments to observe the hierarchy of the group. There was always a form of unspoken ranking amongst team members, principally displayed in the way they spoke to one another – and about each other - when certain team members were not present.

The continual building of trust was particularly important when I moved between teams, and the regular renegotiation of this was continually at the forefront of my efforts while conducting the fieldwork. Despite my best efforts, I remained an 'outsider-outsider': a researcher with no formal attachment to the organisation they are studying (Gravelle and Rogers, 2011: 227), which can negatively affect the type of data and material accessed by the researcher (Reiner, 2000b; Ericson, 1982; Brown, 1996). Typically, in the initial stages of the research, officers were suspicious of my presence, with some officers continuing to express wariness of me throughout my period of observation with them. For instance, one officer told me at the end of my time with their team that she had observed what I was wearing each day to see if a 'wire' could be

fitted underneath my clothing (to secretly record the conversations and behaviours of officers) and she had concluded this would not be possible due to the nature of my attire.

Gaining the admission and approval of the rank-and-file

I cannot comment on whether there may have been any informal attempts to restrict what I saw - it is likely where such conversations did occur, that these took place without my knowledge. As Waddington suggests, 'I can only speculate about how things were done in my absence' (1999: 212). Regardless of this, there was rarely any obvious animosity directed towards me, and upon introduction to officers they were generally friendly and interested in the work I was doing. Those on response teams tended to be more reserved initially, in line with the classic ethnographic studies that suggest heightened suspicion and distrust of those outside the policing circle (Paoline, 2003). However, once these initial suspicions had subsided, I was able to access much of the 'unspoken agenda' of the policing world (Young, 1991). While it is not possible to suggest that a researcher can gain free access to all aspects of occupational police culture (Ericson, 1982), I felt officers' behaviour generally demonstrated some degree of acceptance. For instance, while driving to an incident with two officers, one of them disclosed to the other that they had just discovered via the social media platform 'Snapchat' that their hairdresser was a drug dealer, and they were unsure whether this needed to be disclosed to the job. I do not feel that such a disclosure would have been made in front of me had it been deemed that I was unable to be trusted. Like Loftus (2010: 204), I was trusted to 'earn my keep' by assisting with small duties such as

holding property bags, updating other officers of what was going on during incidents, or keeping an eye out for people for whom there was an outstanding arrest warrant. On one occasion, I was asked if I could ride a motorcycle away from a serious traffic collision as it was causing a traffic jam.

Like other police ethnographers such as Rowe (2007: 42), I was frequently surprised by the frankness with which officers spoke about their work, their colleagues, and those they policed. The extent to which such opinions were offered suggested that officers were speaking honestly and directly to some degree. But it is inevitable that they 'framed' their views as they sought to convey information to me that they hoped would be passed to senior leaders. Officers of all roles and ranks seemed keen to portray how hard it was to be a member of the police, the ridiculous demands of the public, and the pressures placed upon them by those higher up the chain of command. Equally there were numerous occasions where officers seemingly repeated the organisational stance regarding a particular matter, rather than sharing their honest opinion on the matter at hand (Rowe, 2007: 40). This seemed to typically occur with those I did not know well and did not often happen with those whom I had established a level of trust. The placements I believed provided me with the most useful information were the ones in which an officer or a group of officers warmed to me and took me under their wing to show me 'what policing was really like.' However, even this access could change at a moment's notice, seemingly beyond my control. On a team night out, I happened to overhear one officer, who had seemed particularly keen on taking me under their wing, arguing with their romantic partner, who had also attended the event,

over the exact nature of our relationship. After that, the officer in question avoided my eye whenever they saw me, and access was unfortunately lost.

Whilst undertaking the fieldwork, I was particularly alert to signs from participants that I had been 'accepted' into their world. During the research, there were a number of occurrences which indicated I had become accepted by those I was observing to some degree. I was invited along to social occasions in a number of instances, and officers frequently requested my attendance at calls which they felt I would find interesting (see also Marks, 2005, and Loftus, 2010: 205), and it was rare for me to be told by an officer that I needn't attend an incident with them. I was also regularly included in team jokes and banter and was frequently asked what I thought about an incident we had just attended. Moreover, most officers also seemed to enjoy the chance to air their grievances to someone who presented as sympathetic to their plight (see also Loftus, 2010: 205), and would regularly ask me for my opinion regarding any problems they had that related to policing. However, ultimately it was impossible for me to determine with any degree of accuracy the extent to which I was accepted, and the extent to which this did occur was likely to differ between the various teams I observed.

One fundamental obstacle of trust existed in relation to me potentially being a 'PSD mole.' This attitude was more prevalent amongst the uniformed officers than in other departments, where this concern was rarely discussed, and my appearance was typically more accepted by staff. One uniformed officer made regular references to me being part of PSD, and even went so far as to say, 'no matter what you tell me, I will always think you're PSD'. One police sergeant kept asking me nervously whether I was from this particular department to the extent that once we were on our own, he said to

me, 'come on, be honest with me now, are you PSD? I won't tell anyone'. While a number of these comments were apparently said in jest, this suggested to me that officers remained cognisant that an outsider was present. Even efforts to grant me insider access to the group reminded me that I was still, ultimately, an outsider. I was keenly reminded of this whenever I was invited to a shift night out. Whenever this occurred, it was always immediately clear to me that the team had discussed whether I should be invited (usually via the team WhatsApp group, of which, understandably, there was never any discussion of me joining) and had decided that I should be extended an invitation. This discussion had obviously taken place without my knowledge and symbolised that despite the best of intentions, I would always remain an outsider.

Overall, the level of access I was able to gain, and the extent to which I felt I was obtaining truthful accounts from officers depended heavily on the degree of rapport I developed with each team. This in turn was heavily influenced by the sergeant or manager of that particular shift. I noticed as time passed that those supervisors who had greeted me enthusiastically, who had been keen to understand the aims of my research and willing to assist, also managed the teams with which I was most likely to gain useful and interesting information. Conversely, those managers who displayed little interest in my work, and did not take pains to explain the nature of my work to their team, I found much more difficult to build rapport with. This is in line with research that suggests front line supervisors heavily affect the culture and morale of their teams (Bacon, 2013: 110). Therefore, I am not able to say I won the trust of every team I worked with; it is more

likely that I won the trust of individuals of various teams rather than the entirety of the team itself.

Key considerations in reflexive ethnography: Researcher characteristics and personal biography.

Undertaking ethnographic fieldwork requires researchers to be cognisant about how their own personal attributes and presentation of self impacts upon the data they acquire throughout the research (May, 1993; King and Wincup, 2000; Loftus, 2010). The researcher's age, class, ethnicity, and gender can radically influence relations formed with research participants (Berger, 2015). This notion particularly applies to participant observation with policing organisations, who are typically monocultural in relation to workplace diversity, although this is slowly changing (Home Office, 2024). Marks (2004: 869) suggests material derived from ethnographic observation of the police is heavily contingent upon the personal qualities of the researcher. Although an increasing number of women are entering the police force (Home Office, 2024), it would be remiss of me not to consider how my gender impacted upon how I was perceived in a masculine occupational culture (Westmarland, 2001; Marks, 2005; Loftus, 2010: 206).

There is a conception in the ethnographic literature that a female ethnographer conducting research in a highly masculine environment will inevitably be subject to inappropriate advances by male participants (Brewer, 1991). Indeed, a senior police officer warned me to be wary of any propositions I might receive from male officers, although in practice this did not occur. I believe some of the officers, particularly those with whom I formed a rapport, did display protective attitudes towards me, particularly in

situations where the potential for danger existed, but this was appreciated as it provided me with a sense of safety in some tricky situations. Generally, however, I discovered that being a female researcher in a macho environment could be beneficial at times; consistent with the works of other female ethnographers (Westmarland, 2000; Marks 2005; Loftus 2010). I felt that some of the male officers were more protective of me during potentially fraught situations; a consideration that I feel would not have been extended to me had I been male. Relatedly, I believe the officers perceived me to be somewhat of a risk that needed to be managed. Most staff were aware of my connection to Superintendent A and were cognisant of the fact that there may be repercussions for them should they fail to ensure my safety during such incidents. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, there remained the possibility that I was there on behalf of management, which may have influenced officers to behave in such a manner. Ultimately, I had no way of conforming such suspicions, although, given the findings of the thesis, in terms of officers' desire to avoid potential blame, it would be remiss of me not to consider this possibility.

Marks (2004: 881) has observed the personal characteristics of the researcher are paramount to unlocking detailed narratives of participants. During the fieldwork, I made efforts to portray myself as someone who was keen to understand the unique problems police officers experience, aiming to display an interest in learning about operational policing. Essentially, these features of my behaviour were arguably the most important factor in creating a relationship with officers and allowed me a degree of access to their thoughts and feelings (see also Loftus, 2010: 207).

Observing, recording, and interpreting data in the field.

While in the field, in line with other ethnographers (Norris, 1993; Rowe, 2007; Loftus, 2010) I aimed to capture several types of data. Firstly, I paid attention to conversations that took place between officers, which provided useful information about the attitudes, values, and beliefs of these individuals. Secondly, exchanges that took place with the officers themselves proved to be of use, particularly when considering what information officers chose to share with me, as well as what they did not. Thirdly, I collated in-depth descriptions of how officers dealt with the policing tasks they were assigned, and to what extent the concepts of risk and blame were embedded in their roles and rituals. To achieve this, I followed Holdaway's (1983: 11) advice to observe and record as much as possible, even the seemingly routine and insignificant, by thinking of myself as a 'witness to their situation' (Goffman, 1989). It can be difficult to actively partake in conversations with officers, while attempting to retain particularly salient points from these exchanges. Fine (1993: 280) notes how such pressures can lead to the ethnographer becoming too lax in their observations, which inevitably affects the quality of the notes taken. Indeed, I found that shift work made it difficult to write up detailed notes after the end of each period of observation, as many scholars advise researchers to do (for instance, Goffman, 1989) - sometimes I would finish at six o' clock in the morning, and I would not have the capacity to write up detailed findings. Instead, I would take ten minutes to jot down the most salient events of the day, with the aim to write these up within 24 hours of the shift taking place.

From previous ethnographies (Holdaway, 1983; Rowe, 2007; Loftus, 2010), I knew it would not be possible to write detailed notes in front of officers. This would

rouse suspicion they were being watched, while also highlighting my outsider status, both of which I was keen to minimise. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw support this belief, stating that writing is a 'strange, marginalising activity, marking the writer as an observer, rather than as a full ordinary participant' (1995: 37). I did however follow Goffman's (1989) advice, which was to write down as much as possible, wherever possible. I worked towards this by scribbling down notes whenever I was out of sight of officers - for instance, when officers were dealing with a particularly difficult suspect while I stayed in the van. Having a mobile phone played a great part here, and I was able to type important phrases from particularly pertinent conversations that took place in my vicinity, while looking as if I wasn't paying attention to what was being said around me. For conversations that took place in police vehicles it was often very handy for me to gaze out of the window and pretend not to be paying attention to discussions taking place between officers. In relation to analysis of these notes, these were first coded according to broad summary themes and then recoded into more specific categories that appeared regularly throughout the fieldwork.

Personal impact of the fieldwork

Prior to beginning the fieldwork, I attempted to seek out information regarding how to safeguard my wellbeing while conducting the research but found very little advice as to how to do so. Part of the reason for this may be caused by what Fine (1993: 282) describes as the 'self-censoring ethnographer', who does not wish to draw attention to the more negative aspects of conducting fieldwork. Policing, and by extension the observation of this, is mentally and emotionally challenging. To compound this, the

fieldworker often finds themselves in unfamiliar and sometimes dangerous environments (Westmarland, 2001: 533). This is further exacerbated by the physical isolation of moving to a new location to conduct the fieldwork, as I did. Ethnography, despite regular and close involvement with groups of people, can often be a lonely and isolating experience. This feeling fluctuated depending on the group I was with - for those groups with whom I was comfortable and accepted, this did not pose much of an obstacle; however, in teams where I felt my 'outsider' status keenly, this was much more of a problem.

Holdaway (1983: 7) notes that an ethnographer typically witnesses 'very private and precious moments' of people's lives - this is a responsibility the researcher must carefully balance with the potential for intrusion into personal matters. During the fieldwork, I witnessed several potentially traumatising situations, often with a very short space of time elapsing between these. In my first week of shadowing one particular response team, I attended two sudden deaths, and a very serious domestic assault within a few days of each other. I watched mothers have their children removed from them, I witnessed people having significant mental health crises and on one occasion I had a very dirty hand accidentally flung into my face as a witness recounted events in an excitable manner to the attending officer. Despite this, I very rarely felt that I was in any immediate physical danger, but I was aware of the impact that witnessing such material could have on me. As a result, I invested in regular therapy sessions and had monthly meetings with my supervisors so that they were aware of the situations I was encountering.

Response policing is generally very dirty work, and I entered a number of houses that were so unclean and unkept they appeared to be unfit for human habitation. I spent a lot of time outside in all weathers, at all hours of the day. Undertaking shift work was both mentally and physically gruelling - numerous officers told me that 'you don't get used to shift work, you just get used to being tired all the time', and I was keenly aware of this when undertaking placements that required me to observe night shifts. Towards the latter few months of the fieldwork, I felt my enthusiasm and interest in the subject beginning to wane, and I decided to take a short break, and returned to finalise the final portion of this some months later. This allowed me to return refreshed and with a renewed vigour for my work, which ultimately helped me regain enthusiasm for the research.

Questions of ethics

The discussion of ethical dilemmas is particularly important, because as Holdaway (1983) states, detailing difficult decisions made while undertaking fieldwork lends credibility to the ethnographer's work, by allowing the reader an insight into the ethnographic process. Ethnographic research regularly involves making difficult choices (Holdaway 1983: 154; Young, 1991: 29) often between the roles of an observer and participant, especially regarding the amount of information shared with participants, which necessarily raises questions regarding the balance between openness and secrecy on the part of the researcher. The responsibility for making decisions ultimately rests with the researcher, as ethical considerations are rarely clear cut, and decisions taken while in the field often rely heavily on the context in which they are made

(Holdaway, 1983: 341). Holdaway (1983: 327) notes that problems that arise in fieldwork are often unanticipated, so ethical codes do not always provide solutions to the situations the researcher finds themselves in. Rowe (2007: 48) notes that 'since policing is unpredictable, the ethical dilemmas researchers might face cannot be easily anticipated'. Because of this, Norris's (1993) assertion that ethical matters are likely to be situational is likely to apply in many policing ethnographic studies.

I found when observing the departments that were further removed from the emergency response role, I experienced fewer ethical dilemmas, in part because the choices regarding what I should observe had already been made for me. In these circumstances, the officers I was accompanying were able to decide what jobs I should go out on, what I should see, and with whom. Whereas in other frontline roles, I found myself having to manage the situation as it unfolded, as the officers often had little time to consult with me regarding what I observed. Nonetheless, during the fieldwork, several ethical decisions had to be made. I attempted to tackle this by heeding advice to take account of all the information available to me, considering the potential consequences of each course of action, and the potential effects such choices may have on participants (Holdaway, 1983: 326).

Some ethical considerations were relatively straightforward. Participant anonymity was guaranteed by the contract I had signed with Stonecastle Police. All participant details would be anonymised in my thesis, as well as in potential future publications. I attempted to gain informed consent with officers as the need arose, by introducing the project to them at the earliest opportunity and ensuring I provided them with information about its aims and objectives. While doing so, officers were

encouraged to ask questions about the research, and I aimed to answer all queries as fully as possible. This approach was informed by Fleuhr-Lobban (2000) who argues that researchers should not perceive informed consent in terms of paperwork, but instead as offering an opportunity for discussion with participants regarding the aims and ambitions of the fieldwork. This is also in line with Marks (2005), who suggests encouraging participants to ask questions about the purpose of the research creates dialogue about the work. However, I knew I could not always guarantee fully voluntary participation from officers throughout the course of the research. Sergeants and supervisors were ultimately in a position of authority over officers, and it must be assumed that their consent was informed by the fact it was their supervisor who was 'requesting' I observe them. Norris also encountered this problem and noted that 'when sergeants assigned me to specific officers it was difficult to know whether having me along constituted an order' (1993: 129). Ultimately, there is no way of knowing for sure the extent to which officers approved of my presence.

However, it cannot be denied that the general public, whom I came into contact with frequently in my role as observer, were not usually consulted regarding whether they wished me to observe their interactions with police. Members of the public sometimes were told of the nature of the research and assured I was there merely to observe the officers. When responding to incidents, there often wasn't time to announce the reason for my presence, and I sensed the officers would not have appreciated it if I had tried. Instead, I left it to them to introduce me when they saw fit, which varied between officers. Once the initial action had died down and there was a lull in conversation, I often took the opportunity to introduce myself to members of the public

that were present. I was also conscious that many of the people we dealt with were unable to consent to my presence, and often were not asked, with several of them lacking the capacity to do so. An example of this occurred when officers were dealing with a woman experiencing a mental health crisis, who screamed at me to 'fuck off' when she perceived I was looking at her. I do not think it can be said that she consented to my observation of her conduct, making it an uncomfortable experience, one in which I felt I was intruding upon an intensely vulnerable moment in her life. However, at the time this incident occurred, we were in a police van driving towards custody at speed, where the woman could hopefully receive medical attention, and it was not possible for me to remove myself from the situation. Essentially, these individuals were not my research subjects, and minimal detail was recorded of their behaviour in my field notes, with reference to them being made only where strictly necessary. Ultimately, I tried to adhere to the rule of 'first, do no harm'.

Punch (1994) argues that participant observation is inescapably unethical by reason of being 'interactionally deceitful' towards its research subjects (Ditton 1977:10). However, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) would instead characterise participant observation as 'ethically challenging', thus requiring a carefully considered approach, rather than inherently unethical. One consideration that needed to be made was whether I disclosed certain elements of my personal biography to officers. When undertaking the fieldwork, I did not disclose to staff that I had previously worked for the IOPC. On the one hand, I did not want to deceive participants, but on the other, I felt disclosing this information would significantly hamper any attempts to build rapport, as officers would make negative references to the IOPC with great frequency and would be less likely to

trust me. This hypothesis was inadvertently tested during my placement in the PSC. I was sitting with a dispatcher who had just told me she was involved in an IOPC investigation, which she stated had affected her significantly, when I was approached by a member of the senior leadership team, who had obviously been informed by Superintendent A as to my professional background. He began asking me about my career history, and when he asked me about my experiences with the IOPC, I could see the dispatcher physically stiffen. Although they did not ask me any questions about my experience, I could tell our rapport had been affected as a result, as they became significantly more withdrawn in their responses from that point onwards. I subsequently made the decision not to reveal this element of my backstory while I remained in the field.

Another pertinent ethical matter arose while conducting the fieldwork. I was told by the SPOC for a particular area of business that the team I would be shadowing had a very high rate of the use of force, and the sergeant of that particular team was also regarded as being somewhat problematic in his dealings with staff members. While the SPOC stated that this could be interesting for me in terms of the themes of my research, it was clear to me they were hoping for an element of feedback in relation to the conduct of the team. This matter was discussed with my supervisors, whereby it was decided that no personal details could be divulged to management, as this would breach participant confidentiality, which I adhered to throughout the course of my research. Nonetheless, I was aware I may be required to observe instances of deviance within the team, and this undoubtedly influenced my perception of what I might observe

during my time with them. Although I found myself expecting to witness wrongdoing when undertaking observation with this team, thankfully this never occurred.

As alluded to earlier in the chapter, the 'sociological literature on policing includes well-documented cases of police deviance' (Norris, 1993: 140; Rowe, 2007: 44).

Interestingly, where my experience differed was in the absence of significant ethical dilemmas faced during the fieldwork. Instead, I rarely saw instances of active overt violence but instead witnessed what I would describe as 'grey areas' involving potentially dubious practices, but identification of this relied on my personal feelings rather than any overt evidence of wrongdoing. For instance, I witnessed one response team behaving a slightly heavy-handed manner towards a detainee, but not to the extent that this would have been sufficient to raise concerns via the appropriate channels, and I did not feel confident from my vantage point that my assumptions were entirely correct. In line with Rowe's (2007: 47) work, I found ethical 'molehills' instead of mountains. While other policing research contains accounts of having witnessed serious incidents of police deviance, only minor ethical dilemmas were experienced. This may be an ongoing effect caused by the professionalisation that policing has been subject to, alongside several high-profile scandals that have recently drawn attention to police failings.

Limitations

One obvious limitation of case study research is its applicability to other organisations in similar circumstances. However, I argue that the intention of this study is not to produce research that can be generalised to all policing organisations, but instead is intended to

be an 'instrumental case study' (Stake, 1995) of one particular institution. Additionally, such a method is designed to be descriptive and to produce rich data (Yin, 2014 :7), which this research achieves. However, due to the nature of the study, the research was conducted at one specific point in time, and the pressures and strains facing policing may change, therefore further study may be needed to see if similar problems around processes of risk and blame exist in future.

Conclusion

Rowe (2007: 38) argues 'doing research in a dynamic environment such as policing means that principles laid down in the texts or professional codes of practice are very difficult to operationalize'. Instead, the researcher must rely on situational assessments of the context in which the ethical dilemma arose. It is impossible for an ethnographic researcher to provide an objective evaluation of the extent to which the work ultimately achieved its aims, and it is inevitable that there will be a degree of subjectivity contained within subsequent accounts. Despite this concern, useful data was gathered that shed some light on the research questions, particularly in relation to how officers understand the operational world that they inhabit, the way they relate to each other, and how the concepts of risk and blame govern the work they do. Therefore, participant observation remains a useful method for police researchers to study the working assumptions and low visibility practices of officers, as such assumptions and practices often operate beneath a 'presentational canopy' of police organisations (Chan, 1997), which interview and focus group data cannot always penetrate. This chapter has provided a rationale for the use of ethnographic methods, in particular how long-term participant observation is

key to understanding how officers make sense of the concepts of risk and blame, and how such awareness influences their daily practices. In this section of the thesis, I have also discussed my concerns regarding the potential obstacles that arise when attempting to conduct this form of research, and ways such risks may be controlled, either wholly or in part. The following chapters will now build upon the information contained here, to explore the central findings of this ethnographic project.

Chapter Four: Risk averse or risk aware? Constructing attitudes towards risk and blame in policing.

It is my first day with the response team. While in the van responding to incidents, an incident comes through on the radio. A patient at the local secure hospital is threatening to assault staff. Kevin immediately puts on the sirens, and we set about darting through the traffic at breakneck speed. As we approached the bridge, I could see the dual carriageway ahead of us was nose-to-tail with heavy traffic. Despite this, Kevin continued to drive his way through the traffic at a considerable pace. He manoeuvred past a large lorry, colliding with it as he went by with an ear-shattering bang. He went to pull over, but Nicole shouted above the noise of the siren: 'No! Just go!' and he continued driving at speed towards the hospital. Afterwards, the officers informed me they were supposed to immediately stop upon hitting another vehicle and should be breathalysed by another officer. We then returned to the station, where Sergeant A rebuked Kevin for not doing this, but this did not appear to have much of an impact on the officers, who treated the whole situation as somewhat of a joke. On our way out to the next incident, Kevin had Nicole take a photo of him, smiling with his thumbs up, next to the dented vehicle. The picture was then circulated on the team WhatsApp group for the officers' amusement. Fieldnotes, September 2021.

In recent decades, there have been numerous government reviews and policy reports that make the distinctive claim policing organisations are becoming increasingly risk averse (Flanagan, 2008; Berry, 20009; KPMG, 2018; Home Office, 2019; College of Policing, 2023). Central to this claim is the notion officers are afraid to deviate from tried and tested practices in case 'things go wrong'. Such reports identify a pervasive anxiety, particularly prevalent at the lower levels of the organisation, that staff will be blamed for failing to correctly follow procedure if negative consequences arise because of their actions. In contrast to this sentiment, the incident referred to above took place on my first day with an incident response team and represents an interesting contrast to the notion that officers are keen to avoid the attraction of risk as they go about their activities. What stood out here was the somewhat cavalier attitude officers displayed

towards risk in its various forms; most notably risk to self, as well as the potential for negative consequences as they had failed to adhere to organisational policy: a stark contradiction to the concerns outlined in the extant research. Such a scenario was far from unusual, and the way officers act, and react, to the concept of risk is more complex than simply being risk averse. Instead, I argue their approach to danger hinges upon their perception they are being 'responsibilised' for the organisational-level management of risk, and that this significantly affects what they perceive risk to be, and how they approach and subsequently manage this perceived risk.

Firstly, this chapter will define the precise nature of the risks officers typically fear, before moving on to the concept of risk aversion, and the extent to which this is said to exist within policing organisations. I aim to treat instances of risk aversion, not as an obvious problem for policing organisations to overcome, but as claims made by various actors within policing organisations themselves. By identifying it as a claim rather than an objective phenomenon, this allows me to explore who exactly is making these assertions, and their potential motivations for doing so. I will explore to what extent these claims are shared between members of policing organisations, or whether various actors call into question the existence of risk aversion, as well as what is at stake in the organisational contest over the causes. The chapter then moves on to discuss how such policies and procedures shape the way officers interact with risk, whether they encouraged supposed risk aversion on the part of officers, and to what extent, if at all, officers have any agency in their interactions with risk. The discussion is finalised by considering how policing's relationship to risk is shaped by forces external to the organisation, particularly in relation to their interaction with partner agencies.

What is risk? How officers conceptualise and understand the idea of danger

Claims of risk aversion within policing often fail to specify the exact form this takes; whether such antipathy is displayed by the officers themselves, or via the organisations in which they operate. As mentioned previously, it is important to note that many of these claims stem from sources close to operational policing, so such claims need to be approached with a degree of caution. It is therefore difficult to characterise and consider the precise nature of what it means to be risk averse in policing (Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019: 7). Although the various iterations of risk have been discussed in the theoretical framework chapter of this thesis, to fully understand the term under examination, it will first and foremost be useful for us to remind ourselves what officers understand the term 'risk' to mean. As mentioned previously, in line with the work of Mary Douglas, I aim to explore how risks are selectively attended to by the social group, by building an understanding of the meaning officers attach to perceived hazards. I will argue that while officers frequently discuss risk in terms of harm to victims and members of the public, another form of risk referred to by officers is the hazard they face that originate from the organisation itself when they are deemed to have fallen foul of the guidelines set out for them, and the risk this poses to their place within their occupational world. This contrasts with concerns voiced by the organisation when they speak of risk, which is underpinned by concerns regarding the reputational threat that actions of potentially errant officers pose. I will also argue here that due to this organisational preoccupation with reputational risk, officers on the ground are becoming increasingly burdened with thinking about risk from an institutional standpoint as the

organisation seeks to manage risk to its position in society, in an environment that demands policing continually demonstrates accountability.

The research found that officers recognise the importance of managing risk to the public, particularly in terms of risks to the individual's safety and feelings of security. Such an appreciation was fundamental to all occupational tasks, irrespective of department or specialism, from call handling, to responding to calls for emergency assistance, to conducting complex criminal investigations:

This job changes the way you think...you start to see everything as a risk assessment, and you think about risk all the time. It becomes normal to think that way. - Call handler, PSC.

Managing risk and rationalising what you've done is basically what the role involves. If you can do that then you're fine. - Detective Sergeant, investigations team.

These excerpts demonstrate how risk is the dominant consideration when key policing decisions are made, as reflected in the extant literature which suggests a preoccupation with risk on the part of officers (Maguire, 2000; Black and Lumsden, 2020; Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019). Alongside the centrality of this form of risk, it would be useful to consider the distinct types of danger officers encounter as they go about fulfilling their duty, so we can identify what they recognise as 'risk' when they speak of it. As previously discussed by Mythen (2014:4), one obvious hazard is the physical risk presented to officers as an inherent part of their role. Policing is made up of a multitude of tasks where the inevitable risk an officer encounters is a necessary part of their function (Bowling, Reiner and Sheptycki, 2019: 172). Generally, officers display acceptance of the physical risks they experienced in their roles:

Any kind of risk, we willingly go to it. We haven't experienced, touch wood, any great terror threat, but you look around the world and people run away from it and they're the ones then running towards the police. And as I said, it's in the mentality, because we are uniform...we just will run straight to it or do what we need to do for the job, and we adapt. I think we do it and then think about it after it's done. - Focus group, investigations staff, October 2020.

Risk to self is a taken for granted aspect of the role, to the extent that it is rarely registered as a significant hazard in the same way other forms of risk are. As mentioned previously, I argue it is not this form of danger that officers typically refer to when they speak of risk as something to be avoided. As discussed in the theoretical framework, alongside the traditionally recognised form of risk, there exists a second form of danger, that takes the form of hazard to members of the public. The need to protect the public has long been a part of the policing mandate. Further, it is this area of risk that the increased focus on vulnerability refers to, with departments such as the Public Protection Unit (PPU) solely dedicated to managing the specific forms of risk attached to those deemed to be most at risk of harm. The rise of such units reflects the fact policing has seen an influx of complex and high-harm crime (Police Foundation, 2019: 24) situated in a wider environment where vulnerability-related offences continue to account for a significant degree of policing efforts (College of Policing, 2015; HMICFRS, 2015: 5). Like the concept of risk to self, this is a form of danger that officers see as an accepted and inevitable aspect of their role. Indeed, during the fieldwork, many officers informed me their job was primarily about managing risk, and it was typically this form of risk they referred to during such conversations. Overall, staff seemed comfortable discussing the role that such dangers played in the tasks they were expected to undertake.

The third type of danger to be considered here is risk to the organisation itself. More specifically, this form of risk presents a significant threat to the reputation of the organisation, and can arise from a range of sources, from historic enquiries and deaths in custody to negative media critiques and critical discussions of policing via social media platforms (Heaton, 2011; Clark et al, 2017; Bullock, 2018; Norman, Williams and Sondhi, 2019). In recent years, there has been an increase in the negative attention that policing has received in relation to such matters (Angiolini. 2024: 279), and as such, there is increased pressure on policing institutions to appropriately manage the risk to reputation that such situations present, with Heaton (2011: 76) arguing that this form of risk is now the principal liability perceived by policing organisations. Similarly to Heaton, I will argue here that often, when policing organisations and their representatives speak of risk, such fears are underpinned by a concern regarding potential risk to institutional reputation. British policing is still heavily focused on the Peelian ideal of 'policing by consent', a sentiment which is interpreted as central to cultivating public acceptance, and organisational reputation represents a crucial method of building the trust that maintains this relationship. Attempts to control this form of risk are frequently made by the organisation, and by extension the officers in their employ, to ensure potential scandal is avoided and the reputation of the institution is not brought into question. It is clear policing institutions are only too aware of the precarious basis on which consensual policing rests, and consequently are concerned with guarding against potential reputational damage through any means necessary.

Out of this organisational preoccupation with risk arises the fourth hazard present in the policing sphere, and it is this form of risk officers and staff are primarily

preoccupied with. As previously mentioned, policing organisations are keen to protect the fragile consensus they share with the public, which they are aware is increasingly under threat (ONS, 2020; Muir et al, 2022; YouGov, 2024). Where reputational damage may occur due to officer actions, then policing institutions typically seek to portray that they are not responsible for failings that occur at the individual level. This is a hazard that staff are keenly aware of; as suggested by Waddington (1994), officers are not necessarily concerned about 'on-the-job' trouble, but hazards which arises from the role itself. I argue this form of 'in-the-job trouble' arises where officers are perceived as attracting negative attention to the organisation, most notably when they are identified as failing to adequately control risk. It is these dangers that officers construct as posing a significant threat to their place in the occupational order. This is in line with Douglas' view that there are numerous risks surrounding the social group, but only certain dangers are identified as worthy of attention (Douglas, 2002, p. xix) – it is impossible for a social group to be concerned with every obstacle they encounter, with those dangers selected as risks for 'self-maintaining purposes' (Douglas, 1986 :47) in short, to protect their position within the organisation. They subsequently seek to mitigate this threat through seemingly risk-averse behaviour. The risk that occurs as officers attempt to conduct their role is subsequently not managed at the collective level, but at the individual (Mythen and Walklate, 2006), and officers are expected to take on the responsibility of avoiding bringing the organisation into disrepute, alongside the other forms of risk they must consider while undertaking their role.

As a result, officers find themselves becoming increasingly preoccupied by the consequences they may face should their behaviour draw unwanted attention towards

the organisation. Even when officers ostensibly speak of risk to members of the public, they are concurrently considering the risk to themselves, their livelihood, and their employment. The quotes in the following paragraph demonstrate the pervasive concerns officers experience regarding the security of their roles, with staff continually attempting to manage such risks to minimise the chances of this occurring:

Tyler, a detective in an investigations team, tells me about the female victim in a domestic violence case, who is in hospital with a spleen injury, highly likely to have been caused by an ex-partner. There were concerns that once she woke up, she would not want to comply with the investigation. Tyler voiced his unease at this, stating there was a chance he would try to speak to the victim about the matter and she would not want to make a complaint, limiting the potential action the police could take. He said that after the police concluded their investigation, that he wouldn't be surprised if the suspect returned to the victim's address and stabbed her, with the police then being 'hailed over the coals' as a result. – Field notes, December 2021.

Greg, who is a supervisor in an investigations team, begins talking about a sergeant that gave him a job to review, that he had clearly wanted written off. Greg believed there were outstanding actions to be completed, so he sent it back requesting for these to be done. He said as a justification for doing so, 'at the end of the day, it's not worth my job, my pension, my career to be lazy'. – Field notes, April 2022.

As the excerpts above demonstrate, a sense of occupational insecurity underlies any considerations officers undertake in relation to potential risks. Officers' awareness of the precarity of their position has consequently manifested in behaviours designed to safeguard their position within the institution, which the extant literature has labelled as risk averse. In line with Douglas' (1988: 48) view that risks are identified and selectively attended to, I argue that due to this increased sense of precarity, officers are keenly alert to potential threats to their position in the occupational order. Concerns relating to organisational reputation, once a primary concern of the senior leadership team, have

now shifted to the rank-and-file. Officers recognise the threat this presents to their place within the organisation, and consequently attempt to allay concerns by utilising the myriad guidance provided to them, which is designed to demonstrate necessary instruction was supplied for officers to fulfil their mandate. Such policies also ensure to highlight that any failings are not the fault of the organisation and can instead be traced back to the actions of individual officers. Officers are aware of the organisational-level responsibility they have been imbued with and continue to adhere to such guidance to effectively shoulder the burden. To further explore the claims I have made here, we will now examine the ways in which the organisation attempts to encourage officers to take an increased share of the responsibility for managing this risk, and how such structures ensure staff are constantly aware of their mandate to minimise risk. As this chapter will demonstrate, this pervasive awareness of risk subsequently prevents officers from taking the necessary actions required for their role, due to a fear of attracting negative attention should any errors or omissions arise.

How do police policies and procedures shape officer perceptions of risk?

So far, this chapter has established the myriad forms of risk officers' encounter. This section will subsequently explore the policies and procedures that set the parameters for how staff manage hazards, and how this influences the meaning they assign to the risks they confront as part of their role. As argued previously, this type of strategy represents an attempt by the organisation to encourage staff to accept responsibility for shielding the organisation from potential reputational repercussions. Such preparation is understandable to a degree; policing is particularly vulnerable to adverse

consequences, with Heaton, Bryant, and Tong (2019:11) noting how the occupation is besieged by 'high impact, low probability (HILP) risk', which makes negative outcomes difficult to anticipate, therefore a premium is placed on minimising any form of risk to the organisation. The hazards that accompany HILP incidents are renowned for being as difficult to extinguish as they are to predict (Carson et al, 2013), and Heaton argues that addressing such risks appropriately is further hindered by rigid procedures that seek to shield organisational reputation at the cost of meeting key business objectives (Heaton, 2011: 75). Such responses minimise the usage of flexible solutions, instead favouring tried-and-tested procedures that demonstrably minimise risk. These processes are particularly problematic for officers who often find such proposals are not well suited to the situations they face, and instead inhibit their behaviour as they work towards protecting organisational interests, rather than the needs of those they are duty-bound to serve.

Many aspects of the organisation, from the formal working practices set out by the institution, to the informal methods used by officers to address their workload, represent attempts to control uncertainty via what is termed the precautionary principle (Furedi, 2009; Lennon, 2015; Black and Lumsden, 2020). This doctrine was initially developed to 'enable decision-makers to adopt precautionary measures when scientific evidence about an environmental or human health hazard is uncertain and the stakes are high' (EPRS, 2015: 1). Furedi (1997: 9) notes that 'in theory, the principle offers a feeling of safety, but in reality, demands constraints on innovation and experimentation', which plays out in policing, most notably in terms of the creation of rigid policies which officers feel they must adhere to. While the principle has been sensibly applied to some

high-risk areas of policing, such as counterterrorism (McCulloch and Pickering, 2009; Lennon, 2015), it is arguably less suited to many of the lower-level offences policing typically encounters, which do not require this type of risk thinking, which continually caters to the worst-case scenario. Lennon (2015: 46) argues that while the approach is not particularly novel, this perspective has received more attention in recent decades as society shifts towards a more anticipatory mode of dealing with supposed risk (see also Furedi, 2009). This principle is typically employed to minimise the chance of dangers arising that were initially assessed as benign, while tolerating a higher occurrence of possible risks that did not come to pass in reality (Stern and Wiener, 2006: 396).

Hemphill (2020) notes how the precautionary principle can be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways; the 'strong' version of the principle can be used, which is based on the existence of clear and obvious forms of risk, with the weakened version being utilised with a 'just in case' mentality in mind. In the context of policing, a weak version of this principle has been adapted to attempt to control the myriad risks policing faces, regardless of the nature of the risk it is used against. The logic of precaution permeates many policing policies, from the various checklists officers must complete, to the documentation of all actions taken, designed to leave no stone unturned. Black and Lumsden conducted fieldwork with one force control room in 2019. In their work, they discovered control room staff extensively made use of risk averse policies and procedures, guided by the notion that the worse-case scenario must be always catered to. This thesis also found that weight is continually given to the worst-case scenario, regardless of the chance of this taking place. This was echoed in many of the conversations I had with staff while undertaking the fieldwork:

The PSC staff member stated that in the police, and by extension in her role within the police, everybody always had to work towards the worst-case scenario. She gave the example of somebody threatening to commit suicide, 'the one time we don't attend that call, that person will kill themselves and we can't afford for that to happen'. – Field notes, August 2021.

The police are in a place with domestic violence where we take positive action in the overwhelming majority of cases, and is probably the one area where discretion is discarded from that perspective...Our default position is positive action on those cases, for obvious reasons, because we don't want in any way that they [the victim] deem to be let down or vulnerable to further assaults, or the worst-case scenario where a homicide is the result of our inaction. So, I think domestic violence is something that we are pretty risk averse to intervene in, and we take positive action in all cases, I would suggest, unless there's a good reason not to. - Superintendent C.

The excerpts outlined above echo Heaton's (2011: 76) notion the police frequently undertake a 'possibilistic' rather than a 'probabilistic' approach when they encounter potential dangers, where the worst-case scenario is continually used as a template to assess potential risk (Furedi, 2009: 205). Throughout this thesis, I hope to demonstrate how, in line with Douglas, risk conceptualisation is not an objective process, but a 'way of thinking' (Douglas, 1992: 46), driven by staff's own interpretations of the environment in which they work. Such risk thinking is underpinned by a precautionary logic, that enough information cannot be gathered to make an informed decision, necessitating a need to always proceed with caution (Furedi, 1997: 107). Douglas (1992: 23; also, Furedi, 1997: 18) notes how 'the term risk has lost its neutral quality and is only associated with adverse consequences. Previously, the concept would take a measured approach towards potential benefits and drawbacks of a risk decision', but now evidence of extant risk falls secondary to potential future high-risk situations. Instead, in line with a weak precautionary principle, potential danger is used as a template to

assess possible outcomes, requiring decisive action to be taken, even in the absence of evidence to support such a decision (Douglas, 1992: 24; Campbell, 2004).

It is important to note while these policies are designed to cater towards the worst-case scenario, the police frequently do deal with the potential worst outcome in the situations they encounter, which is loss of life, particularly in relation to domestic violence cases. It is not always safe to assume their treatment of occupational hazards is necessarily risk averse, especially in the safeguarding context, where incidents that present an elevated risk of harm occur with regular frequency. While policing organisations, who regularly deal with HILP, often work towards the worst-case scenario, but it perhaps makes sense for them to do so, given the high stakes they face, and the potentially devastating outcome should they fail to do so. In particular specialist teams, and their approach to risk, will be discussed in more detail in chapter eight. Despite the need for such an approach when dealing with high-harm cases, the research found this 'worst case scenario' assumption was also present in other areas of the business where it perhaps was less appropriate to utilise such a perspective:

The officers have just returned from attending a domestic incident. They tell me the victim did not want any form of investigation to take place, with Abbey stating this is very common as usually the victim 'just wants the immediate risk reduced', which typically involves removing the offender from the property. Craig seemed frustrated, and said it felt they were merely process-driven and there was a 99.9% chance the cases they dealt with 'wouldn't go anywhere'. I could see a statement from the victim on Craig's screen, outlining that she did not wish to make a complaint, which he would need her to sign to demonstrate her reluctance to support the prosecution of her partner. He was clearly resentful of the fact he would have to conduct follow up actions to file the case, as he already knew there would not be a positive outcome from doing so - Field notes, May 2022.

Officers often find themselves frustrated by the likely outcome of no further action from the incidents they attend, often stating that attending such incidents is 'pointless'. This may be because attendance does not result in a tangible outcome, which is frustrating in a profession characterised by a desire for action and mission (Reiner, 2002; Reiner, 2010, Bowling and Reiner, 2019). However, it should be noted despite their protestations, the immediate aims of the officers were ostensibly achieved, as the immediate risk was removed, and safeguarding the victim was undertaken. However, it is clear they considered such a result to be inadequate, and themselves reduced to following policy without a clear aim in mind. Officers recognised the requirement to demonstrate that no action had been taken due to the victim's wishes, rather than due to lack of effort on their part, and great pains were taken to provide verifiable evidence of this. In line with the precautionary principle, inaction in such a scenario is perceived as inexcusable. As a result, it must be clearly documented that any lack of action is in no part a failure of the attending officers to investigate the matter. Resources are subsequently diverted into documenting and justifying why discernible actions have not been taken, in the name of 'playing it safe' (Furedi, 2009: 107), shaped by the expectation as 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980), they may be called upon to justify such decisions at some unknowable point in the future (Zacka, 2017: 179).

As previously mentioned, there are areas of policing where a more precautionary approach is perhaps warranted. Domestic violence incidents made up around 20% of police calls for service in 2020 (ONS, 2020), coupled with an 180% increase in domestic violence reports in the past decade overall (HMICFRS, 2021). This type of crime represents a significant reputational risk to police forces, who have come under fire for

failing to adequately manage the risk in the past (HMICFRS, 2014; Burton, 2016; McPhee et al, 2021), and it makes sense police forces may seek to minimise future chances of this happening. Such instances are examples of Hemphill's 'strong' precautionary principle being utilised, in instances where the potential for harm is high, and there is not yet enough information to make a realistic assessment of whether it may occur. As a result, officers are consequently required to undertake a demonstrable form of 'positive action' in the name of preventing future harm, demonstrating that they, and by extension the organisation, take this hazard seriously. Such actions are undertaken even if this occurs against the victim's wishes, which can exasperate officers as they feel efforts to effectively fulfil their mandate are reduced to a box-ticking exercise. In the example outlined above, officers feel they are simply 'following the process'. However, while such a process is not perceived by officers as providing any direct utility, it serves to demonstrate on behalf of the organisation that attempts to minimise risks were made by officers, which serves to protect them from future allegations of neglect of duty.

Even though there is no chance of a prosecution arising from the incident, the officers still must take some form of demonstrable action, referred to by policing organisations as 'positive action'. It is important to note the term 'positive action' is specific enough to determine some form of action needs to be taken but does not provide an explicit directive to officers regarding what it is they need to do. This is in line with Zacka's (2017: 15, 44) observations, who notes how in bureaucratic organisations such as the police, policy instructions are often vague and lack the necessary directives to adequately guide their use. In contrast with the findings of Black and Lumsden, this

research revealed domestic violence policies were less overtly restrictive, giving officers a degree of discretion. However, officers continued to interpret these policies as placing significant restrictions upon their autonomy to deal with such situations on a case-by-case basis. Instances of the same officers interpreting the need to strictly follow policy in pursuit of positive action often had profound consequences for those involved:

We attended a grade one domestic. When we arrive, we intercept a man in the street who has been involved in an argument with his female partner, during which she has thrown his mobile phone against a wall and damaged it. Neither have any previous history with the police and the victim does not wish to make a complaint. The victim is also drunk and refuses to leave the property. The officers enter the house and around five minutes later return with the partner, who has apparently been arrested by Craig for criminal damage to the mobile phone and is taken to custody. When we arrived at the custody suite, the suspect refused a solicitor, saying she didn't need one as she 'hasn't done anything wrong'. She is interviewed and answers all questions put to her. When asked if she has damaged the victim's phone, she says 'yes'. She is subsequently charged with criminal damage and is given a conditional caution at the custody desk. The custody sergeant states that had she not admitted the offence, she would have been NFA'd as there would not have been enough evidence to secure a conviction. I discussed the arrest of the female with Abbey in the staff canteen the following day. Abbey said they had arrested the female because that was what Craig wanted. She stated she did not want to arrest her as she didn't think it was required, due to the low-level nature of the crime which had taken place. She had asked Craig what the necessity for the arrest was at the time of the incident, and he said it would be to prevent further damage to the property, which Abbey said was unlikely to happen due to the nature of the offence, thus the arrest was unnecessary. Abbey stated although Stonecastle Police has a policy of positive action for domestic violence cases, this does not necessarily mean an arrest, and other forms of action could have been taken. – Fieldnotes, May 2022.

It appears Craig took what could be described as a risk averse approach in this situation. Although his chosen course of action eliminated the immediate threat by removing the perpetrator from the property, doing so embroiled the suspect in a criminal justice process that could have been avoided due to the low-risk nature of the offence.

What is interesting to note is that Craig was not necessarily 'following the process' in effecting an arrest. Stonecastle Police's domestic violence policy (2020) does not explicitly state an arrest is necessary, and even mentions it may not always be appropriate to do so. Instead, the policy states positive action must be taken, officers should assess the risks of the specific situation, and act to prevent harm to the victim. The solution Craig chose, while involving some form of positive action, does not necessarily appear to have prevented future harm to the victim, and arguably may have caused more problems than it solved when there were other less invasive options from which he could choose. However, when examining his actions through a possibilistic rather than a probabilistic lens, it is impossible to predict whether future domestic violence incidents may happen between the two individuals, and whether the current level of risk may escalate. Under the precautionary principle, regardless of the current level of risk the situation presents, it is potential future risk that should be considered, as it is not possible to accurately assess this (Ericson and Doyle, 2004: 147), the worst-case scenario should be considered when such decisions are made. As a result of this perspective an immediate arrest may be necessary to eliminate potential threat and ensures the details of incident are recorded and can subsequently be used should future incidents arise.

The course of action chosen by Craig demonstrated he undertook all possible actions at the time of the incident, considering potential future risk when doing so. Making an arrest represents a failsafe method of avoiding potential criticism, as it demonstrates the officers took immediate and decisive action upon becoming aware of the potential risk the situation presented. Fear of potential repercussions should they

take a less tangible form of action suggests officers feel they do not have the permission of the institution to use their professional judgement, and instead are required to proceed with caution with regards to any potential threats (Furedi, 2009). Indeed, as discussed earlier in the chapter, senior leaders stated explicitly that discretion should be discarded when it comes to dealing with matters of domestic violence, with the worst-case scenario instead being considered when selecting the appropriate course of action. This is a direct contrast against guidance issued by the organisation, which states there is no one-size-fits all solution to such instances. It seems one substantial obstacle to confident decision making is competing interpretations of what constitutes good policing between the rank-and-file, and those higher up the organisational ladder. This subsequently leads to different conceptions of risk on the part of both parties, especially with regards to how this should best be approached and handled. Further, there is a mismatch between the requirements of positive action, which satisfies the demands of the precautionary principle that some form of action has been taken, and the use of officer discretion, which does not possess such an advantage. Police managers are hesitant to rely upon the latter, as it has demonstrably exposed victims of domestic violence to too much risk in the past (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996; Grant & Rowe, 2011; Zeoli, Norris, & Brenner, 2011), and it is somewhat understandable that they are unwilling to invite potential risk taking in this area.

As we have seen, officers have raised concerns about the use of positive action, and the extent to which it effectively protects the public. It is worth considering whether it is positive action officers object to, or whether they in fact feel that undertaking such

actions are not an effective use of their time. Such objections do not seem to be couched in terms of protecting victims from risk but are instead focused upon officers having to take time out of their day to undertake bureaucratic procedures that they do not see as fulfilling any particular purpose. From this perspective, the perception amongst the rank-and-file that positive action should take the form of an arrest addresses such concerns. An arrest represents a verifiable and demonstrable course of action that signifies the officer did all they could at the scene, by immediately removing the threat and transporting the suspect to a different location, where they will be separated from the victim for a considerable time while further investigative actions are undertaken. Such concerns are not unwarranted; Myhill (2018: 152) in his research found officers were keenly aware managers were likely to question their reasons for proceeding without an arrest, particularly in relation to domestic violence matters. In this study, officers felt it would be easier to justify making an arrest than if they had decided not to do so. Such practices act as 'presentational techniques' (see Hood, 2013) on the part of officers, allowing them to demonstrate to the outside world, and accompanying accountability bodies, as well as the organisation itself, that they can responsibly mitigate the risk found in such situations by taking irrefutable forms of positive action.

Concerns regarding the utility of positive action indicate officers feel they lack agency and are required to follow processes regardless of whether this represents a suitable outcome for those involved, a sentiment which is echoed in the extant policy research (Flanagan, 2008; Berry, 2009; Home Office, 2019). Such a requirement stems from the requirements of the precautionary principle, and the need to continually cater to the worst-case scenario above other potential outcomes, regardless of the utility of

such an approach. We have seen while this perspective is suited to some areas of policing, it may stifle much needed officer discretion in situations where more bespoke solutions are required. Paradoxically, undertaking precautionary measures in fact may introduce new risks, in that officers may not adequately fulfil their mandate if their actions are heavily restricted by a 'just in case' mentality (Wiener and Rogers, 2002: 321). Zacka (2017: 39) notes such a phenomenon is not unique to policing, with many bureaucratic organisations preferring to curb the discretion of their employees to prevent the organisation from being brought into disrepute. Despite this, the effects of this principle can be found throughout policing practice, particularly in its weakened form, in part because policing outcomes are nearly impossible to predict. Officers are aware of the need to effectively manage potential risk, although they appear to resent the extent to which this interferes with good day-to-day policing, and this inevitably affects the way they conduct themselves. The basis for such sentiment, and the extent to which this occurs, will be explored in the next section.

Matters of precaution, discretion, and autonomy: To what degree do officers have agency?

As explored in the previous section, officers experience the world of policing as one in which they have little authority to exercise their autonomy. Under the variation of the precautionary principle policing adheres to, there is no requirement for human agency in any meaningful sense, with the only suitable solution being to avoid potential dangers at all costs (Furedi, 1997: 107). Such claims can be seen as part of the wider contest

between the organisation and officers regarding who should be responsible for adverse situations, should they occur. Although the perception amongst officers is that they are limited when it comes to fulfilling the requirements of their operational role, Zacka (2017: 34) argues while these policies and procedures 'exclude many alternatives' for staff working within a bureaucratic system, they do provide 'a range of options that frontline workers must choose from'. For Zacka (ibid), 'the world of street-level bureaucrats is one of 'bounded' discretion', with the rank-and-file continuing to possess 'flexibility in choosing the most effective means to attain the ends they are instructed to pursue'. Although the bureaucratic organisation of the police may naturally lend itself to some loss of discretion, officers are still afforded a degree of autonomy in how they choose to carry out their work (Maguire, 2000: 331; de Maillard and Savage, 2021: 157). This is also the perception of the management team, who argue officers have a variety of alternatives to choose from when considering potential courses of action:

I can see it from their end...going into the same house day after day after day where nobody makes a complaint and you're like, 'well, what more can I do for this person?'...What I try to say to the officers is it's not all about positive action in terms of police arresting, there's a lot more stuff we can do for these people, referral agencies and stuff. That for me comes back to our rationale of what you do and what you don't do, so our hands could be tied in terms of the criminal aspect, but we've taken positive action and done something else. And that's what officers need to record, so we prefer then, 'oh we've provided them with contact details of an agency, for both people, not just the victim, because obviously the perpetrator has issues as well', in order to stop that, so in terms of risk aversion, that is where the risk is at. - Inspector A.

A lot of processes have been put in place over the years because of things that we have got wrong. It can almost become a safety blanket, 'if I follow this route, and I follow this process, then I can't be criticised because I've done everything that has been recommended as a result of what went wrong maybe 10 years ago'. And maybe there is an element of sticking rigidly to, 'we do this because that's the way it's done', rather than maybe looking at something on its merits as it is, and having the confidence to make a decision on what you've got there and

then in front of you, because it should be as we know, about the information and intelligence you've got available to you there and then, but sometimes that almost feels like it's opposed to the processes that are in place, especially if you say, if officers see that process as being their safety net, as it were, it can be difficult to change mindsets. - Chief Inspector B.

The perception of those further up the organisational pyramid is that officers continue to interpret policy in a risk-averse manner, despite having permitted discretion to choose the most suitable course of action. To some extent we see this taking place, for instance, when considering the domestic violence arrest discussed earlier in this chapter. This contrasts with Flanagan's (2008: 51) assertion that such behaviour is symptomatic of officers' struggle to implement voluminous policies provided on behalf of policing organisations. Instead, the perception of the management team is that officers do not have an accurate understanding of risk, with officers blindly following policy over attempting to identify practical solutions to the problems they face. Interestingly, managers do not consider the role of the organisation in creating a culture of potential risk aversion. However, employee behaviour is shaped by the occupational environment in which it sits, and policing is not an exemption to this principle. Differing perspectives between the rank-and-file and those in middle management are not new (see Waddington, 1999: 331), and there is a contrast between managers and officers, who believe they are expected to consistently follow rigid processes set out for them by the organisation, regardless of suitability:

While with response officers, we begin talking about police driving powers, and they tell me response officers are not allowed to pursue suspect vehicles and that only traffic officers are authorised to do so, with the remark of 'there's one for your risk aversion!' They tell me Stonecastle Police are one of the most risk averse forces, for instance not allowing me to shadow firearms officers, which the officers feel would be very useful for me in terms of risk and blame 'when actually

you're 20 times more likely to be assaulted when you're out with response.' - Field notes, September 2021.

While observing an investigations team, a response sergeant comes in and asks to swap an automatic car for a manual vehicle, because the person who needs it cannot drive automatic cars. Ellen, a detective constable, interrupts and says 'I'll drive it. I've driven automatics for years'. She is told she can't because she will need to do an automatic driving course run by Stonecastle Police, which she states is ridiculous. - Field notes, November 2022.

There is an obvious contrast between the perceptions of officers and the organisation regarding how staff should handle matters of risk. Such perceptions feed into the organisational contest regarding who should remain accountable for controlling risk, with each party holding the other responsible for perceived failings. Such sentiments displayed by officers demonstrate the principles of precautionary risk thinking; the notion that all aspects of risk must be eradicated, and because risk assessments cannot accurately forecast all and every risk that may occur, risks are instead assessed in terms of the potential worst-case scenario (Black and Lumsden, 2020: 69). Here we notice an interesting dichotomy: Officers claim they feel trapped by policies, with little choice but to take demonstrable and clear forms of action, while the management team believe officers adhere to ostensibly flexible policies too rigidly and are afraid to deviate from tried-and-tested methods to prevent a negative outcome from occurring. In practice this means both sides become frustrated with the behaviour of the other, as they perceive their opponent is acting in protective self-interest rather than attempting to manage risk accurately and professionally. Such perspectives perfectly capture the organisational contest regarding how the unique forms of risk policing faces should be best addressed, with each side believing that the other is failing to accurately carry out their task.

An alternative argument is presented by Black and Lumsden. They contend that one of the methods used by the organisation to control how staff interact with hazards is via 'organisational technologies of risk'; tools and systems designed to ensure officers receive clear guidance on how to best manage hazards. One of the ways this is achieved is via the THRIVE (threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability, and engagement) template used by force control rooms. Utilising this technique ensures staff can 'assess the level of harm, or threat of harm, and guides staff to take appropriate and proportionate action where required' (College of Policing, 2021). Interestingly, in line with the weak precautionary principle, which is typically not underpinned by evidence, the college acknowledges in their guidance that there is a 'lack of evidence associated with these checklists and tools' but that 'this does not mean however, that checklists and tools have no value. They can inform and guide a responder on the nature and origin of risks. However, decisions about the level of risk and what action to take rely on responders using professional judgement'. Such guidance encourages staff to adhere to the worst-case scenario regardless of any evidence to contrary, while ensuring that responsibility for such decisions rests with the individual themselves. Black and Lumsden (2020: 77) note using such tools inescapably lead to an increased focus upon the management of potential risk, as this is continually at the forefront of staff's minds when dealing with an incident, which supports Fischer and McGivern's (2016: 248) notion that such technologies serve to increase staff fears regarding risk, rather than assuaging them. This approach also results in the removal of professional judgement, as staff feel they must rely on prescriptive policy and cannot

use their individual judgement, despite the position taken in the official guidance claiming otherwise.

The disparity between staff and management regarding how risk should be approached is further reflected in their attitudes towards the THRIVE template. Interestingly, members of the management team generally took the view such technologies were helpful to staff as they provided a useful framework to guide their decisions:

THRIVE...It's a document that they can work through in their heads to be able to decide what grading that call should be, and who should actually deal with it. So, it's giving them the ownership and the confidence to be able to make those decisions. - Superintendent B.

Other managers felt these technologies should be helpful, but staff were not using them properly. For instance, a member of the SMT informed me that call handlers often fail to complete the THRIVE assessment accurately, as they struggle to understand the difference between threat, risk, and harm. This perspective suggests staff lack the necessary skill to distinguish between these concepts and thus require prescriptive guidance to effectively do so. However, I noticed when observing call handlers that they were able to discern between the concepts, although when an incident was particularly low level it was less time consuming to complete the essential sections of the template and then close the incident. These staff perceived there was no need to differentiate between these concepts when particularly low-level incidents occurred, and that there would be no significant consequences for them should they treat them in this manner. These actions represent a move away from the precautionary principle and instead

engaging with a probabilistic, rather than a possibilistic form of risk management. To do otherwise would have led to staff mindlessly following such procedures as reflected in Flanagan's (2008: 51) concept of staff following 'Rolls Royce processes' for tasks that did not require extensive rationales to justify the action – or lack of action - taken.

In this way, this technology is reduced to a bureaucratic process that constrains staff as they experience the burden of demonstrating they used the tool properly, rather than accurately assessing risk using their professional judgement. Although such technologies were originally introduced to encourage staff to assess risk independently, these in fact have a stifling effect on their behaviour and lead them to prescriptively follow process, in line with the concerns raised in the Home Office's Front Line Review that staff felt pressured to follow such guidance, even when they felt these efforts would not be fruitful. There is a disparity in the views expressed by officers and management: senior leaders feel such tools give officers a useful framework to assist in their assessment of risk, whereas staff feel they are required to demonstrate they are following process, with a particular focus on documenting rationale over an accurate and realistic assessment of risk. Power (2007) notes that for such institutions, risk is something to be actively managed, even if there is little chance of this occurring. He argues that despite this, institutions are likely to 'act as if the management of risk is possible' (Power 2007: 6). By extension, this involves the employees of the organisation also acting in a similar manner. Such tools are a symptom of this approach, with staff feeling they must follow such processes to the letter, to demonstrate they can professionally handle any risks they encounter.

A further layer of apparent risk aversion is added when partner agencies are considered, especially in relation to who they perceive should take the lion's share of responsibility for risk handling. As we shall see, although such arrangements have been introduced to ensure the appropriate handling of risk, such systems also create opportunities for potential conflict between these organisations, both in the way they recognise risk, and how they feel it should best be managed. It is to this we turn in the concluding section.

Partnership working and responsibility for risk.

In recent decades, policing has been increasingly characterised by a network of public agencies working alongside law enforcement organisations, typically referred to as partnership working. Ericson and Haggerty (1997: 33) note communicating knowledge about risk within policing has now expanded to include other professionals, who also become involved in perpetuating the same risk management processes policing typically adheres to. This approach aims to encourage the sharing of information between various government agencies, prevent the reproduction of work, and to centralise resources (College of Policing, 2020). Due to this, policing organisations are expected to increasingly work alongside other agencies to manage and contain risk. The partnership approach presents further hazards for staff to manage, who have been described in official reports as anticipating potential risks in relation to this way of working (Fleming, 2006; Crawford and Cunningham, 2015: 79; Rabaiotti and Harrison, 2023; 327). This includes assuming potential safeguarding risks which were previously the domain of other agencies, alongside the ever-present threat of sanctions that

typically sit alongside higher-risk policing activities interlinked with partnership working (Flanagan, 2008; Police Foundation, 2019; Home Office, 2019). Officers allege these processes 'strangle' them as practitioners (Police Foundation, 2019), leading to apparent risk aversion as they attempt to navigate working relationships with these organisations. What occurs in practice, however, is a form of competition between these different bodies to pass the risk to other organisations, with partner agencies often presuming the police would assume responsibility for the bulk of the risk work:

During meetings with partner agencies, I noticed how the chair of the meeting is usually a member of Stonecastle Police, who often seems to do most of the work, prompting inputs from others and working to move the meeting forward in a prompt fashion. The teams involved all worked from different systems that could only be accessed by the individual agency themselves, and information sharing appeared to rely on the required party attending and sharing the relevant data. The expectation seemed to be that the police would manage most of the risk presented in the scenarios discussed. - Field notes, February 2022.

This observation is underpinned by extant research that identifies policing organisations frequently assume responsibility for driving forward initiatives, rather than working jointly with other agencies (O' Neill and McCarthy, 2014). Once again, the reality of policing contrasts with official guidance supplied by oversight bodies. The College of Policing 'Risk Principles' (2013) state 'the police should not assume responsibility, directly or indirectly, for all forms of risk....as other agencies may have more appropriate skills, resources and legal powers.' However, the research offers numerous examples of this occurring, for instance in the police being identified as the responsible agency for the risk a matter carries as soon as a request for assistance is made by members of the public, even if other agencies already have prior knowledge and involvement in the

matter (Police Foundation, 2018: 5; HOC, 2018: 71). This results in the perception police officers and staff carry a greater burden of responsibility than their counterparts:

We are the agency who can't say no, so if you've got associated risks attached to things, there is going to be an expectation on the police to be involved. - Chief Inspector A.

Alex gave an example of a care home that rang every night and reported someone as missing. Officers felt the care home was 'reporting to process' rather than dealing with identifiable risk. Alex stated the boy would regularly wake up at 5 p.m., go out and then return in the early hours of the morning. Due to this, he suggested amending his care plan, so the home could then contact the police at 8 or 9 in the morning rather than 1 or 2 in the morning if he had not come home. They told him they could not do this because this would present too much risk. Alex expressed frustration with child services' tick box approach with them suggesting if the boy was not back by curfew, they will simply pass it to the police to deal with. However, he recognised if the police did not go out and speak to the care home the bronze inspector would be asking why the team were not doing anything to tackle this. - Field notes, safeguarding team, March 2022.

Research (Police Foundation: 2018: 4; Van Dijk, Hoogewoning & Punch, 2019: 9) highlights the complexities of complying with a plethora of risk management procedures and regulations typically found within such partnership arrangements. When operating in such systems, policing consequently becomes 'one of many contributors to the expert system of risk management that creates the patient's dossier, and therefore lose control over particular outcomes as well as over the progress of cases' (Ericson and Haggerty 1997: 37–8). It is this loss of control that is particularly pertinent when we consider policing in the context of partnership working. Here, Alex's frustrations here are clear. He feels the care home is not undertaking an accurate and measured attempt at analysing risk and are instead passing any potential risk to the police to manage, without attempting any ownership of this themselves. The burden of doing so is then

passed to the police to manage, with the agency being able to say they have 'done something'. Such instances as that above highlight how there is a secondary contest at play, not only between the organisation and its staff, but also between policing organisations and their partner agencies, that one organisation must assume responsibility for the risk, with the police perceiving the default assumption from these agencies is this risk is best absorbed by law enforcement. For many officers, partnership working represents a requirement for the police to take an active role in managing risks typically not falling under their remit. Each agency attempts to pass the risk to another, with each actor wanting to discharge the risk from themselves as expediently as possible. If anything goes awry, then they will not be held responsible for these failings.

Similar attempts to pass potential risk to external actors can be found in the missing persons team, tasked with locating young missing persons who were assessed as presenting a medium or high risk to themselves or others. I observed once this team took on the task of locating the missing person, they also took entire ownership of the potential risk that accompanies the situation. This represents a clear attempt to discharge the risk policing organisations state they have been lumbered with back to the agencies who originally made the request for assistance. To justify doing so, police agencies will cite the absence of significant risk in such cases, which then allows them to discharge what little risk remains to other agencies. Other instances occurred of partner organisations also attempting to discharge such risk by utilising similar processes:

Greg, a Detective Sergeant and Lisa, a member of his team, are having a conversation about a child abuse case referred to his team by the health department. It is reported there are injuries on the baby that have been allegedly explained by the parents, but the health department has submitted a report expressing concerns they don't feel were adequately addressed by this explanation. Greg seems visibly annoyed at this, stating this is a clear example of the hospital 'covering their arse, there's nothing in it' before pausing and adding '...but then there might be' and states an investigation may need to be carried out. He said they may then have to re-interview the parents as suspects in relation to a possible allegation of child abuse, and in turn 'cover their own arses', 'because we know there's nothing in it, but we still must make attempts to investigate it regardless'. It seems to be a vicious cycle, with each department acting and reacting to say they have done 'something', even if that 'something' is ultimately fruitless in terms of results achieved.

He says this investigation is unfair on the young parents, and 'the hospital seems to be going for them' and offering them early help via social services will be more suitable for them than attempting to criminalise them. Greg tells me the health team are not thinking about the rest of the process and are simply 'doing their part' and documenting the situation but are not mindful of what comes after that. Lisa tells me the report contains one line from a doctor that says it cannot be ruled out the injury to the child was intentional. As a result, social services state they want to put the family on a child protection register, as apparently the report states they 'can't rule out future serious harm' to the child. It transpires a potential explanation for the scratch on the baby's face could be the removal of a hospital feeding tube, but this doesn't appear to be given much consideration, either by the health or social services teams. Lisa makes a phone call to Greg, and he tells her he is considering taking no further action as there is a lack of evidence to suggest the injury has been purposefully caused by the couple. As a result, he is not going to investigate the matter without medical evidence to support the claims made. He sounds hesitant when he says this, and then goes on to state 'I am thinking about our reputation, it is unlikely, but if something goes wrong then they are going to point at the police'. - Field notes, March 2022.

Fleming (2006: 111) notes how in the world of partnership working, police actions are heavily influenced by the limits placed upon them by external agencies. This excerpt outlines how the processes of operating to the worst-case scenario are also present in the partner agencies policing works with. We can see an example of these institutions rigidly follow process in a comparable manner to policing organisations, to demonstrate they have done all they could to address potential sources of risk during the decision-

making process. This is met with frustration and anger on the part of the police, who do not recognise how they also engage in similar practices of deflection and minimisation of perceived risk. In both instances, staff behaviour is underpinned by Hemphill's (2020) weakened version of the precautionary principle, the idea the worst-case scenario must continually be catered to, regardless of any evidence to the contrary. A desire for risk to be passed to the other agency, a viewpoint held by both officers and partner organisations alike, also demonstrates a desire to minimise the risk cases present, both to the organisation and those working within it. Like their relationship with the organisation, there is a contest with partnership agencies regarding who should be responsible for the risk incidents carry. Such instances raised a much broader question of how police organisations and their staff interact with the various forces that dictate how they should approach and manage risk. It is to this we turn in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the way officers conceptualise risk is far from straightforward. Although risk is typically and frequently discussed in terms of the risk presented to victims in criminal cases, it is often risk to self that is at the forefront of officers' minds when doing so, which is in part influenced by the organisation's desire to avoid officers attracting unwanted risk, which has become of paramount importance in recent years. I have outlined the paradoxical relationship between organisational policy and localised officer attitudes and behaviours, and how official guidance given by the organisation is often at odds with instructions given from senior leaders, which in tandem shape the need for precaution to be adopted on the part of officers. Currently,

there is a battle between policing organisations and staff regarding who takes the lion's share of responsibility for proactively dealing with risk, alongside the subsequent fallout should such handling be deemed to be inadequate. There is also conflict regarding who is perceived as risk averse; both groups have a lot to gain and little to lose from painting the other as the source of the problem. Policing organisations have highlighted how they have provided guidance for officers, who they perceive as continuing to adhere to unnecessarily risk averse practices. Conversely, officers report being constrained by the structural conditions in which they operate, including rigid policies that leave little room for discretion, although as Zacka (2017: 34) points out, these officers often have more agency than they are prepared to acknowledge.

While policing organisations are understandably concerned with potential risk to their reputation, officers themselves focus primarily on the risks they face as they attempt to navigate the burden placed upon them by this organisational preoccupation. In this way, officers selectively attend to these risks as posing a significant threat to their place in the occupational order; a perception which is heavily influenced by the occupational environment in which they operate (Douglas, 1988: 48). I have argued here that claims of risk aversion are a way for officers and organisations to account for problems they perceive as being beyond their control. By painting officers as risk averse, organisations are placing responsibility for failing to manage instances of risk onto the officers themselves. Equally, by identifying the organisation as risk averse in its approach to policing tasks, officers claim they have no agency over the processes of risk aversion to which they are subjected. Such claims represent attempts made by officers to protect themselves from such risks by minimising the potential role they play

in maintaining these. Instead, officers behave in a manner akin to the precautionary principle and attempt to control for all and every risk they may encounter to assuage their anxieties. There are several ways in which these forms of risk can conflict and addressing one may mean continually passing risk to another if both cannot be addressed by mutually efficient means.

The data from this chapter highlight how the organisational context described here influences both organisational and officer perception in relation to matters of risk. They also contribute to the wider literature by developing our understanding of how officers understand and experience different forms of risk. The extant literature has previously described officers as being averse to tackling matters of risk; this research has demonstrated how officers are comfortable with the nature of the risks they face, but less so with regards to the expectations placed upon them that they will adhere to rigid policies while doing so. This knowledge allows us to understand which risks officers selectively attend to, and their potential reasons for doing so. The next chapter will expand upon this concept, to understand the ways in which officers actively interact with tools given to them by the organisation, as an attempt to manage the risk they perceive being posed to them.

Chapter Five: The 'risk burden': How staff respond to threat, risk, and harm²

A lot of the time, you'll be worse off not making the same decision, because you can pretty much guarantee something will go wrong if you don't. So again, it just comes down to making that decision, rationalising it. And even if you do then get the negative outcome or not the outcome you were looking for, again, as long as you can highlight why you're doing things and why your train of thought was based on the information at that time then you can't really be criticised. - Chief Inspector A.

The excerpt above captures how risk is approached in Stonecastle Police, drawing attention to the continual need to actively manage potential danger. While the previous chapter outlined how risk to role is the primary deliberation when staff consider potential hazards, what remains to be explored in any great depth is the way police employees attempt to grapple with this type of risk, and whether the findings of the thesis thus far, that officers and staff predominantly fear the dangers that arise should they fail to manage the risks they face, are replicated in their actions. It makes sense that the specific pressures of policing will shape individual practices regarding risk and blame, especially when staff feel under pressure to control risk at all costs. Such an awareness will be explored by examining the practices officers use to mitigate perceived risk to their role, which by extension secure their place in the organisation.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: Firstly, it will explore the ways in which a heightened awareness of risk to self is embedded into the daily rituals of staff and is shaped by the unique pressures they face. In doing so I will demonstrate how many informal policing practices are tailored towards neutralising the perceived risks staff

² Sections of this have been published in Farrow, K. (2024). Blame culture: The line between blame and accountability in policing, *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, Volume 18.

encounter, again utilising the precautionary principle to explain the motivations of staff as they undertake such behaviours. Doing so will allow me to examine how officers mitigate the perceived risks they face, and how their relationship to risk arises from the varied pressures they face as they carry out their work. This chapter will also detail how officers and staff use the concept of risk to deflect the dangers that arise should they fail to manage these adequately, exploring how such dangers differ depending on their role within the organisation. I will also examine the extent to which such behaviours are undertaken by officers independently of the organisation, or whether such efforts are directly encouraged by the policing institution. I then examine the model utilised by the Rape Investigation Team (RIT), which is specifically designed for a realistic appreciation of the myriad risks involved in investigating complex cases. This particular area of police work has been chosen to highlight how policing staff interact with unique and uncertain forms of risk, and by examining this I hope to understand how such pressures shape their attitudes towards risk, and how their attitude differs from those found in the wider organisation.

How officers mitigate risk to the role

It has been discussed in the previous chapter that the form of risk typically at the forefront of officers' minds is the danger that arises should they fail to discharge their duties appropriately. It also outlined how such fears are stoked by continual reminders from the organisation that officers are expected to protect the reputation of the institution via the sensible handling of risk. But how are these perceived dangers mitigated, and what steps do officers take to minimise the chances of this form of risk

occurring? During fieldwork, I discovered numerous examples of what could be conceived as risk averse practices taking place, which were undertaken seemingly under the officers' own initiative rather than at the behest of the organisation. This chimes with claims made by Campbell (2004: 700) that officers recognise the benefits such procedures bring with regards to meeting accountability requirements, despite displaying negative attitudes towards these in the first instance. However, upon further inspection, we can see how such techniques are in fact encouraged by the organisation, despite their claims to the contrary. This phenomenon will be explored via the previously mentioned organisational technologies of risk supplied by the organisation to ensure officers sensibly and appropriately manage risk. While these technologies are imposed by policing organisations themselves, such tools are also independently employed by officers to demonstrate they did all they could to minimise the risks presented to themselves, which this chapter will illustrate. In particular, I noticed how officers attempt to mitigate potential risk using specific techniques designed to 'cover your arse', involving the use of organisational technologies of risk to varying degrees. This will be explored in greater depth throughout this chapter.

The continual requirement for documentation: 'If it wasn't written down, then it didn't happen'.

As the above maxim demonstrates, documentation represents the most tried-and-tested method for officers attempting to control the risk they face by creating an 'official' record of decisions made. This has been widely demonstrated in the extant literature, identified as a form of bureaucratic undertaking in a variety of reviews, which name this practice

as a key component of so-called 'risk averse' practices witnessed in policing (Flanagan, 2008, Heaton, 2009; Heaton, 2010). Campbell (2004: 697) states how staff frequently engage in keeping detailed narrative accounts of any decisions taken, partially by utilising what Black and Lumsden (2020: 66) term 'organisational technologies of risk'. These bureaucratic technologies, such as call logs and crime reports, are provided by the organisation for staff to record justifications for potential acts and omissions. They also 'act as a form of precaution against unintended consequences' by showing officers took every possible action to mitigate the risks of that particular situation (Black and Lumsden, 2020: 78). Tomkins and Bristow (2023: 11) provide more information regarding the drivers behind such an approach. They note in their research how an organisational focus upon the need for transparency leads to feelings of anxiety on the part of staff. To reduce such tensions, staff then work to display what the authors refer to as 'false transparency'. This involves providing detailed accounts of all actions undertaken, but in a manner reflecting 'truth, but not the whole truth'. This allows them to selectively display specific aspects of their account that paint them in a good light, which also ostensibly ensures openness. Whilst undertaking such practices provides insurance against potential consequences should staff fail to demonstrate the required behaviour, it also serves to remind staff of the need to continually deflect potential risk to self, further increasing staff anxieties in relation to this.

As we have seen elsewhere in the thesis, the need for justification is frequently at the forefront of staff undertakings as they attempt to confront the risks inherent in their role. Such an appreciation is influenced by an awareness that as street level bureaucrats, they may be called upon at some unknown point in the future to provide a

rationale for the action, or inaction, they have undertaken (Lipsky, 1980; Zacka, 2017: 179). They subsequently act to mitigate the potential danger such a risk presents by documenting the rationale for why decisions were taken. These details can then be produced as a justification, if necessary, after the fact. These narrative accounts function as constant reminders to staff that they may be required to produce a rationale for their actions at any time and keeps the notion of risk at the forefront of their minds. The need to provide a rationale for any decisions taken provides an incentive for staff to behave in a manner they can account for when required to do so (Zacka, 2017: 179). Such a feeling is enhanced by continual external calls for accountability, principally from public institutions such as the media, with the organisation additionally influencing officer behaviour by ensuring they are aware of the need for continual documentation, by always providing and encouraging the use of these.

The options staff can choose from to document actions taken are continually expanding, with the most recent iteration of this being body worn video (BWV), which has risen to prominence in recent years as an integral method of ensuring accountability from frontline officers. Research such as that conducted by Willis (2022: 722) finds officers frequently experienced anxiety regarding how to best adhere to the discretionary nature of BWV policy. The introduction of BWV also created tensions between managers and their subordinates due to their ability to be disciplined over infractions they had previously kept hidden from management (Willis, 2022: 724). There are also instances in the literature (Owens, McCann, and McKenna, 2014: 17) of officers feeling concerned they would be required to justify any action taken if a third party should view the BWV, as well as potential inaction, after the incident had taken

place. Conversely, other research highlights how rather than seeing such interventions as an 'unnecessary evil', as some literature has predicted (Reichers, Wanous and Austin 1997: 48), BWV is particularly useful as form of documentation for officers, for instance in gathering evidence in relation to domestic violence cases (Owens, Mann and McKenna, 2014:1), as well as reducing the volume of complaints made against them (Ellis, Jenkins and Smith 2015: 1), and decreasing the number of use of force incidents officers become involved in (Cubitt et al, 2017: 379). Interestingly, the response from officers to BWV is bidirectional: whilst officers can utilise BWV to support their version of events should it be required, they can also cause officers to feel they are under constant surveillance, leading to heightened anxieties around utilising such tools. The research demonstrates how BWV is widely used as a technique to provide additional cover for officers in potentially confrontational situations, and is embraced rather than avoided by staff as a result:

We attended the scene with medical staff to detain a woman under the Mental Health Act. We enter the property to find a female lying on the sofa, who seems visibly distressed. The officers told her to get up, and they slowly began to approach her. At this point she began shouting 'get off me' and said the officers would be sexually abusing her if they touched her. She was clearly very mentally unwell. After she made this allegation, Carl then said loudly 'right, the camera is on!' and switched on his BWV. He clearly anticipated a significant level of risk in the situation, perhaps even a potential complaint, leading him to switch the camera on in anticipation of this. Eventually they escorted the woman out of the premises, and she then went into the ambulance and was taken away without further ado. - Field notes, response team, October 2021.

During training, the federation representative tells the probationary officers of a situation which involved a member of the public who had slipped and hit their head, but then alleged the officers had assaulted her and caused the injury. The representative said neither of the officers had their body worn video on, (and thus

were not protected from such allegations), 'get it on, and it will protect you'. - Field notes, January 2021.

These excerpts highlight how BWV is utilised by officers to demonstrate their appropriate handling of risk. In both instances, BWV is used to provide a verifiable account of what happened during the incident. Unlike other forms of documentation, BWV does not primarily rely on officer recall, and is less susceptible to bias, although officers can be selective regarding when they choose to use BWV. BWV provides similar protection for officers that other forms of documentation do, by providing them with the opportunity to create a record that can be used later to justify any action taken (Coudert, Butin and Le Metayer, 2015: 755). Interestingly, rather than avoiding this form of answerability, officers appear to welcome this. Such technologies serve the dual purpose of providing cover for both the officer and organisation, as it allows both policing bodies and those they employ to demonstrate all necessary procedures provided by the organisation were followed. Officers appear to understand the need for such technologies and instead of seeing them as attracting additional unwanted scrutiny, enthusiastically utilise them to protect them from unwanted risk. Like the function that arrests played for the officers discussed in the previous chapter, such practices also serve the purpose of acting as a presentational technique (Hood, 2013: 17), allowing staff to demonstrate they are attempting to deal with risk responsibly, both to the higher-ups within the organisation, as well as those sitting outside policing. This not only serves to demonstrate officers followed appropriate procedures when dealing with a policing matter but can also be used to justify their decisions after the fact, in line

with the requirements of the hierarchical organisation they operate within (see Zacka, 2017: 179).

The need for verifiable justification is particularly visible in cases that involve making no risk or low risk decisions, which often required a specific rationale for any lack of action taken. An example of this can be seen in the way in which the NAIRA ('no apparent immediate risk') team deals with and interacts with this task. Staff who work in the NAIRA team are responsible for dealing with slow time, low risk missing persons enquiries reported to them by partner agencies. When the missing person report is made, staff inform the caller of their responsibilities to locate the person themselves, with the intention to reduce the burden placed on the police to look for the person in question (Shalev-Greene & Pakes, 2013; Phoenix and Frances, 2022; Waring et al, 2023: 5). In the meantime, the NAIRA officer conducts a risk assessment, which is then reviewed after three and six hours. If they are not returned after this time has elapsed, they are upgraded to medium risk and a missing persons investigation is swiftly undertaken. If assessing risk from a probabilistic rather than a possibilistic perspective, this seems an appropriate and informed course of action to take, as the potential for adverse consequences to arise is low. It also serves the purpose of transferring the risk to an alternative agency, as discussed in the previous chapter, which decreases the risk the organisation itself faces if things go awry. We can see here how paradoxically, taking a probabilistic rather than a possibilistic assessment in such a scenario increases the risk staff face, who are required to put additional resources in place to manage this:

A NAIRA staff member showed me a risk assessment detailing why one individual was treated as a low risk missing person, which was around four pages in length. They stated this assessment often took a long time to complete due to

the level of detail required. I noted how they would spend a similar amount of time justifying no action than actually allocating resources to deal with the missing person. The staff member said to me they need to justify why they are not taking any action in case something goes wrong. - Field notes, August 2021.

Although such situations are assessed as presenting very little risk to those involved, extensive documentation is still required to demonstrate appropriate procedure was followed, and all potential outcomes considered. When undertaking a risk assessment from a possibilistic perspective, taking a more permissive approach to risk seems to require more justification, and it would be worth pausing to consider why this might be. When considering the worst possible outcome, inaction is seen as undesirable, as this indicates a lack of concern regarding potential outcomes of the situation in question, even when the likelihood of these occurring is impossible to ascertain (Campbell, 2004: 710). This type of risk thinking encourages action based on potential danger, even if there is little evidence to suggest that significant harm is likely (Aradau & Van Munster 2007: 102). In the situation outlined above, the worst-case scenario is not catered for, but instead processes are designed along the chances of identified risk coming to pass. When operating under the precautionary principle of risk management, to take no action is the riskier route, and consequently it requires more evidencing on the part of officers to demonstrate this was an appropriate course of action to adopt. Such actions demonstrate that even in instances where a more pragmatic approach to risk is undertaken, the influence of the precautionary principle still ensures officers are more cautious when managing risk.

However, my work found while such action was not indefensible, it did require clear justification to demonstrate the utility of such an approach, more than would normally be required if clear and demonstrative action had been taken. This may be because paradoxically, the greatest risk is to in fact assess policing situations as containing little to no risk, as when assessing situations from a precautionary perspective, there will inevitably be some element of risk. When considering this from an organisational perspective, considering the desire to avoid potential risk to reputation, we can understand why policing institutions demand a higher standard of proof from officers making a no or low-risk judgement. Such sentiment is clearly in line with the precautionary principle, discussed in the previous chapter - the burden of proof lies with the officer to demonstrate they have appropriately assessed the risk and have taken the appropriate course of action, which by default involves catering to the worst potential outcome.

‘Covering your arse’: A potential defence against inaction?

During my time with Stonecastle Police, one phrase was repeated whenever matters of risk and blame were discussed: ‘cover your arse’. This finding has been replicated across the policing literature, with Van Maanen, an American scholar (1973: 52): outlining how the ‘cover your ass’ mantra influences a great deal of police work, leading to a form of ‘bureaucratic paranoia’ which infects many policing practices where officers fear being held responsible for adverse consequences. This absorption underpins much of policing activity, especially regarding the management of perceived risk to self on the part of staff, who are keen to avoid this at all costs. Black and Lumsden (2020: 30) note

how such a mentality acts as a defensive shield against the persistent aversion to risk that permeates the occupational culture by providing informal guidance on how staff should behave in situations where risk cannot be avoided.

One area in which instances of risk aversion and 'cover your arse' are typically raised by staff is in relation to Public Protection Notices (PPNs). A PPN is an 'information sharing document' which officers use to record safeguarding matters they become aware of when conducting their duties (Stonecastle Police, 2021). The PPN is typically filled in by officers, then entered onto the force system, where it is then shared with the appropriate teams or individuals. The policy around PPNs brings to the fore an impression amongst staff that it is the organisation who are risk averse in terms of PPNs, as staff perceived the requirement from the organisation to submit a PPN for 'absolutely everything'. PPNs were often submitted with a 'just in case' or 'cover your arse' mentality, with staff completing such forms during instances where they felt them to be unnecessary but felt they would be criticised should they not do so. Examples were given by staff such as:

Nick, a response officer, told me about an incident whereby a man had complained about a woman harassing him. Nick had asked if the male had attempted to contact the woman and tell her to stop contacting him, and he said no. Nick said he still 'had' to put a PPN in even though they had not communicated that they wished to be left alone. For Nick, this was disproportionate, and he emphasised that the supposed offender now has an incident of domestic violence on their record when really this hadn't really what he would consider a DV incident. Nick stated that a PPN functions mainly for officers to cover their arses, stating that he would want to put in a PPN in as if any issues arose with PSD further down the line, as he could demonstrate that he had taken some sort of action. In this way, Nick stated that perhaps police officers were not risk averse but were instead interested in 'covering their own arses'. - Field notes, September 2021.

Jack, also a response officer, tells me about an incident whereby a window had been smashed, and the victim had stated it must be their ex-partner, without any evidence to support this. He said the officer had still put in a PPN anyway as anything went wrong then they would be in the clear. - Field notes, October 2021.

Both quotes outline how officers are aware of the risk averse response they perpetuate by putting in PPN's when they are not required, but feel it is necessary to err on the side of caution regardless. Friedman and Sapolsky (2006) term this precautionary approach as 'you never knowism', where uncertainty is feared above all else. Such an approach is evidenced in the precautionary mindset, and utilised in circumstances where staff feel they 'cannot know for certain the odds of this possible danger, so this logic says, you must prepare for it' (ibid, p. 4). Such a mindset is evidenced in relation to the submission of PPNs. Although the organisation does not specifically direct officers to submit these documents, they are encouraged to do so indirectly by other staff members via a general ethos of this 'just in case' mentality. During the fieldwork, I frequently witnessed officers say, 'did you submit a PPN?' if they were asked for advice by colleagues about what course of action to take. This occurred primarily in response roles, with those in safeguarding departments often complaining about the proliferation of unnecessary PPNs they were expected to process. Conversely, response officers regularly complained about others submitting PPNs when the situation did not call for this but sustained the cycle by continually doing this themselves. This is reflective of discussions that took place in the previous chapter, with officers once again claiming they have no agency regarding the practices they are subjected to by the organisation, while electing to undertake such procedures seemingly of their own free will. When

considering such actions against Stonecastle Police's specific guidance in relation to PPNs, the desires of the organisation are somewhat unclear. For instance, Stonecastle Police's domestic violence policy states that a PPN must be submitted to the PPU when officers are involved in domestic violence investigations, but officers are then described elsewhere in the policy as having the discretion to decide whether such a submission is necessary. Nonetheless, officers perceive they are merely following the process when it comes to the submission of PPNs. Considering the somewhat confusing instructions issued by the organisation, it is apparent that officers feel that to decide not to submit a PPN is to tempt fate somewhat.

As previously discussed, there has been a movement towards replacing the notion of danger with the concept of risk, which created a need for systems that are primarily concerned with avoiding such hazards (Furedi, 1997: 18). Responses such as those discussed above demonstrate a degree of 'buy-in' from officers, as they attempt to use these processes to establish their accountability by indicating that appropriate procedures are continually followed. Huey, Ferguson and Ricciardelli (2022: 1) argue such behaviour is an unforeseen effect of a shift toward increased levels of accountability in policing. This movement encourages officers to follow bureaucratic procedures to shield themselves from potential investigation from accountability bodies, which can be stressful for officers to experience and thus something they are keen to avoid (ibid). Such procedures are used to provide protection against potential vulnerabilities by ensuring their actions can be appropriately explained if they are called to do so. Such a perspective is replicated throughout the organisation; although PPNs represent an illuminating instance of this, officers are not limited to doing so only with

this form of paperwork. This just-in-case mentality was found throughout the organisation, particularly in relation to detailing and justifying any decisions made. As before, such an approach was particularly noticeable on response teams, who when asked by me why certain actions were undertaken, typically responded by citing a 'what-if' situation as justification. By utilising such documents, even if they feel them to be wholly futile, staff aim to demonstrate that they aimed to control every possible instance of risk, even if such an instance was unlikely to ever occur.

We have examined how officers utilise a variety of techniques to control the risks that are presented to them in their working environment. It is worth recapping here that although this behaviour appears initially to be a form of risk aversion, it is actually a means for officers to safeguard against the unwanted consequences they face should they be charged with the inappropriate handling of risk (Black and Lumsden, 2019: 72). Several of these techniques are provided by the organisation to manage and mitigate risk, to avoid potential damage to their reputation should wrongdoing occur. They also have the effect of encouraging staff to act in a risk averse manner by ensuring these tools become an integral part of the tasks they are expected to undertake. Although staff have a degree of agency in how they choose to behave, such tools shape their responses by setting the expectation that they should attempt to control any and every instance of risk they encounter, even if they are unlikely to successfully do so.

Active engagement with risk: Risk as a tool

So far in this chapter, risk has been conceptualised as something that officers must dedicate attention to while also remaining alert to its potential for attracting additional

scrutiny to the organisation. If not adequately controlled, these risks then become a hazard to their position in their occupational world. We have explored the degree to which officers have accepted the presence of risk in their work, and the extent to which policing activities are shaped around the management and containment of this risk.

What has not been examined in any great depth is how it can be utilised meet officers' own needs and ends as they attempt to fulfil their mandate. When undertaking the research, I noticed how risk was central to many considerations undertaken in relation to a crime or incident and can be used to justify decisions that officers want to make to meet their own objectives. These goals vary depending on the remit of that particular department - in response teams, the aim is often to make an arrest and have the person charged with an offence, in investigations departments it is to secure a conviction in court, and in the PSC, it is to accurately and safely resource calls for assistance. As previously alluded to, the notion of risk is used to validate and provide support for police action, especially when high-risk decisions are undertaken. The higher the stakes of a particular situation, the more scope decisive actions possess to be justified via the medium of risk. This form of engagement is particularly prevalent in investigations teams, who are often called upon to validate actions taken during complex investigations, to demonstrate the case is serious enough to merit attention from the CPS:

Harry and Angela, two detectives working in CID, begin to discuss bail conditions for the sexual offence she is dealing with. A lot of the suspect's bail conditions will be related to the risk he presents to others, especially children as well as any potential victims. They decide to include information that he is not allowed to communicate with children, he is also homeless, has mental health issues and is significantly at risk of self-harm. Harry recommends that Angela uses this

information to seek the decision to remand from the CPS. - Field notes, CID, November 2021.

Tyler, a detective in CID, tells the victim their statement would be used to 'convince' the CPS of the need for the matter to go to court. He told me he wanted to make the statement as elaborate as possible because of the risk the female would not comply with the investigation later down the line. If this happened, there would still be enough evidence to obtain a prosecution even if she did not wish to proceed with the matter. - Field notes, CID, November 2021.

These excerpts demonstrate how the notion of risk can be used to achieve the goals of officers, in this example securing a successful prosecution. Through doing so, officers also seek to protect themselves against the risk that arises through failure to secure such a charge. Officers perceive themselves as ineffective when this occurs, leading officers to utilise the concept of risk to minimise the chances of this occurring. In this instance, risk is used as a tool to fulfil their mandate in terms of demonstrating the need for other agencies to act, playing a large part in the documentation sent to the CPS. The notion of risk is frequently used by officers to provide a justification for why a case meets the threshold for prosecution. For instance, the use of the word 'vulnerable' was often used to describe the victim in witness statements, demonstrating the heightened level of risk the individual faced if they were not appropriately safeguarded. Such behaviour chimes with Douglas' (1992: 22) assertion the term risk is now used to ensure accountability in modern society, arguing that the term is now used as a 'common forensic vocabulary with which to hold persons accountable' in the modern world. In the examples discussed here, we can see how the language of risk is utilised to highlight the potential ramifications that may occur should the CPS refuse to take on the case, highlighting the need for them to prosecute the individual. Similar patterns of behaviour also occur in other areas of the organisation. For instance, for more serious

offences, detailed documentation will be required to authorise a superintendent's extension to conduct further enquiries whilst a suspect remains in custody (PACE, 1984). When this is required, officers will invoke similar usage of the term risk to demonstrate why an extension of these limits is integral to the success of a particular investigation.

Such actions are taken to ostensibly prevent the escalation of risk to members of the public, thus achieving policing ends, with the aim of controlling potential danger being used to justify suggested actions. While success in doing so may result in a successful prosecution, or a timely interview of a suspect, they also act to safeguard the staff member in question from bringing the organisation into disrepute, by ensuring they undertake every possible action to bring the case to a positive outcome. Such rationales are couched in the language of harm and prevention of danger to the victim, designed to demonstrate the significant degree of risk present in the situation, which ultimately requires restrictions being placed on the suspect to control the danger they present. Instances of this frequently occurred in the PPU, which often faced significant consequences should they fail to protect victims from the risk of harm:

Barbara gave an example of a patient in a secure unit who made a complaint that she had experienced sexual touching by a male nurse. The ward safeguards the patient by stating the male cannot work with her and must be always supervised on the ward. For Barbara, this is not enough, and she feels he needs to be moved on to another ward. She says there is also a risk that a similar assault might happen again, and the female will not be protected if the male is still present on the ward. She explains the patient cannot simply leave the ward in the same way we can leave the building if we choose to, thus she is at heightened risk of harm, and is more vulnerable than we normally would be. - Field notes, safeguarding team, February 2022.

Here, we can see how the concept of risk is used to justify safeguarding decisions that may cause significant disruption on the ward in question. In line with Douglas' argument, we can also see how the term 'risk' is synonymous with the term 'danger', although the phrase is not explicitly used by Barbara at any point. In her discussion regarding the presence of the nurse, she is cognisant of the danger the patient may be in should the nurse be allowed to continue to work on the ward where she resides. As with other areas of the business, the worst-case scenario is catered to when such decisions are made, and the notion of preparing for risk translates to preparing for all and any potential dangers (Friedman and Sapolsky, 2006: 4). Mythen and Weston (2023: 11) note that in relation to child sexual exploitation matters, the two concepts of risk and vulnerability are used regularly, with distinction rarely being made between the two descriptors. The term vulnerability was often used across the PPU and appeared at first glance to be interchangeable with the notion of risk. However, I found that whilst the term 'risk' was used to discuss potential hazards and dangers posed to the individual in their current situation, the idea of 'vulnerability' was used to convey potential future risk, especially if successful intervention did not take place, which can be seen in the example given above. Both terms were used to emphasise the need for police to act sooner rather than later, and frequently formed justifications for decisive police action.

We have seen how risk in some instances is welcomed by officers to help them fulfil their mandate. The concept of risk management is regularly used by officers to enhance the chances of them achieving their goals, thus preventing risk to role by ensuring appropriate and demonstrable action is taken to minimise risk in the tasks they undertake. Where such efforts are successful, risk to the victim is typically reduced,

which has the effect of additionally safeguarding the reputation of the force by demonstrating its officers can effectively minimise a variety of risks. We have seen how staff can use risk to ensure their goals can be achieved by addressing their 'risk burden' - the specific type of risk they are expected to tackle as part of their individual role. We will now examine the risk burden of one team in particular, using the RIT as an example, as specialists in the various forms of risk encountered when investigating high harm offences.

The 'risk burdens' of distinct roles: The RIT, risk and the investigation of specialist offences

The RIT (HMICFRS (2021: 2) is a complex area of policing, characterised by a heavy workload that requires officers to manage high-risk investigations for which they need the correct experience, awareness, and supervision. With less than 1% of reported rapes ending in conviction (Hohl, 2022; Zander, 2023), the investigation of this type of offence has faced criticism due to the national focus on the lack of results for victims. Although as we have discovered, the management of risk is central to most if not all aspects of operational policing, this is particularly apparent in the investigation of serious and sexual offences, which are inevitably high-harm and high-risk in nature. This area of business is no exception to the charges of risk aversion that currently beset policing, with this phenomenon once again being highlighted in government reports and reviews as responsible for the low conviction rate and elevated level of discontinuance of rape investigations (George and Ferguson, 2021; Taub, 2021).

Despite this prevailing rhetoric, I will highlight how those areas of business that are acutely familiar with high-risk investigations appear to display comfort with the most obvious forms of risk. Through doing so, we will also explore the way in which the working environment influences their approach to risk and scrutiny. I will also outline how concerns around risk to self are as prominent in the RIT as they are elsewhere in the organisation, as staff anticipate potentially damaging outcomes arising from failing to manage the risks that such investigations present. Ultimately, as with officers elsewhere in the organisation, failure to correctly neutralise the risks they face represents a risk to the self, in the form of potential adverse consequences should they be unsuccessful. We will now examine how the handling of risk is integral to undertaking their daily business and will explore the most common forms such hazards take. Particular attention will be paid to the perceived dangers that appear when navigating the relationship with the CPS, interactions with the victim and potential risks to results both inside and out of court, each of which will be explored in turn. I will explain concerns around these hazards by utilising the precautionary principle, which explains why these particular dangers are of concern to staff working within the RIT.

A different and unique approach to risk

Despite the heightened scrutiny that the investigation of sexual offences is currently subjected to (Burman and Brindley, 2021: 199), the officers involved in this area of the business tended to be comfortable with talking about risk *prima facie*, seeing themselves as possessing the ability to manage the inherently high-risk, high-intensity nature of the role:

Max tells me the job of detective in the RIT is all about managing immediate risk.
- Field notes, RIT, October 2022.

When I told the sergeant I was examining decision making, she gave me an example of a case where she had needed to decide whether to continue investigating the case, after the refusal of the victim to make a complaint. She outlines that on the balance of the risk presented to others by the suspect, she decided to interview the suspect and press ahead with the investigation. She provides her rationale for this: she tells me that the victim and suspect are both university students and that he has a new girlfriend who is also vulnerable. She says it is therefore better to intervene now than in later years if the problem persists, as 'we can give him a rap on the knuckles' now to prevent his behaviour from potentially escalating in future. - Field notes, RIT, November 2022.

Officers are seemingly confident in their identification and subsequent management of risk. Particularly in the second example, officers seem comfortable with weighing up likely risks, and can provide detailed rationales for actions they decide to undertake. In this way, their assessment of risk appears to be grounded in a realistic assessment of likely danger, rather than operating automatically towards the worst-case scenario. Instead, officers appear to be comfortable with addressing risk in a professional capacity and often speak of it with a degree of ease. Indeed, they appear to see themselves as 'professional risk experts' (College of Policing, 2023) in the management and assessment of risk. By extension, they do not consider themselves to be risk averse and see themselves as appropriately managing the risks they face, approaching potential hazards with the correct degree of caution.

As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, there are many elements of both internal and external oversight that officers claim to abhor, yet those working within the RIT displayed a more relaxed attitude towards the notion of scrutiny. A key influence on their

confidence in approaching risk lies in the supervisory oversight that any decisions are subjected to, which is interpreted as a positive form of accountability on the part of officers. Officers were particularly comfortable with internal forms of oversight, chiefly in the form of quality checks by their immediate line management. Whereas other areas of the organisation frequently discussed nefarious outside actors waiting to trip them up whenever matters of accountability were mentioned, these were not discussed in this manner in the RIT, and instead there was an understanding and acceptance of the need to demonstrate accountability, both to internal management structures as well as to external agencies. This is attributable to the positively perceived intention of such scrutiny, which often came from internal sources, rather than the negative intentions attributed to external agencies such as the IOPC. As with other areas of policing, documentation and ratification were practices used by staff to transparently demonstrate the appropriate course of action had been taken. However, rather than being imbued with a sense of fear, as was found to be the case elsewhere in the organisation, staff used these techniques as an attempt to allay concerns around the need to display responsibility. These were positively associated with demonstrating much-needed accountability, and officers treated these with a degree of acceptance and even appreciation:

Max tells me his sergeant and inspector will regularly review outstanding tasks on the investigative log, as well as the actions that have already been completed. He shows me one case where he has decided not to arrest the suspect. The sergeant adds a comment to this decision, stating: 'I have considered an arrest but due to proximity - the suspect lives a long way away from the victim - it is not necessary until further enquiries are done. Consideration can then be made as to whether an arrest is necessary and proportionate'. - Field notes, November 2022.

Max tells me PSD checks the team's investigations to ascertain if there is any potential wrongdoing that may arise from the incorrect handling of cases. The result of these is added to the investigative log. Max tells me that alongside such checks, the sergeant and inspector will regularly review what is outstanding and what has already been done in terms of investigative tasks and will also make a note of this on the OEL for him to see. He seems comfortable with the prospect of this and appears understanding of why such accountability checks may be required. - Field notes, November 2022.

Staff in the RIT generally found such processes to be indispensable, and often used them to reduce potential risk to self by preparing a detailed rationale to obtain buy-in from a supervisor. Such tools are particularly useful in a hierarchical organisation such as that of the police, where obtaining top-level cover adds additional legitimacy to decisions taken. This practice becomes another form of ensuring potential risk is safeguarded against by obtaining additional clearance from supervisors before making potentially risky decisions (Hood, 2013: 36). If the operation fails, those on the lower rungs of the occupational ladder can demonstrate the decision was endorsed by an ostensibly more experienced individual. This finding is also discussed in more detail in chapter seven, in reference to the blaming processes that also operate within the organisation. This ratification was not always sought after by the officers themselves but was often designed into decision making processes by the organisation, which brings into the question the assertion that officers utilise apparently risk averse processes under their own initiative. Such ratification featured frequently in supervising officers' daily practices and became an integral part of the supervisory mandate, particularly in relation to the investigation of serious and sexual offences, which by their very nature attract a significant degree of risk.

It is worth considering what features of this area of business lead officers to be comfortable with the notion of risk, and any accompanying scrutiny. I argue there is less risk aversion if officers are more comfortable working with complex forms of risk on a day-to-day basis. This experience is likely to be mediated by their experiences of this oversight – the extant research demonstrates officers are more likely to be confident in their decision-making abilities if they feel fairly treated by the policing institution (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). In this area of the organisation, officers generally had positive experiences of supervisor support and oversight, leading them to exhibit less concern regarding potential risk due to the level of support experienced. Further, the RIT team perceived positive aspects to this form of internal scrutiny. Norman et al (2022) note how reviewing officers provide useful top-level cover, which demonstrates the need for this type of oversight to be embedded within the investigative process. Indeed, this appears to reduce fear of risk, rather than enhance it, and officers seemed grateful for the chance to gain insight and feedback regarding their investigative decisions. It may be the experience of supportive oversight which may lead officers to be grateful for this form of internal surveillance. In summary, what matters is the way such oversight is experienced – if officers understand and accept the reasons for why such checks and balances exist, they are more likely to be accepting of these processes.

Research has demonstrated that being treated with dignity and respect by supervisors (Quinton et al, 2015: 11), receiving meaningful feedback (Johnson, 2015: 1155) and a supportive style of management (Dick, 2011: 557) leads to positive organisational experiences, all of which contribute towards an understanding and

acceptance of oversight. The research found officers in the RIT regularly sought out such oversight from supervisors, communicated closely with managers and regularly asked for advice, all of which influenced their attitude to risk. There are several reasons why this might be the case: in particular Johnson (2015:1159) notes how supervisor feedback provides role and performance clarity, giving staff the opportunity to admit to mistakes and adjust their performance to meet the standards required (Agho, Mueller, & Price, 1993; Hutchison & Garstka, 1996; Komaki, 1986). When employees feel less concern about potential uncertainties regarding role expectations, they tend to demonstrate increased satisfaction with their relationship to both their supervisor and the organisation to which they belong. We can see how positive supervisor support influences officer attitude to risk by providing them with positively experienced oversight, rather than negatively perceived scrutiny, which can increase feelings of support when tough decisions are made. Such positive treatment leads officers to welcome oversight, rather than to fear its presence. However, as with other areas of the business, staff still were concerned regarding the potential for risk to self, and there were several sources from which such concerns stemmed. The next section of this chapter will explore some of the drivers behind these concerns, and the ways they attempt to address these anxieties.

Risk to results, and why this matters to officers.

As we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, it is important to examine what officers mean when they refer to risk, and why these matter to the officers in question. As we saw with CID officers, the most hoped-for outcome for specialist investigations teams is that of a

successful prosecution. However, in the realm of police investigation, but also in the RIT more specifically, there are several obstacles that can prevent this outcome from being realised. As previously mentioned, rape investigations are currently suffering from a notably poor conviction rate (Hohl, 2022). Indeed, Murphy et al (2022: 85) found there has been significant scrutiny regarding the outcome of rape cases in recent years, which presents an additional risk that officers need to be cognisant of. It is this that represents the most obvious form of risk to this team, who are aware of the difficulties they face in attempting to obtain a charge, alongside the potential reputational consequences this has for the institution. Failure to achieve a result risks attracting negative attention to the organisation, combined with the potential for individual staff members being held to account should this occur. There are several barriers that may prevent securing a positive outcome for this type of offence. Firstly, the submission of a high-quality evidential file rests upon the ability of the police to gather sufficient evidence to present to the CPS, for them to charge the suspect with the commission of an offence. This represents a significant risk to officers, as their success often hinges on meaningful interaction with the CPS, and the presentation of a persuasive case that will justify the continuance of a case to court. Failure to meet their specified threshold means the case cannot proceed and a successful prosecution will not be obtained.

In particular, the case of *R v Allen* has impacted upon police attitudes regarding the risk present when investigating rape allegations (Gekoski, Massey and Davies, 2023). The aforementioned case was discontinued by the CPS due to digital evidence that had not been disclosed by the police during the investigative process, which placed the prosecution's case at risk of failure. This matter had significant ramifications for

decision-making and the disclosure of material in future investigations of serious sexual offences (CPS London and Metropolitan Police Service, 2018: 1). One of the consequences of this was an increasingly risk-averse approach on the part of both the police and CPS, who became reluctant to proceed with cases that did not demonstrate a heightened chance of successful prosecution. Alongside this, there exists longstanding division between the two organisations (HMICFRS, 2021: 6; Gekoski, Davies and Allen, 2023: 4), and a desire on both sides to place responsibility with the other for low charge and conviction rates. This has placed pressure on the already fractured relationship between the police and the CPS, as we have seen with other areas of the organisation regarding partnership working, which has also led to each side blaming the other for their various shortcomings. The research also found a tension in relation to this particular relationship:

Georgia states that liaising with the CPS is a stressor of the role. She tells me 'You never know what you will get with the CPS, the cases you think they will charge they don't, and those you think they won't, they do'. She says it is difficult to know what to expect when dealing with them, which presents an additional stressor for officers. She says she can never predict the decisions that other interested parties will make, such as the jury and the CPS, because the cases are so difficult to prove and the threshold for doing so is very high. - Field notes, RIT, November 2022.

The sergeant elaborates on issues the team experiences with the CPS, saying that the longer they take to charge the suspect with an offence, the higher the chance of the victim dropping out of the process. She states the pressures placed upon the victim are extreme, and she understands why some victims drop out of the process to protect their mental health. - Field notes, RIT, November 2022.

The CPS are perceived by staff as a significant barrier to securing a conviction, particularly regarding their lack of consistency when making charging decisions. It is interesting to note how concerns raised with policing investigations, such as lengthy investigation times and weaknesses in the prosecution case (Burton et al, 2012; MOJ, 2021; HAC, 2022), are laid at the door of the CPS by the police, who do not see themselves as responsible for such failures. Like the research conducted by Gekoski, Massey and Davies (2023), the fear of the CPS risking the results they had worked so hard to achieve was evidenced, with officers holding the belief that the CPS presents a significant, yet ultimately unpredictable barrier to obtaining the result they desired. Although previous research suggests the police perceive the CPS to have a high bar for clearing cases, the message from the RIT seems to be that their standards are inconsistent rather than unobtainable, and thus almost impossible to foresee. Erratic practices are naturally difficult to plan for, which increases the risk of negative consequences in the minds of officers. Even if staff utilise a precautionary approach, and attempt to plan for every eventuality, such actions ultimately cannot control the decision the CPS may reach. Furedi (2009: 198) in his discussion of the precautionary principle, notes how groups regard uncertainty is a direct consequence of their confidence in the future. When analysing such concerns through this lens, it is easier to understand the potential insecurities underpinning these fears, particularly in relation to anxieties around the certainty of their organisational position. Further, officers are all too aware of the intense scrutiny they face and are keen to avoid this to prevent bringing the organisation into disrepute should these types of investigation not succeed.

A second hurdle to be overcome when attempting to secure a conviction is that of other criminal justice actors should the case go to trial. This group represents a further barrier to success should the defendant be found not guilty of the offences they are charged with. This is a significant risk as the outcome of the case lies predominantly with these individuals at this stage of the process, and there is little officers can do to influence the outcome. The national attention that the low conviction rate has received (HM Government, 2022; Hohl, 2022; CPS, 2023) places additional pressures upon officers, who are expected to tackle this obstacle with commitment and to make significant headway in reversing this trend. Subsequently, staff hold the perception their actions are more likely to be scrutinised than previously. When examining such instances as those referred to in the previous paragraph, we can see how such risks can damage the outcome hoped for, and how this hazard is notoriously difficult for officers to control:

Libby tells me it is generally bad news if the jury consists of more women than men. Todd agrees, and says women are bad to have on a jury, as they see their sons in the dock and think it could happen to their child and will therefore be less inclined to believe the victim's account. Libby elaborates on her fears, giving the example of a case she dealt with where a 15-year-old girl was groomed by an older male, which she had thought was a clear case of wrongdoing. Whilst at the trial, she had overheard the jurors saying, 'I don't want to say she's a slag, but have you seen how girls dress these days?'. She states that upon hearing this, she realised the case was unlikely to be successful. She said she now tells victims not to wear make-up when they give evidence, to look younger than they are, as she knows they need to play on the prejudices of the jurors. - Field notes, November 2022.

The jury represents the final hurdle officers must overcome to secure a conviction, and it is this aspect of risk they perceive is most difficult to control. Officers typically do not

play an active part in the trial, and they therefore have little option but to watch the case unfold. The only way they can attempt to control the outcome is to undertake control measures prior to the trial to decrease the risk, for instance informing the victim how to behave and how to present themselves to convince the jury of their victim status. However, evidence from Thomas (2010: 30; 2023) suggests these concerns are perhaps misplaced. Thomas (2023:19) analysed all rape charges in the UK from 2007 to 2021 and found juries were consistently more likely to convict defendants than to acquit them. These findings directly contrast with the sentiments expressed by RIT officers that juries represent a significant risk to their ability to secure a conviction, and it is worth considering why such a perception is held despite a lack of evidence to support this assertion. Stories such as those told by Libby above, serve to reinforce the 'availability bias' of such events in the minds of officers, leading them to consistently overestimate the probability of dramatic events which may jeopardise the results they seek (Kahneman, 2012: 203 - 204). Combined with cultural sensitisation towards vulnerability, and the 'othering' of those who sit outside of policing, these risks are repeatedly and significantly overestimated in the minds of officers. Such a tendency does not focus on the facts of the matter, but instead concentrates upon potential danger, with any uncertainty also being assessed as a potential threat.

It is worth considering why risk of result is so important to staff, particularly those in the RIT. As previously mentioned, a key aspect of the police mandate is to protect the public from risks that arise in the modern society; when they fail to control these risks, they consider themselves to have failed. Such efforts may also be a byproduct of the social and political pressure that officers face to produce results, first identified by

Skolnik (1966, see also Reiner, 2016). When examining the overall impact of these factors, we come to understand how officers perceive a heightened risk to the successful securing of a prosecution for the team, which ultimately prevents them from fulfilling their mandate. The victim themselves is also represented here as a danger to the case, in not knowing the exact rules for credible behaviour that other criminal justice actors implicitly understand, as well as what information to enhance to increase the chances of securing a conviction. This behaviour on the part of the officers represents attempts to curb the risk such factors present by controlling the outward presentation of the victim. The officers are aware how the victim's behaviour could be perceived by external actors, and work to minimise the risk this presents. Indeed, such risks are frequently anticipated and feared by the officers in the case:

Gabriella is concerned about a victim who has disclosed a further rape after her initial interview with the team. The other officers ask why the disclosure is problematic and Gabriella said it undermines the case because she did not disclose it at the time of the interview when she had the chance to, so it looks as if she may be hiding something. She says the defence will already be asking questions around why she has chosen to disclose the offence at this stage, when it occurred in 2013 and will be looking to cast doubt on her credibility because of this late disclosure. - Field notes, November 2022.

Libby speaks about the victim we have just conducted an interview with, 'I don't think she's going to get the result she wants...She won't be prepared to get ripped apart on the stand'. She states there is a significant chance she may not achieve a conviction, because she states in her initial account that after the suspect raped her, she then consensually gave him oral sex, which the defence will use as evidence she consented to having sex with him. She states the disclosure will also confuse the jury, who do not have a good understanding of what does and does not constitute rape and will assume the entire act was consensual. - Field notes, November 2022.

From the excerpts above, we can see how the victim is viewed as a risk by RIT officers, who fear behaviour that falls outside of the 'perfect victim' ideal (Christie, 1986: 17) may jeopardise their chances of achieving a successful result. These officers also anticipate outside actors interpreting this behaviour in a negative light, and subsequently identify steps to minimise the chances of this occurring, despite, as previously discussed, the chances of this occurring being low. It is worth considering here once again the multifaceted nature of the risks officers in the RIT must contend with. By controlling external risks to the investigation, the officers are minimising the hazards for themselves and subsequently the risk presented to the organisation's reputation should they be seen to have failed to secure convictions for serious sexual offences. This particular area of policing is under significant scrutiny and faces considerable pressure to achieve results (Stanko and Hohl, 2018). As we have seen with the concept of risk more broadly, officers claim they are imbued with organisational level responsibility for managing risk and the burden falls upon them to do what they can to achieve results that will safeguard against reputational harm (Heaton, 2010; Home Office, 2019). The most significant form of risk for these officers is risk to result and much of their activity focuses around attempting to control factors that may impinge upon this. The result of this is varied; officers are often able to demonstrate they have controlled many of the risks present in this type of investigation but experience much more difficulty when trying to control dangers created by third parties who are responsible for the ultimate securing of a charge, namely the CPS and the courts.

We have seen how the RIT's unique mandate specifically influences its approach regarding the management of risk. This area of the business is different from other

aspects of the organisation, as it involves dealing with a specific form of high-risk crime that is complex to investigate (Rumney et al, 2019: 548), coupled with a time of intensive scrutiny and negative media attention (Premkumar, 2019; Capellan, Lautenschlager and Silva, 2020; Gau, Paoline and Paul, 2022). Due to experiencing such pressures, officers clearly feel the need to do the job well to effectively manage the high 'risk burden' they carry. However, many of the negative aspects of the risk practices seen elsewhere in the organisation are absent. Although some of these practices, such as the need for documentation and ratification are on display within this department, officers demonstrated an understanding of the need for such oversight and tended to be active participants in these processes. Officers were less concerned with 'covering their arse' and were more aware of the reasons why such practices may be required, for instance to demonstrate openness and transparency in the investigative process. Via initiatives such as Operation Soteria, which is designed to increase the conviction rate for sexual offences, efforts have been made to introduce more positive working practices into this area of the organisation, for instance through the encouragement of closer and more supportive relationships with supervisors (Stanko, 2022), and it may be this that influences their more relaxed attitude to risk.

The type of scrutiny officers experience, while intense, is also supportive and focused on improving performance – there is an understandable reason for its existence, which officers appreciate and subsequently buy in to. Due to this, such oversight is not experienced as merely identifying shortcomings in their approach but serving a clear purpose from which officers can develop and learn, subsequently minimising the chance of repeated failures. Further, officers expect to encounter

scrutiny due to the nature of their work, which may prepare them for the degree of oversight they experience, with this being understood as being designed to help, rather than to hinder their efforts.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how expectations within the working environment of Stonecastle Police shapes officer and staff perceptions and treatment of risk, and how behaviours stem from their awareness of potential risk to self in their occupational world. Behaviours designed to manage the 'risk burden' each department faced were ubiquitous throughout the organisation, and although their form depended on the particular pressures of the role, elements of these practices were observable regardless of specialism. What is notable across these various aspects of the organisation are the ways the language of risk is used to control the various hazards each role encounters, and how these risks differ depending on the unique mandate of the individual area of business. These behaviours demonstrate how staff divert efforts into controlling the perception of their ability to professionally manage risk, and by extension, the external perception of their ability to do so. Although a number of these techniques were provided by the organisation, staff independently undertook such practices to safeguard themselves against potential repercussions. These behaviours were underpinned by a precautionary style of risk thinking, ensuring every potential outcome is catered for. Through such a preoccupation, we can see how operating with the worst-case scenario in mind is visible in every aspect of the organisation, reflected in practices such as

extensive documentation, and the 'cover your arse' method utilised by officers as they fulfil their day-to-day roles.

By extension, we have also examined the RIT's unique relationship to risk, and how their specific mandate influences what risks they perceive, and how they attempt to neutralise these. Despite the myriad forms of risk present in this particular area of policing activity, one of the more noticeable features about the RIT's way of working was their comfort with a significant degree of oversight. There was a general degree of acceptance and expectation in relation to the accountability requirements to which they were subjected. This was particularly notable when contrasted against the negative perceptions found elsewhere in the force of the external accountability mechanisms to which policing is also answerable.

This chapter has contributed to the wider literature around policing by detailing how officer behaviours regarding risk are heavily influenced by their understanding of the hazards they face. It aims to challenge preconceived notions officers are driven by risk aversion, when in fact such behaviours are propelled by a logical attempt to minimise perceived danger. Their perception that risk to self is the paramount danger with which they must grapple leads them to anticipate future hazards, and this fear influences their behaviour in terms of how they attempt to tackle the risk that arises when they attempt to meet their mandate. We can also see how the practices discussed here are used to justify action taken, and consequently to deflect potential blame if failings arise. The extent to which these blaming practices permeate the organisation is a key driver behind such practices, and as such will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Six - Blame culture: The line between blame and accountability in Stonecastle Police

Because we are the agency of last resort, we are the easiest to blame. Because it is more tangible when you can put the blame on a 22-year-old cop with six months service who's just come out of a pandemic with online learning who hasn't experienced much in their lives. And we invest in them to make these key decisions. They are that last person who has the last contact with an individual, and we blame them. Because it makes sense for the family, makes sense for the nearest and dearest to put a name or an identity on somebody who is at fault. But the reality is, sometimes we do get it wrong. - Superintendent C.

As discussed in previous chapters, the handling of risk is central to the policing mandate. Due to the elevated levels of uncertainty that often surround policing activities, sometimes unforeseen problems emerge, and negative consequences arise. When this occurs, policing organisations will attempt to make sense of the part that their actions, decisions, and omissions played in the events that unfolded. While seeking to identify a potential culprit for such happenings, another hazard arises - the risk of attracting personal blame for the situation that materialised. Hood (2013: 5) identifies the danger that confronts these individuals as 'blame risk', the chance of being identified as culpable for potential wrongdoing, irrespective of whether the actions surrounding the event were intentional. As the quotation above highlights, policing is particularly unique in that it is characterised by high stakes, uncertain outcomes, and decisions taken in an environment of high scrutiny and external pressure, representing the exact environment for blaming practices to flourish.

This chapter will establish the extent to which blaming practices characterise interactions in Stonecastle Police, and the degree to which staff are concerned by

potential criticism when undertaking their roles. The chapter is organized as follows: I will begin by examining the potential existence of a blame culture within policing, through an analysis of Stonecastle Police's processes of blame, alongside an exploration of the current accountability arrangements that exist within policing, and the extent these contribute towards the maintenance of blaming practices. While doing so, I will consider whether it is possible to subject policing to the appropriate degree of scrutiny, without this being experienced by officers as contributing towards a blame culture. I will examine the organisational contest that takes place in relation to the assigning and acceptance of blame, as well as the ways the different levels of the organisation attempt to deflect potential criticism away from themselves. I will continue by examining the impact blaming practices have had upon policing's relationship to the public, and the extent the notion of 'policing by consent' has been damaged by these processes. I will examine these claims through the lens of blame avoidance provided by Hood (2013), in particular the strategies the organisation and its staff utilise in an attempt to neutralise and deflect responsibility for potentially blameworthy acts via a 'framing contest' that takes place when such acts occur. Attention will also be paid to any relevant changes that have arisen in the political and social context in which policing operates. A degree of preoccupation regarding scrutiny and blame have long existed in policing, and I will explore whether there have been any significant developments in the policing environment that have heightened such concerns.

Blame or responsibility? Centring officer experience of accountability frameworks

As previously discussed earlier in this thesis, there are concerns within the policing sphere that a blame culture permeates the policing organisation. A contributing factor toward this phenomenon is a lack of differentiation between blame and accountability in relation to ensuring officers remain responsible for actions they choose to undertake. For many officers, accountability is synonymous with the concept of blame, in part due to the way accountability systems are designed to primarily identify a responsible individual, with recognition of organisational shortcomings falling secondary to this. These arrangements, such as those used by the IOPC and PSDs, are designed to establish individual liability at the earliest opportunity once they are alerted to potential misconduct taking place. Upon receipt of a referral from the police force in question, the investigator must assess whether the matter requires investigation and if it does, whether it falls under one of three categories; a complaint about an officer's behaviour, a conduct matter about an individual or group of officers that has been identified by the force itself, or a death and/or serious injury investigation, usually linked to the actions of a police officer in relation to that particular event. All three modes of investigation involve the identification of a culpable individual (or group of individuals) and scrutinising the conduct of the parties involved over the wider context in which such decisions were taken. While adherence to organisational policies is examined as part and parcel of the investigation, whether the necessary conditions existed for adherence to these policies to realistically take place, is not. The terms of reference that dictate the parameters of the investigation also explicitly rule out examination of partner agencies, and findings must only concentrate on the conduct of the police themselves (IPCC, 2015: 5).

While considering how attitudes towards blame are formed in policing, we should acknowledge how these formal accountability frameworks shape how officers make sense of blame. Perceptions of blame are heavily influenced by the notion officers will be publicly held to account for any failings (see Home Office, 2019), which is related to the bureaucratic accountability structure to which they are held. It is typically such systems that officers refer to when they speak of a blame culture (see Flanagan, 2008; Berry, 2009; Metcalfe, 2017). Zacka (2017: 180) provides more information regarding the relationship between the two concepts by building on Lipsky's (1980) notion of street-level bureaucrats. He notes how many public bureaucracies are characterised by hierarchical accountability within the organisation, as well as forms of direct accountability from those outside of the institution, and as a result, the rank-and-file can be expected to provide justification for any decisions made. Since staff are aware they are required to account for these decisions, they subsequently behave in a manner that they are able to explain. It should be noted the term accountability can be used to describe both formal mechanisms of accountability, as well as wider public scrutiny of police practice via more informal mechanisms; with both exerting a powerful influence over police behaviour. However, it appears that regardless of the form these accountability systems take, they are nonetheless experienced as blaming systems by those subjected to them.

We see how such arrangements are perceived by staff as a search for a culpable other, on whom the full force of the investigative gaze must rest. Officers are aware of the high levels of blame risk present in the working environment, and subsequently tailor their behaviour to allow for this. Such feelings are amplified by the perception that

they are held to a higher standard than other public bodies, and are often identified as liable for joint failings, despite other organisations also having input regarding the situation in question:

That is where the blame culture festers, where nine times out of ten, there's a rationale or reason why...something has potentially gone wrong...Of all the agencies that support our vulnerable people in Stonecastle, each one of those has a footprint and fingerprint on the life support frameworks of a person. So, if that person eventually comes to harm, like the chap I just described, who came into contact with our services, and then tragically committed suicide a few hours later. Where do we put that blame? Instead, we blame the individual who had the unfortunate experience of that last contact...That does not sit well with people, because they want to blame because it makes sense to them. Where it's not always as simple as that. - Superintendent C.

This excerpt reflects a commonly held perception among staff that despite an array of agencies often being involved in such scenarios, it is typically the police that bear the brunt of any fallout. While there is some understanding of the need for accountability, officers also expressed frustration at the inevitability of such processes, and how these were organised around identifying a culpable individual over introducing necessary changes to existing processes. There exists a deep-rooted anticipation of blame in policing, shaped in part by a belief that a named individual must take the brunt of the responsibility for any failing that takes place, instead substituted by a system which focuses upon the last point of contact over examining the bigger picture (Metcalf, 2017). This was recognised across Stonecastle Police, with many officers stating that 'the buck stops with us' whenever matters of accountability arose. Metcalf (2017: 159) notes how police accountability is a 'backward-looking phenomenon', focusing on the allocation of individual blame over examining the deeper organisational context in which such decision-making sits. While this form of accountability can deflect incoming

criticism from the media and politicians, by producing an identifiable figure to whom such blame can be assigned, it is experienced by the rank-and-file as an attempt undertaken by the organisation to identify a potential scapegoat for any failings that occur (Metcalfe, 2017: 159; Rowe, 2020: 47). The Front Line Review (2019: 54) also found accountability bodies had an inhibiting effect on officers, as they felt their behaviour to be under continual surveillance from these organisations, thus contributing to the perception of an ever-present blame culture within policing.

When examining such claims, it is useful to consider what would constitute an appropriate level of scrutiny for policing organisations, without being cast as blame seeking arrangements by these institutions. It is worth remembering officers have long resisted attempts at external intrusion into their work. Smith and Gray in 1985 (p. 342) remind us officers have always held strong contempt for any attempts to quantify or evaluate their performance, feeling this was an unwanted attempt by management to keep their autonomous movements accountable (see also McLaughlin, 2007). In the past, policing organisations made claims that these systems would damage 'professional self-esteem', create a sense of distrust from the public, and undermine the authority of the senior leadership by removing their ability to discipline the rank-and-file. Once the Police Complaints Authority had been introduced in 1985, officers quickly accused the body of holding too much unnecessary power, castigating it as victimising virtuous individuals (that is, police officers) undertaking a challenging role in difficult circumstances (McLaughlin, 2007: 176). It should be remembered that the police are unique in their ability to lawfully wield a great deal of force against members of the public (Brodeur, 2010), and for this reason require a great deal of oversight. It may be

that the potential to attract blame, is itself a risk inherent to the policing role, due to their specific and powerful function in society. In this way, officer claims of a blame culture may be a form of resistance against attempts at controlling the freedom and discretion they exercise as part of their role. The next section of this chapter will examine whether such perceptions regarding blame differ depending on the individual's position within the organisation, or whether such fears exist throughout policing, regardless of rank.

Perceptions of a blame culture by rank

As previously discussed, Hood outlines how the management of 'blame risk' has a strong influence upon how an institution operates (Hood, 2013: 6). This is rarely acknowledged by the organisations themselves, with internal processes being designed ostensibly in the name of efficiency and effectiveness, or in the case of policing, around the handling of risk. When looking at particularly problematic behaviours labelled as 'risk averse' under this lens, they make much more sense in terms of the reasons for their occurrence. When we start to see these behaviours not as risk aversion but blame avoidance, we can understand how attitudes and values around the management of risk are formed. Such behaviours arise not as an aversion to risk but are rooted in a perception blame will be attached to their actions should negative consequences arise. As discussed earlier in this chapter, such a perception rests on the assumption that the current accountability systems that surround policing function with the primary aim of assigning blame to individuals, rather than ensuring responsibility for any actions undertaken. In relation to Stonecastle Police, the research found there was a discrepancy between the different elements of the organisation and their perception of

negative blaming practices. Those in the lower ranks felt that a blame culture remains inherent within Stonecastle Police while others, typically those of higher rank, were of the view that although in the past there was the perception of a blame culture, Stonecastle Police is now an organisation that seeks to learn from its mistakes where possible. These individuals believed support would be offered by the business for those who found themselves on the receiving end of intense scrutiny:

So, my youngsters coming in, probably don't think it's a blame culture. But if you speak to anyone who's probably got 15 years' service, or more, they will say it's a blame culture. - Superintendent B.

There used to be a massive culture of blame. And people, managers, made careers off looking to discipline people and be, I suppose, as brash as they could be really, I think, certainly over the last, I would say, 10 years...we started to move away from it. - Chief Inspector A.

There is a perception at management level that the blame culture is a thing of the past, and the organisation has moved towards becoming a learning culture, focused on learning from mistakes over assigning blame to an individual. There is also an assumption made by these staff that those with less time in service will be less likely to highlight informal blaming practices as a problem within the organisation. If this perception is accurate, we would assume that newer officers are less likely to be preoccupied with matters of blame. While it is likely that the organisation has experienced some cultural change in relation to the overt blaming of individuals, the rank-and-file in fact held a different perspective to middle-ranking officers. The following excerpts are taken from the PSC focus group, which was conducted online in October 2020:

Yesterday we had a training day via zoom about terrorism and then halfway through one of the trainers started saying about the covid guidelines and said, 'you'll be referred to professional standards if you breach any guidelines.' We were like, 'what relevance does that have?' Like they're scaremongering us almost into doing everything we can to not get covid.

When I see things on Facebook, covid related, regarding the government rules or whatever, as a citizen, I should be allowed to put whatever I want to put in the comment box, but the amount of times I started typing things and then delete the text, I thought 'if this gets picked up, I'm going to probably end up in trouble for stating my opinion', and I think a lot of people are the same. We are scared to view our opinions on social media regarding government decisions because of fear of the backlash.

The contrast between these two sets of excerpts demonstrates a discrepancy between the views of middle management and the rank-and-file regarding the existence of a blame culture in policing. At first glance, it would be easy to assume that those in middle management positions are simply removed from the sharp end of blaming practices; and the extent to which this sentiment holds will be explored later in this chapter. These excerpts demonstrate how the rank-and-file perceive they are subjected to extensive blaming practices and scrutiny measures that are designed to 'catch them out' when engaging in normal, everyday behaviour. This leads to resentment directed towards the organisation for the intrusive oversight they perceive themselves as being subjected to. The perception of a blaming culture within Stonecastle Police contributes towards the feeling of constant scrutiny staff claim to experience, as they anticipate being held liable for any failings that occur. Hood (2013:15) notes how social settings within institutions play a significant part in experiences of blame, particularly those that set the expectation

that blame should be avoided at all costs. The experience of a blame culture is shaped not only by the high-stakes nature of policing, but also by the onus placed on staff by the organisation regarding avoiding the gaze of blame. Further, it is important to understand the specific avenues through which blaming processes occur to appreciate how attitudes towards accountability are formed. In the next section, we will explore the mechanisms behind such blaming processes, and the extent to which they arise in Stonecastle Police.

Blaming as a social and political process

To explore how the process of blaming functions within the institution itself, we need to utilise an interactionist perspective to examine the act of blaming as both a social and political process. By focusing on everyday communications between individuals, this allows us to understand how these interactions shape informal blaming practices, and by extension the wider social environment in which officers operate. The act of blaming is social in nature, due to the informal methods that enforce such processes, and the potential consequences that ensue should such practices be successful. Such mechanisms also possess a political element to them, as they assure the gaining of power within the workplace as a means of controlling and deflecting the risk of criticism for blameworthy incidents. For Hood (2013: 7), the process of blaming typically affects actors who have an involved stake in the process, who he names 'blame-makers'; those who aim to attribute blame to an identifiable cause, and 'blame takers', who are on the receiving end of the search for an accountable other when negative situations unfold.

The two competing sides come together in a process described by Hood as a 'blame game'. The overarching aim of this contest is to pin responsibility on another party for the adverse event, with all parties acting as 'blamers' to avoid becoming 'blamees' themselves. We can see in the example from the PSC focus group, how staff members perceive themselves to be unfairly blamed by the organisation, thus assuming the role of blame takers for behaviour they consider to be within the bounds of acceptable conduct. Another instance of such blaming practices can be seen below, where there is a perception of criticism from others working in the organisation:

Stephen, a police officer working in the PSC, describes his role as 'a job with high levels of responsibility but low levels of trust being put in you as an officer'. He gave the example of the crime integrity unit, whose job it is to check officers are adhering to national crime recording standards, which he described as a 'civilian checking whether I've done my job right', with disdain clear in his voice. While we were together a call taker came to speak with him regarding a member of the public who had rang the PSC to inform them how helpful Stephen had been earlier that day. After delivering this message, the call handler then gently rebuked Stephen and told him that he had failed to link himself to the initial incident to identify himself as the officer who took the call. Stephen was friendly and polite to her, but after she had walked away, he turned to me and said 'she's told me to add myself to the log...I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to listen to her, she's only a civvy'. - Field notes, August 2021.

Stephen perceives he is susceptible to being blamed by others within the organisation in several ways. Firstly, there is the potential for blame from the crime integrity unit, which he perceives as existing chiefly to castigate officers when they fail to adhere to bureaucratic standards imposed upon them by the organisation. It is interesting here how Stephen uses the word 'responsibility' initially to describe the scrutiny he observes. However, when used in conjunction with the phrase 'low levels of trust' we can see how

he perceives this not merely as a matter of responsibility, but as part of an underlying blaming process directed towards officers. Combined with his negative response to the feedback of the call handler, it is clear he perceives he has been directly blamed for not adhering to these prescribed standards. We also see the 'defensive posturing' here mentioned by Metcalfe (2017) in his blatant refusal to adhere to the request to link himself to the incident. Stephen then responds by becoming a 'blame maker' himself, by directing criticism to the call handler and identifying her request as problematic, rather than reflecting on his own behaviour.

It is important to note the response to blame is not necessarily a one-way process, but can be bidirectional, and instead when being blamed, staff often undertake the role of blame maker and direct criticism back towards the original blamer, who often originates from inside the organisation. This has the effect of further perpetuating the cycle of taking the blame, then passing it to other aspects of the organisation, which staff do in an attempt to deflect said blame away from themselves:

Alex told me he had spent three hours with an Asian male who had had racist graffiti sprayed on his driveway, providing him with reassurance. Although he knew the case wouldn't go anywhere, for him it was important to help the victim, who was clearly distressed by his experience. He stated that as a result he got a 'bollocking' for it from a supervisor, and he was asked 'why have you spent 3 hours on that?' He then realised it was 'no longer about providing a quality service, it was just about getting to that next call'. - Fieldnotes, March 2022.

Alex was initially blamed for his response by his supervisor, the original blame maker. Alex's analysis of the situation is that such blame was unfair, and his supervisor is at fault for failing to value the importance of connecting with victims. In Alex's retelling

of the story, he becomes the blamer and the supervisor the blamee. While Hood's theory does not discuss the extent to which the two roles are interchangeable, I argue these roles are not fixed, and in some instances the initial blame taker may undertake the role of blame maker to deflect perceived criticism away from themselves. The response to blame is not necessarily one way, and it is possible those who are blamed for misdemeanours can also attribute blame towards others rather than passively accepting criticism. Like the processes highlighted by Hood, Resodihardjo (2020: 13) also identifies another type of 'blame game', which takes place particularly in the aftermath of a critical incident and is a type of accountability process designed to assign responsibility for negative events. She notes how within organisations such as the police, after a crisis there is an overarching focus on establishing whether a particular individual can be identified and subsequently blamed for the occurrence that took place. In this way, the process is a 'framing contest' (Resodihardjo, 2020: 13); a social process designed to identify a blameworthy individual as quickly as possible to prevent further damage. Such an approach is typical of the police misconduct system, with its singular focus on identifying a named individual responsible for causing the situation at hand. Although the rank-and-file appear to believe otherwise, such processes are not merely the domain of the management team, but can also take place within the lower ranks of the organisation:

Justin, a response officer, had arrested a woman, suspecting her of being the perpetrator in a domestic incident. On the way to custody, it transpired the woman had been assaulted by her partner and was thus the victim of the situation. Justin contacted his Sergeant who had told him to continue, so he took the woman to custody to be interviewed under caution. The group of officers crowd around the computer Justin is sitting at to read the investigative log for the

incident, which the detective sergeant (DS) from CID has recently added to. They exclaim over the entry, and it is evident that Justin is in trouble. Justin kept repeating: 'I only did what I was told by the supervisor!' but it is clear the rest of the team think he is at fault for the situation that unfolded. Another Sergeant then intervened and said 'unfortunately, it's your name on the OEL and on the custody log, therefore it's your responsibility and you are the one that will be blamed'. Later, I asked Craig what had been written on the log. He said the DS had clearly not agreed with the course of action taken and had stated: 'while I wasn't there and I don't have access to all the information, I personally would have made a different decision'. Craig said while the DS was right, he was clearly acting with the benefit of hindsight, saying 'you're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't.' - Field notes, May 2022.

Having explored the degree to which blaming practices exist within Stonecastle Police, it would be useful to consider what drives such processes, to understand why they are particularly prevalent in policing. To do so, we can make use of Malle's Path Model, which focuses upon the notion that intention, capacity and obligation must be established for the attribution of blame to occur. For Malle, it is important that blamers can readily identify the reasons for why the conduct is particularly blameworthy – if not, this is likely to have the effect of discrediting the blamer and minimising the effect that intended blame has (Malle et al, 2014: 149). Blame judgments are underpinned by specific observations relating to the individual who undertook the blameworthy act, particularly in relation to cause and effect (Morrison, 2010: 14), ability (Rivera, 1992), responsibility of the individual in question (Hogan, 2007), and mental states. What is significant is that the act must be linked to a blameworthy individual – if this does not occur, then the judgement becomes one of wrongness rather than of blame. If an individual cannot be identified as causing the blameworthy event, then blaming does not occur as criticism cannot be directed towards a particular agent. If a culpable individual is identified, the observer will weigh up whether the behaviour in question was

premeditated (Malle et al, 2014: 151). If intentional, the reasons for the conduct are considered, and if not, whether the agent should have prevented the blameworthy conduct from arising (obligation) as well as whether they had the ability to do so (capacity).

As previously mentioned, Malle et al (2014: 151) note blame arises when 'the perceiver detects that an event or outcome violated a norm; and subsequently determines that an agent caused the event'. We can see from the reaction of Justin's colleagues that his behaviour violated group norms; in this instance, by arresting a victim of a domestic violence offence, and treating them as a suspect in the matter. However, we must also consider the influence of 'outcome information' as Alicke (2014: 188) also suggests. It is likely the officers judged this behaviour to be blameworthy precisely because they had access to information that Justin did not have at the time of the arrest. The authors (Malle et al, 2014: 148) state the main purpose of blame is to control the behaviour of actors within a social group; to that end blame is attributed to an individual when they have either been the cause of, or behaved in a manner that violates existing group norms (Scanlon, 2008; Sher, 2006). In this instance, informal blaming practices are not only intended to guide Justin's conduct, but also serve as a reminder to others that such behaviour is not acceptable. In this way, blaming practices, as a social process, aim to regulate the behaviour of all group members.

This approach can be applied to other instances of blame that take place within the organisation:

We've got a lot of junior officers, our workforce on the front line is reducing in terms of years in life and experience that goes with it, life experience and police

experience. And so, as a result of that, you will see with the more junior officers, that not so much that they are not comfortable making the decision, but they will make the wrong decision sometimes. And that's purely because they're a different generation. You know, and they are just inexperienced, so they handle it differently...so that's the only thing I would throw in is, yeah, officers junior in service, I don't think they're afraid to make decisions. It's sometimes that they will make the wrong decisions if that makes sense. - Chief Inspector C.

In the example above, the mid-ranking officer blames those lower down the hierarchy for what he considers to be ineffectual policing, citing causes that are out of the control of the organisation, for instance the age of the individual. Rather than identifying a lack of training, or any fault with the organisation, he instead identifies the officers' lack of experience as the main blocker to their success. This places responsibility for failure with the individual, rather than examining the wider organisational context in which such behaviour occurs. Malle et al (2014: 147) note that there must be a degree of warrant for blame, and those who undertake this practice must be able to identify why the individual's conduct is deemed to be blameworthy (McKenna, 2012). Here, the Chief Inspector can identify the officers' lack of experience as the driver behind their perceived poor decision making. Such judgements are identifiable as 'blame' judgements, rather than statements of wrongness (Malle et al, 2014: 150), as the responsibility for such conduct rests with the individual, rather than being attributed to the situation at hand. It may be this reason why blame is so pervasive in policing – as discussed earlier in this chapter, rather than attributing negative incidences to misfortune or wider circumstances, they are instead attached to the conduct of the individual in question.

When undertaking attributions of blame, considerations of capacity are important when determining whether such conduct is worthy of blame. Malle et al (2014: 155) note that:

Typically, less information is needed to determine obligation (e.g., the agent's role) than to determine capacity (e.g., the agent's knowledge, skills, tools, opportunities). However, sometimes capacity information can strengthen obligation—such as when a person's knowledge about risks creates an obligation to take special care in preventing them. (See also Gilbert, Tenney, Holland, & Spellman, 2013).

When reflecting on the scenario involving Justin, we see there is assumed capacity in his role as police officer, and it is this which increases his obligation to act in a more appropriate manner. As a trained 'risk expert', Justin's mistake was perceived as careless and easily avoidable by onlookers. It is not considered by his audience that Justin made attempts to correct his behaviour by checking in with a senior officer after the error had been made – what is important here is Justin, in his role as police officer, possessed both the obligation and capacity to avoid such a scenario in the first place. Such blaming practices contrast with Cushman's (2008) notion that those who do not intend to undertake blameworthy behaviour are less likely to receive blame as a result. As we can see, it is capacity that is particularly important when considering whether to assign blame to an individual's conduct. This scenario highlights how blaming practices are prevalent in the policing context, and how mishaps attract attributions of blame rather than judgements of wrongness.

Like Hood, Resodihardjo et al (2015: 351) note how much blame actors attract depends on several factors; the result of the framing contest itself; the extent to which

the situation was seen as catastrophic and thereby deserving of blame; whether the situation could have been prevented, and how successful the involved actors are in their efforts to transfer blame away from themselves. Here, we can see how once the blameworthy incident was identified by the group as being worthy of this status, in terms of the victim wrongfully being arrested for a domestic violence matter, a framing contest began with regards to who was responsible - and thus who would be blamed - for this oversight. The most obvious culprit was blamed - the officer who had the most extensive contact with the individual in question, and who appeared to have undertaken the blameworthy action. It is worthy of note that Justin made attempts to safeguard himself by verifying his actions with a supervisor, in line with the 'cover your arse' mentality discussed in the previous chapter. However, because there was no formal evidence of this taking place, he subsequently came to be blamed for the incident. The stated reasons for attracting blame were that he should have conducted his policing activities more carefully and should have correctly identified the perpetrator prior to making an arrest. Through examining this scenario, we see how blaming is a social process that principally relies on whether group members identify and perceive the situation as such. As discussed earlier in this chapter, should the group decide the conduct is not worthy of blame, the behaviour would be judged as wrong, rather than the individual being assigned blame for the events that occurred. It is particularly interesting to note how officers state there is a blame culture operating within the organisation, which they perceive as being external to them. We can see from the example here that Justin's colleagues acted as blame makers, thus taking an active part in the blaming process, despite stating he would be blamed by a shadowy outside actor

for his actions. It appears officers themselves perpetuate such practices and have more of an active role in maintaining processes of blame than they would otherwise admit.

This will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Like Malle's path theory, Resodihardjo et al (2015: 351) outlines how once the situation has been defined as blameworthy (Boin et al, 2009), subsequent treatment of the event is determined by judgements concerned with whether actors should be held accountable for causing the crisis. These judgements are informed by whether there have been previous occurrences of similar behaviour, which will result in more blame being assigned to them; the reputation of the individual prior to the dilemma unfolding, and how much unnecessary damage was generated by the situation (Coombs 2007:141–43; Hood 2013: 6; Stone 1997:190–91; Bovens and 't Hart 1998; Bovens et al. 2008; McConnell 2010). This process mirrors the work of Malle, who discusses how blame requires an evidential basis to be truly effective (Malle et al, 2014: 147).

Returning to the example above, Justin was clearly established as having responsibility for causing the situation. I had gleaned knowledge from previous team observations that Justin was frequently identified as responsible for blameworthy conduct, increasing the likelihood he would attract similar attention in future. It is evident that the harm caused to the parties involved was seen as avoidable by his colleagues, had he taken more care in assessing the situation. We can therefore understand how the framing contest begins and continues if all the criteria are satisfied for blame to be attached to the conduct in question. Framing contests can occur even when the blamers themselves do not have a personal stake in the contest, as seen here; the officers are highly unlikely to be affected by the outcome of this contest but insist on playing an active role in

attaching blame to Justin's actions. Such behaviour may arise from concerns that the individual in question will bring the organisation into disrepute with their conduct.

Assigning blame communicates to the blamee that the behaviour is unacceptable and goes against social norms (Nadler, 2012: 1). In assigning blame, colleagues may hope to discourage similar misdemeanours from occurring in future.

This section has explored how the social and political underpinnings of received criticism perpetuate the existence of an apparent blame culture within policing. Despite officers' insistence that they are passive participants in such processes, we observe instances of this occurring in the organisation despite the blamers not having a personal stake in the framing contest itself. We have also established the reasons why this may occur, and how this behaviour protects the established values of the group. We will now examine other pertinent aspects of blaming processes, and how these behaviours place the organisation and its staff, as two separate entities, in direct competition with each other as they attempt to refute, curtail, and transfer any blame that could potentially be attributed to them (Resodihardjo: 2020:15). Policing remains a high-stakes occupation in relation to the attribution of responsibility for perceived failings, and staff remain at significant likelihood of being blamed for adverse events that take place. In such environments, blame avoidance is integral to avoiding unwanted criticism, as the consequences for being blamed are severe, both socially and in terms of officers' wider employment prospects.

Blaming as an organisational contest

As previously discussed, there exists an organisational contest within Stonecastle Police regarding potential liability for the lion's share of risk handling, with each aspect of the organisation being particularly keen to discharge responsibility to other aspects of the institution. Alongside this, there exists a second form of conflict between the institution and those it employs in terms of the acceptance of blame for both individual as well as organisational failings. The resulting framing contest regarding who takes responsibility for blameworthy conduct represents a battle between the top, middle and lower ranks of the organisation after potentially disastrous events occur. Through such a lens, such behaviours can be best described as blame avoidance techniques which take place at each rung of the organisation, as its members seek to deflect blame away from themselves onto competing players. Those at the top of the chain are in the most powerful position and have the option to delegate responsibility for blame down to other players in the organisation via a range of methods at their disposal (Hood, 2013: 36). Those further down the rungs of the organisational ladder, while having less power than top level players, are also able to use a range of methods to deny and deflect blame. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the techniques utilised by those in the middle and lower echelons of the organisation to deflect blame as part of these organisational framing contests. As the research did not focus on those at the top of the organisation, the actions of these players will not be described in depth, but for completeness they will be mentioned where relevant.

The blaming practices of the middle ranks

Despite the protective cushioning afforded to them by their position within the organisation, middle ranking operatives are particularly susceptible to blame, and often become faced with accusations relating to unclear instructions, conflicting expectations, and charges of failing to understand the reality of the occupational world the lower orders inhabit, as well as complaints from those higher up the chain of command that they have failed to provide adequate leadership to the lower orders (Hood, 2013: 35). This means those in the middle of the organisational hierarchy can regularly find themselves at the sharp end of blaming processes, from those both above and below them in the chain of command (Hood, 2013: 35). Once the blame game begins, Hood (2013: 36) highlights how middle management 'players' need to identify methods of directing criticism towards other areas of the organisation to deflect attention from their own shortcomings. However, while such individuals can more frequently find themselves on the receiving end of blame, they have more choices open to them when it comes to shifting potential criticism away from themselves, due to the position they occupy in this organisational hierarchy (ibid). While those at the top of the chain move blame downwards, and those at the bottom have no choice but attempt to move blame further up the hierarchy, those in the middle of the pyramid can shift the blame in either direction, as the excerpts here demonstrate:

There will absolutely be a frustration across all ranks, that hang on. We want to be defended here. We want you to go out in the media and defend us and be open and honest. And if we've done something wrong, hands up.... It is very frustrating across all ranks that sometimes we just want to see from the top that we're being defended publicly. And that's out there, you know? - Chief Inspector C.

They (two officers) went to a domestic, our policies clearly say you go in the house, you don't just deal with the male on the doorstep. You go in and see the female and what's going on inside etc, etc. And what they basically did is spoke to the male on the doorstep, he was confrontational, bordering on aggressive. They backed down for want of a better word and came away, rationalising that, oh, he said there's nothing going on etc, etc. And ultimately, it led to some serious violence in that address and somebody getting significantly injured. So, they made the decision, but it was all based on lack of experience and a lack of willingness to deal with confrontation. - Chief Inspector C.

Middle ranking players possess the ability to push the blame upwards when they perceive they are not being defended by the organisation, but also downwards to the lower orders, citing a failure to adequately follow policies and procedures set out for them. These players can use their position to ensure accountability for any potential wrongdoing can be reallocated to the rank-and-file, to be classed as individual level errors, best remedied by disciplinary action, rather than being treated as organisational level failings that they could potentially be held responsible for (Hood, 2013: 36). It is interesting the middle-ranking officer blamed staff for their poor ability to do the job during their probationary period, which is in effect an on-the-job training stage of their career, instead of considering that the organisation may not have given them the skills required to do the job effectively (Marsh, 2022: 214). The excerpt above demonstrates how the officer in question believed the root of the problem rests within the individual's own capabilities and is beyond the control of either himself or the organisation. He identifies the officers have a lack of experience but does not consider what the organisation could do to build such experience, or whether they should take responsibility for such lack of knowledge. This is in line with Hood's (2013: 37) observation that middle ranking players have the power to ensure the burden of making difficult decisions in critical situations is placed onto the lower ranks, so those frontline

operatives are liable to bear the brunt of the blame should any potentially adverse consequences arise.

We observed in the previous chapter how officers regularly utilise supervisor ratification to obtain a degree of buy-in when attempting to manage potential risks. These processes also operate in a similar manner regarding the handling of blame. Those in the middle of the organisation can deflect blame upwards to those further up the occupational ladder by locking in top-level players to every decision that could possibly lead to a negative outcome if matters go awry (Hood, 2013: 36). This demonstrates they had orders from the top to act in a particular manner, which also serves to spread the blame should wrongdoing occur. As demonstrated by the incident with Justin above, this needs to be in a clearly documented format, so the individual can demonstrate they had clearance from another player higher up the chain of command. The research found that numerous instances of obtaining this top-level cover took place within Stonecastle Police:

When I told Stan, who works in PSD, I was looking at risk aversion in policing, Stan told me it was BCU commanders, typically at superintendent level, who would send a staff performance matter straight to PSD to decide on that individual's conduct, when they could easily deal with it locally. - Field notes, March 2022.

It tends to be the admin things and the staffing issues. And I should say dealing with people for performance and things like that, all those things, I think they are risk averse to that as in, don't want to have the grief, don't want to put people on to unsatisfactory performance, sometimes they'll make a referral to PSD rather than deal with it themselves. - Superintendent D.

As we saw with risk, such processes provide a form of insurance to staff by demonstrating that their actions are ratified by individuals in the occupational order with more power. In relation to the examples referred to here, one driver behind this behaviour may be the nature of formal misconduct processes, which typically differ from criminal investigations in that they often contain numerous 'grey areas' when it comes to assessing the standard of the conduct in question. Policing organisations are uncomfortable with the dilemmas such situations present, and it is sometimes easier to pass difficult decisions further up the chain, rather than reach a resolution with potentially incomplete information. Research by McDaniel and Malik (2023) found this occurred frequently with potential misconduct matters involving BAME officers. First-line supervisors, who were predominantly white, were found to pass more low-level misconduct matters for formal investigation than was necessary. The research found supervisors were often afraid of being labelled as insensitive to cultural differences and felt that 'offloading the risk' to PSD helped them avoid the hazards such cases presented. Such behaviour ensures decisions that may attract blame will be left with a third party, thus clearing them of any responsibility. These actions suggest the most successful method of deflecting potential criticism is to dispose of the blameworthy event altogether. Overall, middle management are in a particularly advantageous position when it comes to shifting the blame away from themselves, possessing several tools at their disposal to do so, due to their unique positioning within the organisational hierarchy. However, it does not necessarily follow that they are immune from blame. Middle-ranking players remain vulnerable to criticism directed to them from various aspects of the organisation, as the following section will illustrate.

The lower ranks and the blame games they play.

Hood (2013: 34) states that while at first glance the rank-and-file appear to be disadvantaged by their position in the organisational pyramid, they too can act as blame makers, and have a variety of options from which to choose to avoid and deflect blame. For Hood (2013: 8), frontline operatives will be particularly concerned about blame avoidance if they think that to attract criticism may jeopardise their standing within the organisation. This is the case amongst the rank-and-file, as they perceive they are subjected to high levels of scrutiny, where significant levels of blame can have serious repercussions for the individual's employment prospects should they be blamed for negative events. As a result of this, those on the ground work to deflect blame to other aspects of the organisation, where those players can be framed as accountable for ostensibly defective practices, unsuitable organisational policies, and deficient resources (Hood, 2013: 30). The research found many officers blamed the higher ups for what they perceived as foreseeable problems that could have been avoided:

A 'critical incident' had been declared in the PSC. Measures were introduced to tackle this, involving giving out additional overtime to staff, and requiring them to work 12 hour shifts instead of ten. These changes were intended to deal with the increase in demand that had occurred post-lockdown and which had been exacerbated by lack of staff. Ruby, staff member working in the PSC, gave her opinion of this to me: 'it's like putting a Barbie plaster over a bullet wound... no one's looking at the internal bleeding and what's going on inside'. She told me she had recently been part of a staff briefing with a superintendent where she had told him the PSC desperately needed more staff, and she was told bluntly that there was not an issue with staffing. It was clear she thought the superintendent was wrong, and that he simply didn't want to deal with the enormity of the problem that the PSC faced. - Field notes, August 2021.

The response officers commented on Stonecastle Police's policy not to release CCTV footage during IOPC investigations; they took this silence to feel that they were not being defended by the force and instead the public were left to just assume the police had done something wrong. - Field notes, September 2021.

The implication here is that the organisation does not 'protect' staff from public accusation, and instead leaves them to fend for themselves when difficulties arise. With regards to the second excerpt, it should be noted that it is the responsibility of IOPC to share information with interested parties when conducting independent investigations, so the organisation is merely abiding by protocols set for them, over which they have little control. However, the perception of the rank-and-file is that this is a clear choice made by the policing organisation, and they are not prepared to address the root causes of such problems, finding it easier to assign blame to staff rather than conduct a deeper examination regarding potential organisational shortcomings. Hood (2013: 32) notes how the rank-and-file are likely to utilise blame avoidance strategies tailored to their organisational position, for instance following policy and procedure rigidly, despite its potential lack of fit for the situation at hand, to provide protection against allegations of poor use of discretion. Interestingly, Hood's assertion that staff will unthinkingly following protocol is echoed in the claims we see regarding so-called risk aversion amongst the rank-and-file. In earlier chapters of this thesis, concerns were raised regarding the fact that such claims are typically grounded in the 'for-policing' literature rather than 'about-policing' literature. Hood's observations may provide some weight to these assertions, providing these behaviours are analysed through a blame avoidance lens rather than one of risk aversion. Hood states such strategies are influenced by staff's lack of power within the institution, which leaves them with little scope to delegate

responsibilities to other aspects of the organisation, and therefore must attempt to detract blame with the little power they possess.

Such behaviours mirror those discussed in earlier empirical chapters concerning the management of risk. Examining such actions through the lens of blame avoidance, rather than risk aversion, allows us to develop a deeper understanding of why these behaviours occur. Staff anticipate blame, and consequently act to minimise the chances of attracting negative attention. While the incorrect handling of risk increases the chances of attracting blame, it is criticism itself that staff fear. As highlighted by Malle et al (2014: 149) blame is a powerful resource, with the potential for highly damaging outcomes for the individual in question, and it makes sense that staff would divert significant effort into avoiding its effects. Such behaviours, such as rigidly following protocol despite their suitability for the situation at hand, reflect tensions between the desire to do the job well, and adherence to prescribed organisational standards. These actions demonstrate, both to the policing organisation, as well as to the wider world, that staff can sensibly and accurately manage risk, thus minimising their chances of coming to be blamed should adverse consequences arise. While such actions have been named as risk averse in the extant literature, upon examining the underpinnings of these behaviours it may be more accurate to refer to these as blame avoidance techniques rather than risk averse practices.

We have examined how the position of the rank-and-file within the organisation, like those of the middle-ranking players, affects the strategies they are able to use when it comes to deflecting blame away from themselves. In this sense, we can see how the act of both attributing and avoiding blame is a political and social process that varies

across the organisation in the way it is assigned to the apparent guilty party. We have also discovered how different aspects of the organisation have a variety of tools at their disposal to successfully avoid blame, which they use with varying degrees of success. Despite these techniques, the potential for individual blame looms large in the policing sphere, regardless of the rank of the officer in question. We will now go on to explore an additional option, the dispersal of blame to others outside of the policing organisation, in an attempt to shift criticism away from the police as an institution, to outside forces perceived as bearing a degree of responsibility for the myriad problems policing currently faces.

Blame and its interaction with the public-police relationship.

As mentioned previously, policing cannot be separated from the context in which it operates, as it is heavily influenced by its surroundings. Blame games not only operate internally within the institution, but also play out in the external environment that surrounds policing. Hood (2013: 39) notes how organisations tend to place responsibility for negative events onto outsiders, rather than attributing these to their own actions. Such an approach is manifested in the frequent warnings from policing bodies such as ACPO (2008; now the National Police Chiefs Council; see also Heaton 2011: 82) who state that policing is seen as answerable to several outside actors, including an invasive mass media, unsupportive politicians, and an increasingly intolerant public that demands accountability for all errors and omissions. It may be this perception that leads officers to feel they are experiencing increasingly heightened scrutiny than in previous years. Resodihardjo (2020:15) highlights politicians and the

public alike are frequently prone to outrage and become highly involved in the search for someone to blame whenever misdeeds occur. The news media is a notable example of this, with officeholders frequently identifying this institution as the culprit of biased reporting, creating baseless rumours designed to subvert public confidence in policing institutions (Dobrin et al, 2021: 44). In recent years, social media in particular has been increasingly highlighted as saturating the public sphere with negative imagery of policing (Karunakaran, 2019; Premkumar, 2019; Ellis, 2023: 130), placing additional pressure onto the organisation. It is therefore in the interest of policing institutions to disperse blame to outside agencies via claims of unfair blaming practices in an attempt to divert negative attention away from themselves. The excerpt below demonstrates how external actors are often viewed within Stonecastle Police as undertaking a powerful blaming role whenever a crisis arises:

A member of the public managed to get some footage of our officers dealing with a COVID breach... the officers turn up and are excellent in the way they deal with them; they try to engage with them on a real personal level... And when the group of people are clearly intent on not listening to anything they're told... The officers end up reporting them for summons, and the individual has managed to get some footage of this off a mobile phone, obviously, somebody was present who's really cleverly edited out the part of the engagement and it doesn't show anything of the build up to the fact that these people have been clearly flouting the law and not listening to anything they're told. It's posted on social media, and it's had several thousand views, lots of comments on it from people, 'you'll pay for this when this is all over, we won't forget, and we'll kill the police officers involved'. Really serious threats. - Chief Inspector A.

The Chief Inspector blames members of the public for portraying the actions of officers in a negative manner, as well as for the subsequent negative attention that arose from this, which he believes is not an accurate representation of the actions officers

undertook. From his viewpoint, the officers behaved fairly and impartially, and are being undermined by an unappreciative and hostile public in response to their efforts. As highlighted previously, policing, and the public's response to it, should be considered alongside the context in which it operates. The task of policing the COVID-19 pandemic led to the police facing unique pressures, as they were expected to effectively police a national health crisis, which created further points of tension between the organisation and members of the public (Farrow, 2020). This strain lead officers to anticipate animosity from members of the public, as well as other external actors, which may contribute towards increased feelings of intensive scrutiny. This is clearly demonstrated in the way officers speak about institutions such as the media and the IOPC, and the way they are framed as blame makers by officers, ready to attribute criticism onto the police at every opportunity (see also, Dobrin et al, 2021):

We're unsupported by the media, I think. As I said, there is a large proportion of the public who will probably support us and who are behind us, but it is a small, noisy, proportion who aren't and I think the media fuels a lot of things as well, which creates negativity and bad press for us. - PC, response team focus group, October 2020.

People have got their backs up anyway because we're being painted in the media as these hired goons that go around and just beat people up, which is actually nowhere near the truth. - PC, response team focus group, October 2020.

Frontline officers are the most visible aspect of policing, also experiencing the highest level of contact with the public. It is understandable those in response roles are more likely to experience the brunt of negative media attention and attribute this as a significant source of blame risk. Further, those in front line positions are more liable to

being filmed by members of the public, and having their antics placed on social media, opening them up to potential repercussions should they be identified. This perceived threat is reflected in Cox's (1996:167-169) notion of the 'symbolic assailant', leading policing organisations to feel they are constantly under attack from outside forces. The relationship between the police and the public is strained by the perception that those they are seeking to protect continuously point the finger of blame towards them. There is a perception the public are unappreciative of the policing role, instead choosing to blame them whenever desired results are not achieved. These beliefs are further heightened by the impression other public institutions continually criticise the actions of the police. Such perceptions were perceived prevalent in relation to high profile incidents, for instance the death of a member of the public, which had occurred in a local custody suite:

The response officers discuss the impact the death in custody had. They stated that immediately everybody blamed the police, 'as they always do'. Both officers lamented that the police were portrayed as murderers when people did not know what had happened. The officer said: 'people see the IOPC release statement, and they see a number of officers are under investigation, and they immediately assume we're guilty.' Field notes, September 2021.

The officers perceive they are automatically blamed by members of the public when negative outcomes occur, regardless of the circumstances surrounding such events, particularly when there is a lack of public knowledge around these instances. When this occurred, there was a sense of unfairness, that the police had been unfairly blamed and targeted for circumstances out of their control:

Obviously, we're all made out to be racist, etc. And like you see on social media; the police are one of the favourites there to be shot at. And so, it's just interesting to see you know what's going around at the moment. A prime example of that is, people aren't supposed to be travelling to take exercise with COVID and like I said, I cover...all the beaches etc. So, on one half, we get the public complaining that these people have flooded to these areas to take exercise. So, we do something about it, then you've got all the other people complaining that 'oh, you've got resources to do that now then, when you didn't have resources when I was assaulted three months ago', etc. It's just an impossible situation. We're just between the devil and the deep blue sea. And yeah, we're just an easy target, unfortunately. - Chief Inspector C.

Research has found (Premkumar, 2020; Dobrin et al, 2021:36; Gao, Paoline and Paul, 2022) that officers are quick to place the blame on members of the public and external bodies for demonstrating disrespect towards policing, placing responsibility with them for contributing towards the general deterioration in perceived police legitimacy. Dobrin et al (2021:49) suggest this form of blaming practice is a response to heightened scrutiny, elevated by intensive media coverage which has culminated in a blame culture. Recent scandals, such as the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer, have also received significant attention, which may contribute towards the perception policing is currently experiencing particularly high levels of scrutiny. The authors suggest officers respond to such criticism by becoming deeply involved in a traditional police culture as a defensive response to this situation, placing the blame with the public rather than engaging in any introspection to identify potential internal causes of the problem (Dobrin et al, 2021: 48). My research has also demonstrated that the relationship between the public and the police is becoming increasingly strained, with the police perceiving the public as frequently taking a central position in casting blame towards them when negative situations occur. This perception of the public as

blame makers is likely to further increase their anticipation of attracting criticism from sources external to policing, thus perpetuating the cycle of blame.

Conclusion

Both the structure of the policing environment, in its search for a culpable individual when wrongdoing arises, as well as the negative beliefs officers hold regarding the consequences for incorrect handling of risk, create the perfect conditions for blaming practices to occur. Blame has become a prominent tool in organisational crisis management efforts, although the police are not particularly unusual in this sense; Resodihardjo (2020:13) argues that seeking to deflect blame from organisational shortcomings is typical of many contemporary institutions. However, this experience is acute in policing due to its operating conditions and the potential blame risk such activities tend to attract. As with the experience and treatment of risk, through undertaking an interactionist perspective, we have discovered how the notions of blame, accountability and responsibility are typically perceived as synonymous by officers and staff, with the concept of accountability becoming increasingly conflated with the likelihood of receiving blame. Historically, policing institutions have objected when accountability arrangements are introduced, and there is often a failure to recognise their activities by their very nature require a degree of oversight. It is likely that in some respects, what policing refers to as a blame culture is in fact an attempt to subject policing to the appropriate level of scrutiny. While policing requires some degree of oversight due to its unique position in society, the way this is experienced by officers

can result in feeling unfairly criticised if such oversight is designed to attribute blame over identifying areas requiring improvement.

The handling of risk is identified in the extant literature as a form of aversion to hazards. However, once we start looking at these behaviours as being driven by blame avoidance, it makes sense that the noted difficulty in tackling this supposed risk aversion, may stem not from reluctance on the part of organisations to do so, but instead flows from inadequately identifying the root cause of obstacles which need to be addressed. Applying Hood's theory to such actions provides a useful explanation of why such behaviours are ubiquitous throughout the world of policing. A problem cannot be solved if it is not correctly identified in the first instance. Bureaucracy has been named as the main culprit in risk averse practices, when it may be instead that practices of blame avoidance, albeit embedded within bureaucratic systems, are the key drivers behind this approach.

I have utilised Malle's theory of blame to explore the cognitive and social foundations on which blaming practices are constructed. I have paid particular attention to the assumptions regarding the intentions, obligations and capacity of officers, and how this influences the extent to which staff are blamed. Additionally, Hood's theory highlights how those who operate within the organisation are involved in a framing contest designed to shift the blame from themselves to other actors embedded within the institution. The consequences for doing so are significant, and much hinges on being able to do so successfully. Hood (2013: 4) points out while there can be positive consequences from fear of blame, such as reduced rule breaking and allegiance to organisational values, it cannot be ignored that the negative effects overwhelmingly

contribute toward the blame culture we currently see in policing. We have also examined the impact such practices have had on the police's relationship with the public, which is increasingly characterised by suspicion and hostility on both sides. This strain presents a significant threat to the notion of policing by consent if it continues its current trajectory. As with their treatment of risk, what stands out here regarding staff attitudes to blame is the precarity they perceive when considering the security of their position within the organisation, and the lengths they will go to safeguard against this. The next chapter will examine the effect this has on staff behaviour, by examining the more informal methods officers utilise to ensure blame is appropriately deflected.

Chapter Seven: Narratives of blame: Cultural scripts regarding perceived criticism and scrutiny

There's so much scrutiny, both from the public and certainly the media. And social media has become so popular with everybody, you are under scrutiny from just about every aspect. And I think as that's become more prevalent, that's changed the views of people, and officers, and it's increased the pressure, certainly on frontline staff. I think they're more mindful than ever that they are being watched at every turn. I know, when I was a frontline PC, we didn't even have CCTV in our community. Whereas now everybody has a mobile phone to record everything on, it's levels of scrutiny that just weren't seen previously. - Chief Inspector B.

Introduction

The excerpt above highlights how policing organisations and their employees are, in their view, facing a period of unprecedented scrutiny. This chapter will build upon this perception and will explore how this ideal influences the behaviour of staff. The previous chapter explored the institutional processes that allow criticism to be spread, denied, and deflected throughout the organisation. Through doing so, I outlined how the continual presence of blame risk, and officers' perceptions of how to manage this, drastically influence the way they fulfil their mandate. Building upon this foundation, the current chapter outlines how these perceptions feed into officers' attitudes and values, and how this consequently affects their behaviour, highlighting how an awareness of blame risk continually filters into the occupational tasks staff undertake. This chapter is arranged as follows: It will begin by discussing the extent to which informal blaming practices are perceived to occur within the organisation. It will examine the pressures the external environment creates, paying particular attention to accountability institutions such as the IOPC, and how this sustains a feeling of scrutiny among staff as

they attempt to minimise their exposure to potential blame. This chapter will also explore the ways officers sustain this fear of blame themselves via the interactions that occur between staff. These chiefly take place through the cultural scripts they pass between one another regarding the prevalence of potential criticism. Finally, this chapter will discuss the strategies staff use to counter these processes to protect themselves from potential repercussions; some of which are encouraged by the organisation, while also utilising informal attempts to deflect and deny potential blame. It will also examine how, conversely to officers' claims, these activities continue to perpetuate such processes of blame, and how their assertions of victimhood, while made in earnest, may be somewhat displaced, as they neglect to understand the role their actions play in sustaining such a system.

Organisational blame

In line with the extant literature (Heaton, 2011; Metcalfe, 2017; Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019), Stonecastle staff regularly highlighted that they felt the internal operational environment was characterised by high levels of criticism, and they frequently feared the apportioning of blame as a result. Such sentiment directly contrasts with claims policing organisations often make, that they are unwilling players in a wider blaming system that seeks to direct criticism towards policing rather than other agencies for any errors that arise (HOC, 2018: 71; Tomkins, 2020; Shannon, 2020). From the perspective of staff, policing organisations are active players in the blaming systems of which they are a part, rather than the passive recipients they claim to be. Interestingly, this perspective mirrors the view staff have regarding the management of risk within the

organisation – that they are unwilling participants in a system where they have little choice but to assume responsibility for any blame that arises.

The internal enforcement of appropriate standards of behaviour was a matter that came up regularly during discussions with staff in the PSC in particular, with one individual going so far as to state that '*everything is stuffed down your throat regarding conduct.*' The PSC acts as the 'screen or mesh' for calls coming into the force, where staff decide whether a request for service falls within the remit of the police (Manning, 1982: 231), which they are required to do in a particularly high-pressure environment. In their study of call handlers, Lumsden and Black (2018: 615) found these boundaries were blurred, with staff experiencing uncertainty regarding whether the call was the responsibility of police or partner agencies. In their study, staff were concerned that if they did not allocate the call correctly, and the caller suffered significant consequences as a result, they would likely be blamed for this. Similar anxieties were found in my observations of the PSC, where staff expressed concerns regarding the potential for a wrong decision to be made:

The staff member stated that the police, and by extension her role within the organisation, meant everybody always had to work towards the worst-case scenario. She said: 'the one time we don't attend that call, that person will kill themselves and we can't afford for that to happen'. – Fieldnotes, PSC, August 2021.

These concerns are compounded by the working environment in the PSC. Staff typically assess calls alone, without colleague input. Consequently, it is often difficult to obtain a second opinion if the call handler is uncertain regarding the appropriate course of action

to take. This limits the utility of relying upon colleagues to shoulder the potential blame for any situations assessed, and they are likely to face the consequences of a wrong decision alone. Combined with an environment of heightened risk and reduced resources (Lumsden and Black, 2018: 606), this creates an additional source of pressure for staff who fear the apportioning of blame. Qin's (2022) work sheds some light on why PSC staff are particularly alert to blame risk. In his research (p. 10), he found when operating conditions are characterised by threat, urgency and crisis, staff become particularly aware of the threat element of the situation. It is likely that staff in these conditions perceive the increased chances of blame in scenarios where a decision must be made quickly, often concerning the immediate welfare of an individual who is often experiencing a crisis situation, without the chance to reflect upon the chosen course of action before applying this.

The related topics of blame and scrutiny were also particularly prevalent when observing response teams, particularly around conversations relating to the IOPC and PSD. This is perhaps not surprising; Hinterleitner and Wittwe (2022: 759) find that political and media pressure strongly affect frontline workers, who will be intensely aware of the potential for damaged reputation should they select the wrong course of action. A specific instance of the desire to avoid blame risk can be found in officers' discussions around the existence of PSD, and the fear this engenders in staff whenever they perceive themselves to fall under the gaze of this aspect of the organisation:

We were in the parade room when Lara received a text message from Nicole, telling her that she 'just had a call from PSD, phone me now'. Before she could respond, her mobile phone rang. Lara looked visibly panicked and left the room. She returned 10 minutes later saying that the witness from the domestic violence

incident we attended last week had complained that Lara had mentioned her name in front of the suspect. I recalled the witness had expressed concerns about ringing the police, saying she was worried as she lived across from the address and did not want the suspect to know she had called the emergency services, for fear of repercussion. Lara relayed to the team that the PSD officer had given her words of advice, with no other consequences, telling her to be more careful in relation to matters of personal information being discussed in front of the suspect. Lara was clearly angry about having been, in her view, unfairly reprimanded by PSD. - Field notes, September 2022.

We can see how Lara perceived the contact from PSD to be a form of blaming practice on the part of the organisation. On the surface, it appears the 'words of advice' given by PSD are designed to merely correct Lara's conduct, but the officer in question experiences this outcome as unreasonable, although it was not clear precisely why this should be the case. The attempts made by Nicole to warn Lara of the PSD's attention also demonstrates the extent that officers experience PSD as a blame-making force. Had the warning come at an earlier time, it would have provided Lara ample time to deploy blame avoidance strategies in anticipation of the event. It is particularly interesting that PSD is perceived as a symbolic assailant (Cox, 1996; 167 - 169) operating within the force, a role that is usually assigned to outside actors, and cast as the 'other', despite being an integral part of the policing organisation. PSD officers inhabit a unique and usually undesirable position within the institution. While they are perceived as members of the policing organisation by society, within the institution itself they are perceived as outsiders due to breaking with police cultural norms by working directly against the 'blue code of silence' (Westmarland, 2020) by actively investigating matters of staff misconduct. PSD staff often play a conflicting role within the organisation, in that they act as blame-makers by identifying and pursuing potentially

discreditable conduct, but are not immune from being blamed themselves by staff for their own shortcomings, from the length of time taken in investigations to their apparent overzealous investigative practices (Heaton and Tong, 2019; Tomkins, 2020; Tomkins, Hartley and Bristow, 2020; Home Affairs Select Committee, 2020).

Mirroring the concerns found in the PSC, fear of blame is particularly pertinent in response. Interestingly, when observing these teams, there was never any mention of the terms 'accountability' or 'responsibility', nor any discussion regarding why external accountability mechanisms may be required. Instead, it was often the blame aspect of the research participants were quick to pick up on. Further, though the term 'blame culture' was never specifically mentioned during fieldwork, these officers regularly referred to the potential for being blamed, 'stuck on' and 'getting done' by PSD, reflecting their belief that the organisation would be intolerant should any genuine oversight occur. Further, I was asked on several occasions by officers in these departments whether I was an undercover officer working for PSD; an approach that was mocked by officers in other departments upon hearing this, who told me not to be concerned as response officers were known for 'paranoid about PSD'. Within response teams in particular, in line with the extant research (Flanagan, 2008; ACPO, 2008, Metcalfe, 2017, HOC, 2018; Home Office, 2019) there existed the pervasive belief that no matter how closely policies and procedures were followed, nor how honest one's intentions may be when doing so, at some unknown point in the future, their actions would be subject to intense scrutiny by a third party.

It would be worth considering what it is about these two operational environments that leads to a heightened fear of blame that is not reflected elsewhere in the

organisation. Both roles involve high contact with the public and involve responding to emergency situations. Consequently, decisions often must be made in time-pressured circumstances, typically with little information to underpin the chosen course of action. In contrast, the areas where the least discussion of blame took place were in safeguarding and RIT teams, areas that had less public contact and lacked the same time pressures that existed in other frontline roles. As discussed in chapter 6, the RIT in particular was able to contextualise the need for accountability and understood the reasons for why this might be required, although there was still some discussion regarding the potential for criticism. In contrast, front facing teams were more likely to characterise such systems as blame attributing and were generally more aware of the chance of blame whenever an action was undertaken. Qin (2022: 10) notes these crisis situations are often accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty, which as discussed in chapters four and five, are generally discouraged under the notion of the precautionary principle. It may be that staff in these contexts do not have the time to utilise techniques that would normally minimise risk to self, for instance extensive documentation or consulting a supervisor. Without this safety net, they are increasingly aware of the chance things may go wrong and they may come to be blamed.

The preoccupation with individual blameworthiness and accountability on the part of staff, is driven by concerns that to attract blame may lead to significant repercussions for the staff member in question. Such concerns, however, are not completely unfounded. Policing has received a high amount of negative attention in recent years, in part due to the number of high-profile scandals that have taken place relating to police activity (Heaton, 2011: 83). Such failures have continued to highlight defects in the

perceived accountability and legitimacy of the police (Innes: 2014), subjecting the service to increased public and governmental scrutiny to remedy these failings. While scrutiny of policing has always existed, this is somewhat exacerbated by the role the media plays in continually bringing such matters to the fore (Dobrin et al, 2021; 36). Persistent feelings of scrutiny were further exacerbated by the internal environment in which staff operated, in which regular surveillance of their actions took place:

I notice that each officer must place a small metal disc into a docking console on the dashboard whenever they drive a police vehicle. Alison tells me that this is called an IR3, and that it is used to track which officer is driving, and that it beeps repeatedly if you do not identify yourself. I have heard this tone myself a few times, and it is so loud and insistent that you cannot drive without stopping and using the IR3. This is also used to track the speed the vehicle is driven at, so it is possible to identify if an officer has been driving too fast, or driving on blues and twos when they shouldn't have been. If an officer forgets this disc, it is going to be nigh on impossible to drive a work vehicle, which is essential for response roles. - Fieldnotes, September 2021.

I've just seen massive changes over the years. Everything we do is monitored. When body worn cameras were introduced, they were initially at the officer's discretion as to when you put them on. Now everything has to be recorded. Every call you go to, you get at least two or three mobile phones in your face recording everything you say and do. - Chief Inspector C.

Officers and staff experience their working environment as one of constant inspection, both internally, in terms of the policies and procedures they are expected to adhere to, and externally in the form of frequent oversight from third parties such as the media and the IOPC. Their behaviour is consequently shaped by an awareness of being subjected to constant scrutiny, which lays the foundations for a blame culture to thrive. Douglas (1992: 59) notes how in the aftermath of a crisis, most institutions will begin a process of

sensemaking to understand the events that unfolded. During this process, they will pass judgement on the justifications given by those involved. It makes sense that in such a setting, officer actions will be geared towards ensuring that blame is avoided at all costs. Examples of this are abundant in policing, particularly in relation to policies and procedures that govern the actions of staff, designed to minimise potential blame risk at all costs. As discussed in the earlier chapters of this thesis, such practices inevitably shape how staff approach and handle risk, for instance in the continual documentation of actions, undertaken to avoid leaving oneself open to blame; a practice which also paradoxically serves to heighten staff's awareness of blame risk. Such procedures inevitably lead to a preoccupation with avoiding potential blame as staff behaviour is continuously directed towards the minimisation of criticism.

It is clear staff perceive blame risk as being continually present in the organisational setting. This perception is supported by the apparently high levels of scrutiny officers face, from internal audits to regular reminders issued by the organisation that bad behaviour will not be tolerated. As we saw previously regarding the treatment of risk, the sentiment frequently articulated in the literature, which cites the external environment as the key driver for blame risk (for instance, Home Office, 2019; Premkumar, 2020; Dobrin et al, 2021) may not be entirely accurate, and policing organisations may play an integral role in furthering the fears of staff via the emphasis they place on avoiding blame risk. While certain actions may be undertaken by staff to minimise the chances of attracting blame risk and subsequently drawing attention from external oversight bodies, this has the effect of creating a perpetual fear of blame among the workforce. It is important to note that institutional behaviours do not take

place in a vacuum, and are shaped in part by the external environment, which the next section of this chapter illustrates.

External investigations and the ever-present threat of the IOPC

The existing literature has found matters of risk aversion and blame are attributed heavily to the possibility of IOPC investigation that seems to constantly loom over the policing sphere. This particular accountability institution is responsible for investigating the most serious complaints and conduct matters that arise in relation to police organisations. The organisation is regularly identified as a cause of worry for officers, who they see as maintaining unreasonable amounts of scrutiny towards staff (Home Office, 2018: Front Line Review, 2018; Shannon, 2020). The IOPC is the latest iteration of national bodies designed to ensure police accountability; each with increased powers designed to maintain oversight and accountability of police systems (Torrible, 2020: 15). Within Stonecastle Police, the IOPC was perceived as restricting behaviour, with staff reporting feeling heavily scrutinised by the oversight organisation:

We're held to account for a lot of external inspections, and obviously, our own PSD and the IOPC. ...I feel frustrated at times...I don't think other organisations are held to account in the same way, when a lot of their actions and for health, for example, I'm going to pick on them obviously, a lot of their actions can lead to deaths ultimately, more so than ours can. - Inspector A.

Within policing, the IOPC is perceived by staff as what Douglas (1992: 15) terms a professional 'blaming system', one which is designed to assign every failure to the behaviour of an identifiable individual (Shannon, 2020: 921). The current misconduct

arrangements are designed to establish individual responsibility for conduct over organisational failings, and as a result, officers act to ensure that they are not individually held to account for what they perceive to be institutional shortcomings. In line with Douglas' sentiments, Metcalfe (2017: 159) notes that such authorities do not adequately prevent potential failings, but instead strengthen feelings of hardship, frustration, and apprehension within policing organisations, contributing towards the 'blame culture' that has arisen within policing. However, as discussed in earlier chapters, the chances of being subjected to such an investigation are relatively low (Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019: 151; Home Office, 2022; 2023). Despite this, research found officers remained concerned with the likelihood of being investigated by the IOPC, particularly regarding its perceived inability to investigate misconduct matters effectively and expeditiously (Shannon, 2020: 919). For these officers, the process of a lengthy investigation becomes the punishment as they await the outcome of this procedure. This may contribute towards the fear officers experience, as officers lack trust in the IOPC to conduct fair and impartial investigations. Within Stonecastle Police, staff did not identify failure as a necessary precursor for being investigated by the IOPC, but instead saw them as taking unreasonable decisions regarding staff conduct, made with the benefit of hindsight. Consistent with the literature in this area, extensive adverse sentiment was found within Stonecastle Police in relation to the IOPC:

Jake gave the example of the IOPC Twitter account that had recently advised people to make a complaint if they saw or experienced the police dealing with a mental health matter poorly. Jake was clearly irritated by this and said to me 'we are not trained to deal with mental health problems, and encouraging people to complain is wrong'. He tells me that 'when it comes to policing, we are not told by the IOPC how to improve, merely what we did wrong'. - Fieldnotes, May 2022.

Officers proactively spotted somebody sitting in the car at five in the morning...They're having a real tough time in their life, so we quite rightly take them to the Crisis Centre... So, we've done the right thing. We left them in the care of the hospital staff, and we drove away. Unfortunately, three hours later, this person killed themselves...That constitutes what's called a DSI referral [to the IOPC], so a death or serious injury referral, because of the contact with police. So those officers are then investigated, when the reality is they tried their hardest to support somebody...That's where trust, blame and confidence is significantly impacted because that cop next time is going to drive straight past that car. - Superintendent C.

This organisational othering illustrates how the IOPC, as the main oversight body of the police, are perceived by staff as a particularly malign force that seeks to unfairly assign blame for unintended negative consequences. Metcalfe (2017: 157) identifies how police organisations typically perceive these accountability bodies as a danger to their ability to adequately fulfil their role. Perceiving these institutions as a threat also bolsters organisational identification by underscoring the bounds between the police and the rest of society (Barker, 2001), by othering these institutions. Metcalfe (2017: 157) also notes while this may have beneficial effects, primarily by solidifying officer identification with policing organisations, it increases distrust on the part of staff, and enhances the perceived need to avoid blame risk at all costs on the part of officers.

Such fears represent significant concerns regarding blame risk on the part of officers, as they anticipate adverse outcomes for themselves, even if they appear highly unlikely to happen in practice. These anxieties are heightened by the perceived blame culture operating within the organisation, alongside concerns that criticism will be heaped upon them as individuals, as they will be expected to be answerable for what they perceive to be organisational failings. The fact that this mode of accountability is

typically conducted with the benefit of hindsight (Metcalf, 2017: 159) only adds to the fear that such danger may present itself at any time, as officers become concerned their decisions will be assessed in the current context, rather than with an appreciation of the situation faced at the time. Such fears are directed towards internal accountability systems such as PSD, as well as external bodies like the IOPC, who are typically characterised as possessing nefarious intentions and conducting poor quality investigations, coupled with a desire to penalise officers for unavoidable mistakes (Tomkins, 2020; Tomkins, Hartley and Bristow, 2020; Tomkins and Bristow, 2023). When examining how attitudes around fear of criticism are sustained, we should consider how messages around blame are transmitted between officers, and how staff themselves play a role in creating such concerns, which we turn to next.

‘Storytelling’: Telling a tale of institutional myths in policing.

Numerous researchers (Fletcher, 1996; Van Hulst, 2013; Smith, Pedersen, and Burnett, 2014) note policing organisations have a natural propensity for storytelling, and this feature of the organisation can be useful for studying assumptions underpinning the way policing is done (Holdaway, 1983, Fletcher, 1996; Chase, 2018). Focusing on how staff tell stories provides us with an understanding of their perception of the situations they face, while allowing us to focus on the manner that cultural knowledge is disseminated to others in the group. These stories ‘pass on and replicate the organisational DNA’ (Van Hulst, 2013: 232) to other staff members, and act as an integral method of sustaining existing norms and values. Storytelling is, above all, a social practice, shaped and guided by the social conventions of the setting in which they are told (Ewick and

Silbey, 1995). Via the practice of storytelling, we can examine how pertinent cultural information is exchanged between officers in relation to the management and apprehension of blame risk. As Holdaway (1983: 146) notes, the telling and subsequent re-telling of each story underpins a process that bolsters the perspective of the rank-and-file in relation to salient cultural information, ensuring the messages contained within these institutional myths continue.

Storytelling in training

The introduction of a new officer into the policing institution also represents the initial stage of their induction into the organisational culture. In the early stages of their career, officers receive information about the more pertinent aspects of the role they are about to enter. In this environment storytelling can be particularly powerful when conveying narratives around blame risk and the impact this could potentially have on new officers' career stability. Such narratives invite officers to imagine the worst and present a never-ending set of scenarios in which the officer could potentially be held to account for wider organisational and societal failings. In the training setting, blame risk is represented as a powerful danger to the security of new officers' career. These stories are typically employed by more experienced members of the service to impart essential knowledge to newer members. Such stories can be particularly useful for providing warnings of potential hazards (Van Maanen 1973, McNulty 1994) and granting entry to the occupational environment being discussed (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). This information is distinctive as it typically places blame upon external players for any adverse situations that unfold, at a minimum placing responsibility upon them for

creating the circumstances in which the problem arose (Burke 1969, Van Hulst, 2020: 100). Officers at the start of their career are primed for processes of blame risk that take place within the organisation. The research discovered how more experienced officers use storytelling to pass on important cultural information to newer officers via the training environment:

The Police Federation representative tells the officers about an individual who was under investigation for two and a half years. He tells the class how the IOPC decided to bring charges of assault, and the officers had to go to court to 'defend themselves'. The criminal case was discontinued, but it persisted as a misconduct matter within the organisation. The person then needed to 'defend himself' in front of a panel, and the outcome would be either 'not guilty or lose your job, one or the other' He said 'you will go to jobs where people don't like the police and there's money to be had... I don't want to put you off, but every time you go to a call it could happen, and you suddenly find yourself at the end of an investigation'. He finished by saying, 'Have I scared you all now? As a police officer there are a number of ways it can go wrong. The IOPC can come and investigate that, and they can investigate you'. He finished the session by asking them which talk was next. He was told this would be taken by a member of PSD, to which he said, 'well I suppose you'll need to know who's going to be arresting you'. He finished the talk by saying 'you've got a lot of responsibility now' as a parting shot. – Fieldnotes, January 2021.

The first thing the PSD officer said was that 'now you are no longer citizens, you've got to be really careful with your behaviour because everyone's got cameras now'. He said 'you must be beyond reproach, and I can't emphasise that enough... I'm telling you this to try to scare you into realising that people's lives are in your hands'. He told a story of an officer who had 'let a victim wander off' and they had eventually drowned in a river that was some distance away. As a result, the officer was put under investigation for death during/after police contact. His advice was to 'basically just cover your arse', which was met with laughter by the class. The PSD officer continued by saying: 'of course we always get the blame, don't we? If anything goes wrong in society, it is always our fault'. – Fieldnotes, January 2021.

From the examples above, we see how experienced officers convey to students in the class that their behaviour will be under extensive scrutiny from the point of joining the organisation onward. A sense of powerlessness and fatalism pervades these talks, that any events that follow are out of the officers' control, further increasing fear of the inevitability of blame amongst the new officers. It is interesting that these officers continually employ examples of the worst-case scenario when such stories are told. For instance, the Police Federation representative does not mention there are other options for sanction when a misconduct matter arises, such as a final written warning or a reduction in rank for those with some degree of seniority, but only outlines how officers may lose their job if they are found guilty. Such tales make use of the strategy of 'emplotment', which Bruner (1990: 96) outlines as a calculated move intended to endorse a distinct perception of the situation that suits the motives of the storyteller, primarily to paint himself, and the group to which he belongs, in the best light possible.

In these stories, officers are typically portrayed as innocent individuals who are trapped, coerced, or otherwise unintentionally cause wrongdoing by sinister outside forces. Van Hulst (2020: 99) notes both those who tell such stories, and those who choose to listen, are unlikely to be cognisant of the degree to which such stories emplot storytellers' presumed beliefs and philosophies. When examining the examples given above, several assumptions are revealed – that the officers' actions were fair and reasonable, and those of the third party were not; the officer's intentions were pure, and any damage caused was unintentional. Such assumptions are particularly powerful in staff training sessions, where newer officers often have little existing cultural knowledge to assess such stories against for veracity of the claims made, and instead are likely to

take the content of these at face value. However, we can see how such stories implicitly shape the narrative that blame risk is ever-present in the world of policing; something to be feared and controlled at all costs, which is particularly important for new officers at the start of their careers. This phenomenon is not unique to the training environment, with instances of storytelling being widespread across the policing organisation, as the following section will demonstrate.

Storytelling and cultural scripts across the policing institution.

Across the wider organisation, the processes which underpin storytelling in the training environment also continue to sustain the fear of blame risk amongst experienced officers and newer staff alike. Fear of blame is kept continually at the forefront of staff's minds, with many of their informal interactions focusing upon the discussion of potential blame. Indeed, when conducting the interview element of the fieldwork, staff often used stories to convey their fear of blame risk to me, and to illustrate the potential scenarios in which received criticism would be particularly significant:

A female was quite low and tried committing suicide in a hotel room. Our officers attended, spoke to the mental health team...they said for us to leave. Because she had help from the mental health team. Sadly, an hour later, she committed suicide in that hotel room and our officers had to attend coroners court and were dragged through the mud regarding it...they attended with the best intentions, and it was a lot of pressure to try and do not only your police work, but also kind of social work and mental health work. They ended up trying to do their best. She ended up killing herself and then... they were dragged across the coals for supposedly not going further. – Safeguarding focus group, October 2020.

Officers had dropped him at Tesco the night before, which is where he wanted to go, after being released from [name] hospital. Then it transpired that after they dropped him off at Tesco, he's gone to Tesco and bought a load of beer and

vodka, and then he's chucked himself into the river next to Tesco. Next thing is, the officers were brought in and they had questions to answer over that, over why they didn't drop him at his home address, when in fact on that occasion I don't think they had any legal obligation to take him anywhere after he'd been assessed and released in [town], they just did it to give the guy a lift back to wherever he wanted to go... ultimately it's still the case that if you think they should be taken or you need to do more, that's still for the officer to do so, even though it's not our area of expertise, it does seem like stuff does always stop with the police. – Chief Inspector C.

Such stories are told by officers to highlight the presence of perceived blame risk in and around the occupational environment. Both officers present the scenario of staff acting with the best of intentions, but subsequently finding themselves liable to charges of misconduct. Both also highlight the presence of external agencies and the part they play in such scenarios, and the lack of negative attention their actions draw, despite significant involvement in the situation under discussion. In the examples discussed above, the perception of symbolic assailants driving the existing blame culture is bolstered by the perpetual retelling of stories and myths between staff, which constitute a significant part of the informal working culture. Research demonstrates individuals are more likely to assess specific problems as highly relevant to their circumstances if they are more easily able to recall them (Kahneman, 2012: 10). The regularity with which stories are told that focus upon the need to avoid criticism influence officers' perception of the prevalence of blame in the occupational environment. This fear leads officers to consistently expect negative repercussions for their behaviour at some unknowable date in the future. When such an effect occurs in combination with perceived vulnerability to blame, alongside the 'othering' of accountability institutions (Metcalf, 2017: 157), blame risk is substantially overestimated as a threat to the officer's place in the organisation before they begin their time on the beat. We have examined how the

telling of stories influences officer expectations of blame throughout their career. The next section of this chapter will discuss how these assumptions influence officer behaviour, particularly with regards to how they guard themselves against the possibility of coming to be blamed.

Blame avoidance behaviours.

Hood's (2013) work builds on this awareness of blame risk to identify how the behaviour of frontline individuals heavily focuses on the avoidance of blame. Due to the high risk of attracting blame in their working environment, staff need to utilise techniques to avoid, deflect or neutralise the danger of attracting blame. Such desires reflect the argument made by Weaver (1986: 371) that those in public facing roles will be keener to avoid blame than they will be to claim credit for any actions undertaken, which this section of the chapter will demonstrate. As previously discussed, in policing, there are an array of what are ostensibly risk-averse practices, which are in fact designed to prevent the attraction of blame, from meticulously documenting actions taken, to operating towards the 'worst case scenario' prior to an incident occurring to presentational techniques put into gear after high-profile blameworthy incidents have taken place. Hood (2013: 91) describes how these 'policy strategies' are used to decrease the risk of organisational or individual culpability for errors via the elimination of individual discretion. This type of approach is particularly relevant to the policing organisation, with its focus on minimising risk to reputation to safeguard against the erosion of its relationship with the public. These policy strategies work to 'shift the blame' in several ways, and for the purpose of this analysis I shall focus on two of them

in particular, as these practices were prevalent throughout the organisation. The first way blame avoidance is achieved is by designing restrictive policies and procedures on the part of the organisation, known as protocolisation, and secondly, using the 'herd mentality' approach by those on the ground, both of which are designed to safeguard officers from potential blame should it arise.

Developing Hood's idea of blame avoidance behaviour (BAB) is Hinterleitner (2017) who identifies two forms of this informal practice: anticipatory and reactive BAB. These behaviours are deployed with the intention of minimising or removing oneself from situations where the likelihood of attracting blame is high. For Hinterleitner, anticipatory BAB is deployed when an individual wishes to prepare for a potentially blameworthy event that may occur, whereas reactive BAB occurs after the blameworthy event has arisen and is designed to publicly confront any accompanying criticism (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015: 588). The research found many instances of anticipatory BAB, deployed with great frequency by the organisation and its staff, both of whom often anticipated attracting blame for their activities. Reactive blame strategies, typically occurring when the public confrontation of blame is required, were generally undertaken by higher-ranking members of the organisation, which this research did not examine in any great depth. The remaining part of this chapter will concentrate on the rank-and-file's attempts to avoid blame by utilising anticipatory avoidance strategies, some of which are provided on behalf of the organisation, while others are utilised under staff's own initiative. More specifically, we will establish how these behaviours appear within the policing context, and how what at first glance appears to be risk aversion, is in fact a form of blame avoidance.

Protocolisation: 'following the process'

The first policy strategy detailed by Hood (2013: 93) is that of 'protocolisation'; the removal or minimisation of the opportunity for individuals to exercise discretion, which decreases the opportunity for mistakes to be made. Hood (2013: 20) outlines how such policy strategies are designed to remove individual judgement and replace it with automatic processes, which would allow both the organisation and the individual under its employ to demonstrate the correct procedure was always followed. Such strategies are often the blame-avoidance method chosen by organisations when alternative methods for further delegation, for instance to external agencies, are not available. He (2013: 102) notes how in many organisations, policy strategies centre around the removal of actions that may potentially attract criticism. Policing with its ever-broadening remit of public protection and its status as a principal emergency service does not have this option, so instead needs to make good use of strategies to ensure it adequately deflects any blame it may attract. Hood (2013: 20) notes how the stronger the negativity bias within the organisational culture itself, the more likely that such defensive strategies are likely to be utilised. The depiction of this type of occupational ethos is synonymous with policing occupational culture, characterised by its propensity for suspicion, defensiveness, and solidarity (Skolnik, 1966; Reiner, Loftus, 2011), a sentiment which has only been heightened in recent years, due to the perception of higher levels of scrutiny being placed upon it. We can see how policy strategies are particularly useful in the policing environment when it comes to the deflection of blame. These procedures identify the course of action least likely to attract unwanted attention and encourage officers to adhere to such policies. Further, they provide a degree of insurance to

officers that their chosen course of action will be endorsed by the organisation, lessening the chances of them coming to be blamed for potential failings.

Such schemes are regularly employed by Stonecastle Police, chiefly via the implementation of specific rules of behaviour, which are favoured over discretion-informed decisions. An instance of this can be observed by returning to Stonecastle Police's domestic violence policy, which offers specific guidance for frontline staff dealing with such incidents. As noted in the preceding chapters, it is worth noting that those domestic cases which are recognised as high-risk also present a significant likelihood of attracting blame should the risk in such situations escalate. In these instances, the concepts of high-risk and high blame are synonymous, and recognising this allows us to understand how the avoidance of blame has typically been classified as an aversion to risk. The policy in question states that:

The first priority of the attending officer is to ensure the safety of the victim and take positive action to assess the risks, reduce or remove the threat and prevent any harm. Where crime is reported/suspected, the arrest of the perpetrator **MUST** be considered and any decision (whether no arrest, VA etc.) should be accompanied by a full and detailed rationale - including where the victim does not support a prosecution. - Stonecastle Police, 2020:13.

This guidance represents a classic example of Hinterleitner's concept of anticipatory blame avoidance. For Hinterleitner (2017: 243), whose work focuses primarily on public officeholders, BAB is becoming increasingly prevalent, due to an expectation of higher standards on behalf of the public, alongside an increase in media coverage of high-profile scandals (Strömbäck, 2008; Flinders, 2014). As a result, the risk of being publicly assigned blame is heightened, and individuals and organisations alike must calculate which incidents are most likely to lead to the attraction of blame and will consequently

focus upon anticipating and deflecting the fallout that arises from such matters (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015: 594). The blame risk that a particular situation presents is driven by the expected reception of other institutions, such as the media, and members of the public if the blameworthy event becomes widely known (ibid.). There have been numerous examples of high-profile criticism being directed at the police where they have been perceived to inadequately intervene in domestic violence matters (HMICFRS, 2014: 17; IOPC, 2022a; IOPC, 2022b), so it is not surprising that resources are invested into preventing future admonishment. This is chiefly achieved by police forces by providing careful instructions to staff, controlling their actions via Hood's notion of the blame avoidance policy strategy. Such directives, which have been characterised in the policy literature as encouraging risk avoidant behaviour on the part of officers and staff, in fact encourage blame avoidance as staff anticipate potential criticism from external audiences should they fail to adhere to instructions.

The domestic violence policy goes on to detail specific instructions for how other areas of the organisation, for instance the PSC, should assess the incident, alongside a precise ten-point plan for any investigative tasks that should be undertaken. Further, the policy dictates a variety of actions that should be carried out at the scene, for instance that a minimum of three houses each side of the incident address are visited. Hood (2013: 93) notes how such strategies curb or remove accountability by making it difficult to determine if any wrongdoing occurred, predominantly by demonstrating that all necessary precautions were undertaken to avoid accidental harm. If any negative consequences arise, the organisation and its employees can demonstrate they undertook the correct course of action, and the fault must lie elsewhere. It is not

surprising Stonecastle Police are keen to manage blame risk in relation to domestic incidents, which the policy described as being 'high volume and high risk' in terms of the potential for serious and significant victimisation (Stonecastle Police, 2020), as such incidents are ripe for blaming practices to occur. Such policies are particularly useful in this instance as they 'limit blame for the faulty exercise of discretion' (Hood, 2013: 93), and can prevent potential criticism by ensuring all appropriate actions are taken.

Stonecastle Police's approach to high-risk incidents is influenced by national guidelines that dictate the actions they must undertake regarding such matters. Guidance provided by the College of Policing (2023) identifies potential approaches for domestic violence matters, providing an assessment as to the appropriateness of each method discussed. The first of these is the unstructured clinical judgement, where 'grading of risk is based solely on the assessor's opinion'. It goes on to state 'this approach is... prone to the assessor's personal biases. It lacks accountability and is recognised as the least accurate.' Such an approach is clearly synonymous with police discretion, and the guidance discourages such practices in favour of what it terms 'structured professional judgement' instead. It states that under such an approach, 'responsibility for grading risk sits ultimately with the assessor, but their judgement may be guided by a structured tool that includes relevant risk factors. This approach combines a degree of accountability with the flexibility to consider the wider context of specific cases.' Consequently, the individual use of discretion is impeded, in favour of more objective risk assessment tools that lower the risk of blame, both for the individual and for the wider organisation. Although ostensibly such tools give freedom to the officer to make an informed assessment, such techniques are also designed to reduce

the chances of the organisation being charged with negligence or lack of due care in discharging its duties. As previously noted, although such policies are ostensibly concerned with controlling risk, they also serve to protect police organisations from potential accusations. By encouraging the use of tried-and-tested techniques, the organisation hopes to minimise the utilisation of discretion, thus decreasing the chances of attracting blame (Hood, 2013: 93). In this way, policing organisations operate their own institutional method of 'cover your arse', discussed in earlier empirical chapters, echoed in the behaviour of its officers, by making sure they demonstrate the provision of necessary guidance for officers and staff.

These 'protocolisation' methods are bids to sidestep potential criticism by ensuring staff consistently adhere to agreed procedures above other possible forms of action. Using Hinterleitner's theory allows us to understand how such guidelines are a form of BAB deployed by the organisation itself. The organisation anticipates potential blame, and subsequently attempts to control this by providing detailed instruction to staff informing them how to avoid bringing the organisation into disrepute. As we can see from the example above, such an approach aims to minimise the use of police discretion wherever possible. Using the protocolisation strategy, blame is, in theory, only placed at the door of the rank-and-file should they fail to adequately follow the policies set out for them by the organisation (Hood, 2013: 94). Allowing staff autonomy is seen as encouraging blame risk if the usage of permitted discretion results in any form of error or wrongdoing. Hood (2013: 91) notes how these strategies choose the course of action that minimises likely blame, either by decreasing the chances of blame being detectable by others, or at least by showing the organisation and its employees

did all they reasonably could to foresee and prevent potential harm, which in itself is a form of anticipatory blame avoidance. Although on the surface these policies can be interpreted as another facet of a risk averse approach to policing, Hood (2013: 90) states such policies are in actual fact another form of blame avoidance on the part of the organisation, designed to minimise risk of mainly institutional, but occasionally individual liability. Such approaches allow the organisation to manage risk to reputation first and foremost by decreasing the probability of blameworthy incidents taking place, by minimising potentially questionable conduct on the part of its officers and staff.

The jobsworth strategy: a natural consequence of protocolisation?

This 'jobsworth strategy' is another method identified by Hood (2013: 33) as a technique for neutralising blame risk. This approach can be interpreted as a reaction on the part of officers to the protocolisation of their profession, and involves following set rules to avoid blame, primarily through rigidly adhering to standardised procedures set for them by the organisation, which offers staff a 'best practice' defence, even after making decisions which are a poor fit for the situation at hand. Earlier in the thesis, this particular phenomenon was identified by Flanagan as 'risk aversion', seen in the way staff were often reluctant to deviate from tried-and-tested processes. Such behaviours are, in fact, forms of anticipatory blame avoidance taken on behalf of staff. Following such policies may be beneficial for staff, as complying with tried and tested procedures ensures they have the backing of the organisation when undertaking their role. This ensures that should supposed misconduct arise; they cannot be charged with deviating from officially approved guidance. The research demonstrated many instances of staff

choosing to follow such processes when they had discretion to do otherwise, with importance being placed on not only adequately following procedure, but also being overtly perceived as doing so, both at the time the incident occurred, and in its aftermath:

Ruby took a call from a man regarding his 10-year-old son who had purposefully destroyed his television, and who wanted him arrested for criminal damage. During the call, a woman could be heard in the background referring to a recent murder of a young child by its parents, which had caused significant upset amongst the local community. The caller then said 'it's no wonder that things happen to kids in this town... what does it take before a parent snaps? I'm trying to tell people that something's wrong and no one is doing anything about it'. Ruby informed him that officers would attend the address, and closed the call, grading this as a two, requiring a police response within the hour. However, she was preoccupied, and I could tell the call was concerning her a great deal. She opened the call log again, then changed this to require a grade one immediate response. She stated to me that she was very concerned for the welfare of the child, due to the threats made by the parents. She documented this rationale on the call record, and then spoke to the deputy supervisor about the call. She then told me the deputy supervisor had listened to the call and did not appear to hear the threats made by the female and told Ruby she had nothing to worry about.

Ruby remained clearly agitated and asked the force incident manager (FIM) to increase the audio quality of the call so that the speech contained within it could be heard more clearly. We listened to the call together, and I could hear the woman's threats in the background. Ruby then went to the main supervisor of the PSC, who was also her manager's supervisor, and talked with him about her concerns. She kept telling me that she couldn't stop thinking about what might happen to the child if further action was not taken. The main supervisor agreed with Ruby's concerns. Ruby was worried that she had 'gone over her manager's head', although she informed me that she was merely following the process by escalating her concerns. Ruby kept saying how if she hadn't ratified the call and written on the log what she had done, then she would not be able to prove that she'd gone to a supervisor to highlight the problem. For the rest of her shift, Ruby anxiously tracked the incident on the force system, and she did not take any other calls during that time. Although officers were dispatched to the incident, she continued to say how worried she was, as officers wrote on the log that social services did not see any risk to the child and would not take the child from the property. Later, officers added that despite social services reluctance to take the child, they felt there was a genuine concern, and they would be taking the child to the police station themselves to have him removed by social services. Ruby was pleased with this course of action, which would protect the child whilst also

removing any potential risk to herself. She repeatedly told me that she didn't know why she was worried as she did everything right and the call was now completely out of her control. – Fieldnotes, August 2021.

Hinterleitner and Sager (2015: 593) note how anticipatory BAB allows the individual in question to prepare a form of defence should blame be directed towards them. As discussed previously, the PSC is one of the more high-risk departments in Stonecastle Police, as operatives work in conditions regularly characterised by threat, urgency, and crisis (Qin, 2022: 10), which makes it more likely staff will anticipate potential blame. Ruby's concerns were twofold in this scenario. Not only was she concerned for the child's well-being, but also for the consequences for herself if something untoward happened and she was deemed not to have graded the call accurately. Hinterleitner and Sager (2015: 294) note individuals will concentrate most of their available resources on avoiding blame when they think this is highly likely to occur, which we see in this example. Ruby seeks out alternative advice to confirm her suspicions from further up the managerial chain. Such behaviour has also been discussed earlier in this thesis in relation to staff's desire for ratification, which is typically used to demonstrate top-level cover has been obtained to control for potential risks. Ruby utilises such a technique to serve as a form of insurance. Should she come to be blamed, she can demonstrate she attempted to obtain a second opinion from a more experienced colleague. She seemed worried about being blamed for the incident and was noticeably relieved by another supervisor ratifying her decisions, as this would then apparently allow her to avoid potential blame, as well as avoiding sole responsibility for the risk associated with the call, should there be any type of formal investigation. In ratifying the log, Ruby has verifiable evidence of the actions she took to prevent the situation

escalating. Further, by seeking confirmation from someone higher within the organisational hierarchy, she is ensuring she will be protected if she is discovered to be going against the advice of her immediate line manager. Once she ensures she has appropriately followed policy, her concerns become lessened (but are not extinguished altogether) as she believes that following procedure will protect her even if the outcome turns out to be unfavourable. In these instances, Hinterleitner and Sager (2015: 600) note how the ability to identify 'potential threatening events' is paramount to successfully avoiding criticism. The actions undertaken by Ruby were a form of BAB, as they were underpinned by the anticipation of blame, and the tasks she undertook were intended to deflect potential blame, should it arise.

It is worth pausing to consider the utility of the blame avoidance practices discussed here. Hinterleitner and Sager (2015: 594) notes such practices are typically deployed in scenarios that carry increased likelihood of blame risk, with staff utilising these techniques when they anticipate the greatest chance of being blamed. While such approaches are designed to either minimise or spread the risk of blame, it should be noted that staff would still be required to undergo a misconduct investigation should a negative outcome occur, regardless of whether they followed internal strategies correctly. If they are deemed to have no case to answer, they will still have been protracted to a lengthy investigation, which is typically experienced as a form of punishment by the intended individual, regardless of whether wrongdoing is found. As demonstrated in the example above, staff continue to feel the weight of blame even if they rigidly adhere to such policies, thus limiting the efficacy of such strategies, though the consequences for staff should be somewhat lessened for having done this. Such

strategies ensure it rests with the staff member to prove they acted within the guidelines provided for them by the policing institution, rather than the organisation to demonstrate those guidelines were fit for purpose. These methods, rather than providing top cover for the officer, in fact serve to demonstrate the organisation prepared the officers as best as they could, thus ensuring the organisation itself largely avoids any blame. It is perhaps understandable that protocolisation often features heavily in institutions that attract high blame risk (Hood, 2013: 95), as policing would face significant reputational damage should they be seen to have failed to prepare for such a risk occurring, and it is understandably in their best interests to avoid this. Despite providing obvious benefits for policing organisations, anticipatory BAB does have a degree of use for staff, as this enables them to demonstrate they adequately followed policy provided, in the hope potential consequences will be softened should their actions attract blame.

Herding

As mentioned previously, specific policies provided by the organisation theoretically protect its employees from adverse consequences should matters take a turn for the worse. In reality, staff may still feel liable to received blame should negative consequences arise and may wish to seek out additional protection. A second, more informal policy approach favoured by the rank-and-file which also aims to minimise this danger, is what Hood (2013: 92) calls the herding strategy. This 'safety in numbers' method of blame avoidance is demonstrated by the tendency for staff to converge when undertaking decision making, to avoid one individual being identified for potentially blameworthy conduct. This technique is a form of protection designed to ensure all

players agree regarding the course of action decided upon, especially if this may attract criticism later down the line (Hood, 2013: 97). Such a strategy also serves to ensure the responsibility for sensibly handling risk is also spread amongst group members. A notable example of this approach is the practice of officers and staff undertaking group assessments of risks posed in situations where the stakes can be high. This practice is particularly prevalent in frontline policing, where critical decisions are often taken in the context of time pressures and little to no information. While the herding approach does not dilute potential blame, it may dull it by making it almost impossible for one individual to be identified and subsequently held responsible for any negative consequences (Hood, 2013: 100). Such a strategy is particularly useful when accountability organisations (for instance, the IOPC) seek to identify culpable individuals when high level wrongdoing arises. The nature of frontline policing, with its accompanying pressures, means that such practices are undertaken with high frequency, especially by those who are young in service and may lack the necessary confidence to make difficult decisions. Examples of such an approach can be found below:

A male is repeatedly attending a particular pub, but he has bail conditions not to attend that location. At the request of Johnny, Abbey attended and gave advice to him and other officers who had been called to remove the male but were unsure whether they had the necessary authority to do so. It was unclear whether the individual had breached police bail or court bail, as there are different levels of enforcement available depending on the restrictions in place. Abbey asked her sergeant for advice across the radio. He said the man might be under court bail, but the PSC had initially informed him that it was police bail. Abbey asked how to find out what the conditions were. The sergeant said 'I'm assuming not to attend that place' - he clearly did not know what the conditions were, and we were none the wiser as to how to proceed with the little information we had. - Fieldnotes, May 2022.

When speaking with Nicole, she tells me 'The organisation doesn't care, and you don't get the support. The team is brilliant, I know that if I've got a question or a problem, someone is only a point to point away who can help me'. This is something I have seen in action when with the team - if they are ever unsure of something, they will radio another team member to confirm whether the course of action they intend to take is correct. - Fieldnotes, September 2021.

We see how individuals often use this strategy in an attempt to shift the blame away from themselves by ensuring potential criticism will be shared between others who have participated in the decision-making process. This has the effect of minimising the chance of being held solely responsible should any wrongdoing arise. Notably, as with many other strategies involving the avoidance of blame, herding is particularly useful in response roles, which are typically time pressured and require swift responses to the situations staff confront. While such strategies may not allow staff to avoid blame altogether, they ensure any received criticism will not be focused upon the conduct of one individual (Hansson, 2018c: 234). Indeed, the utility of this approach lies in its ability to avoid individual liability for potential misconduct. As previously mentioned, the current accountability system focuses upon identifying if each officer's conduct fell below the standard required and is designed to identify a culpable individual over group or organisational failings. Utilising this approach enables officers to anticipate this process and allows them to spread responsibility for any decisions made, thus making it difficult for one officer to be held culpable if matters escalate.

In conclusion, the above section demonstrates how officers and staff employ a variety of strategies primarily focused upon the avoidance of blame. Such strategies are designed to minimise, deflect, and deny potential criticism should it be directed towards

the organisation, or its members. As I have argued throughout this chapter, these behaviours should be viewed, not as methods deployed to avoid risk, but instead as techniques designed to reduce the individual's chances of coming to be personally blamed. Whilst such strategies have the effect of minimising risk to self, the most pertinent way this is achieved is via the avoidance of blame. Such strategies are centred around deflection of potential criticism, although they often also contribute towards demonstrating the sensible handling of risk. It may be this reason why policing organisations have been unable to make sense of so-called risk aversion; when such arrangements are analysed through the lens of blame avoidance, it is easier to understand how such practices influence staff attitudes and behaviour, particularly with regards to the handling of risk.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined several behaviours that occur in the policing environment, and how these affect staff interpretation and experience of blame. An exploration has also been undertaken regarding the perception of officers that their actions and behaviour are heavily influenced by outside scrutiny and has uncovered how their own informal practices stoke these fears. Policing organisations themselves play a key role in sustaining these attitudes, chiefly in the expectations they place upon staff to avoid attracting unnecessary blame risk at all costs. Despite this, a number of these behaviours are undertaken under the initiative of staff themselves, who seem to be unaware such behaviours further stoke existing fears with regards to blame. While the external environment does have some bearing on how policing organisations operate,

certain characteristics of the organisation perpetuate staff's fear of blame, most notably the continual reminders they encounter that encourage them to avoid blame risk at all costs. The degree of risk officers are expected to attend to ensures the chances of being blamed remain significant. As a result, staff demonstrate anxiety in relation to potentially being blamed should a genuine oversight occur, demonstrating an awareness of the blame risks they face, and it is from this fear practices designed to avoid potential blame stem.

The Police Foundation (2019: 6) has noted that the police, 'as key players in the criminal justice system, are intrinsically bound up in the business of attributing blame and holding to account, and therefore it is inevitable – and perhaps right – that the standards, mindsets and logics applied to transgressions within society more generally, are also applied internally'. It follows that the need to identify a culpable individual when wrongdoing arises is consequently found within the culture of these organisations. However, what matters is not that officers are held to a high standard of accountability, but the form this accountability takes and the way this is experienced by staff subjected to such processes. As the research has shown, these procedures are often experienced as seeking individual culpability at the expense of organisational responsibility, which is resented by those subjected to them. Officers respond to accountability frameworks with a significant degree of apprehension, as to be held to account is also to be attributed blame, which is something to be avoided wherever possible for fear of negative sanctions that may arise from this. Such fears are bolstered by institutional processes that appear to discharge organisational responsibility to the level of the individual, which staff are all too aware of.

The examination of the informal practices conducted in this chapter contributes towards our understanding of what motivates officers and staff to undertake blame avoidance behaviours. The cultural scripts officers employ anticipate high levels of blame, which subsequently informs the actions they undertake to avoid this. These stories are passed between staff via their informal interactions, thus sustaining a continual fear of blame. Further, this chapter has explored several behaviours undertaken by staff that demonstrate the importance of avoiding blame. Such conduct has previously been conceptualised as risk aversion, whereas undertaking this analysis from a blame avoidance perspective allows us to understand how such behaviours are in fact underpinned by a desire to avoid criticism, and this desire becomes apparent once we begin to explore the motives officers have for engaging in these actions. Like the treatment of risk, what is particularly pertinent is the way both the organisation, as well as its staff, operate in tandem through using these techniques to avoid blame. Having identified how processes of blame and risk are sustained within the organisation, the next chapter will summarise how these concerns influence how officers and staff fulfil their organisational mandate, and what implications this could potentially have for police organisations.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

The concluding chapter of this thesis highlights pertinent themes that arose from the fieldwork, while considering their implications for policing scholarship more broadly. I summarise the findings of this thesis, before reflecting on the contributions they make to the existing criminological literature. My argument is that what at first glance appears to be risk aversion, is in fact a form of blame avoidance undertaken on the part of officers. Officers make sense of the concept of risk against the backdrop of blame avoidance, with risks being selectively identified (Douglas, 1992: 45) in direct proportion to the individual's chances of being blamed in association with these risks. In this way, Weaver's (1986) notion that officeholders tend to pursue blame avoidance over the chance to claim credit, plays out in the world of policing. Indeed, the fieldwork uncovered numerous instances of officers and staff seizing opportunities to decrease, deflect and redirect blame wherever possible.

By adopting an ethnographic approach, this study has established how matters of risk, blame and scrutiny are understood and experienced by officers, and has explored what influences their understanding of these terms. While there are some limitations to adopting an ethnographic case study approach (see Mason, 2017), the findings from this study offer new insights into the so-called risk averse practices we see within policing currently. The research found numerous participants understood the futility of the risk averse processes which they were undertaking, but felt the need to participate in such practices, regardless of their suitability for the task at hand. Many officers, both rank-and-file and those in supervisory positions, recognised their actions

would be unlikely to minimise risk presented to members of the public. However, they failed to recognise their own contribution to maintaining these processes, instead protesting about limited choice or lack of agency; something which Zacka (2017) argues is far from the case. Interestingly, opposing arguments were made by those who occupied middle management positions, who typically portrayed staff as risk averse, despite the provision of ostensibly flexible policies on the part of the organisation. Ultimately, the research demonstrated both aspects of the organisation co-create such a dynamic, and no single group of actors can be said to be wholly controlling the impact such practices have on the other. Ultimately, the result of this preoccupation is that safeguarding the reputation of the policing institution ultimately becomes the underlying purpose of the organisation as an increasing number of policies and procedures are directed towards doing so.

The concept of risk has come to increasingly dominate public life, in part due to the influence of the modern risk society (Beck, 1992). This reorientation towards risk has inevitably affected policing, with much of their activity now organised around the management of risk (Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019: 155). The extant research often emphasises the risk averse nature of officers' behaviour, without critically analysing such claims. For instance, officers are frequently portrayed as being risk averse in their attitudes towards their work with little exploration regarding why such practices are undertaken. Concurrently, there have been claims of a blame culture operating deep within policing, with officers articulating concerns regarding the prospect of being blamed for any unsatisfactory outcome, despite the low chances of coming to be so (Metcalf, 2017, Heaton and Tong, 2023). There has been little exploration of this

dichotomy; that officers are increasingly preoccupied with being blamed, despite the introduction of learning-focused policies designed to divert officers away from unnecessary misconduct processes (IOPC, 2022). This thesis outlines how ultimately blame avoidance drives such concerns, rather than the desire to avoid risk, which I will expand upon in reviewing the findings below.

Overview of findings

The requirement to control risk is an integral aspect of the policing mandate, something that policing must continually grapple with to adequately fulfil its role. The introductory chapter discusses how despite this, there are continual claims that policing organisations, and by extension those they employ, are risk averse. Through my research, I found that the policing organisation itself acts to remind officers of the continual importance of always managing risk, most notably in the prescriptive guidance provided for officers. This finding is reflected in the extant research, which claims policing organisations typically provide staff with detailed policies that restrict discretion and require following closely (Flanagan, 2008; Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019; Front Line Review, 2019). However, my research discovered that officers themselves perpetuate these practices by continually operating towards the worst-case scenario, independently of a requirement from the organisation to do so. Similar findings were found in respect of blame: there are many features of the policing environment that lend themselves to blame, for instance, the aforementioned misconduct arrangements that prioritise the investigation of individual conduct. However, as with the treatment of risk, officers also neglect the role they play in sustaining these blaming practices, instead

attributing responsibility towards external accountability institutions, as well as their local professional standards departments (Shannon, 2020). Further, officers are often quick to become involved in the sharing of informal tales that perpetuate the need to remain aware of potential blame. As I have illustrated here, risk aversion and blame avoidance are closely related, and one cannot be adequately considered without paying close attention to the other.

I began the thesis by examining the existing literature relating to matters of risk and blame in policing, to situate my empirical work. I then traced the rise of risk thinking, more broadly in society as well as with regards to policing. In doing so, I also explored the claims of risk aversion and build an understanding of what this term translates to in the policing context, particularly in relation to what Waddington (1994) terms as ‘in-the-job’ trouble. I outlined how there has been little critical exploration of the notion that policing is characterised by risk averse practices. I also explored claims that there is a blame culture in policing, and examined the overlap the term blame has with notions of scrutiny and accountability. I highlighted how ‘the difference between positively perceived ‘accountability’ and negatively perceived ‘blame’ has never been articulated in the policing context’ (Heaton, 2011: 83), and it is from this confusion that concerns around blame and responsibility partially stem.

The conceptual framework provides the definitions of risk and blame that I refer to throughout the thesis. I characterise risk as factors that officers perceive as endangering their position in the occupational order, most notably if they fail to control the risks in their immediate environment. Whereas blame, using Hood’s definition, refers to the act of attributing an action considered to be bad or wrongful to an identified

cause, be that an individual or organisation (Hood, 2013: 6). When constructing these terms, I adopt an interactionist approach to understand how officers' experiences of blame rely heavily on their informal interactions with one another, and to explore the social and psychological underpinnings of this particular process. I was particularly interested in the sentiment articulated by Douglas (1992: 46), that the notion of risk itself is socially constructed, in the way individuals will selectively address certain dangers in their environment while ignoring those they deem to pose less of a threat. I was also keen to understand what potential problems officers perceived as representing substantial risks to their place in the organisation, and what their reasons were for selecting these hazards as worthy of attention.

As previously discussed, my methodological approach made use of several ethnographic research methods, primarily by conducting participant observation with the staff of Stonecastle Police, as well as online focus groups and interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic. This gave me an additional form of access to the experiences of officers, and allowed me to compare between the narratives given, and the reality of policing on the ground (Reiner 2000: 219; Westmarland, 2001: 12). Notably, I was unable to access the upper echelons of the organisation, which is a common occurrence in policing fieldwork, which typically focuses on the rank-and-file (see ethnographies such as Loftus, 2010, and Campeau, 2015, as examples of this). However, I am more interested in the perspectives of operational staff, as it is this group that are often referred to as being risk averse in the extant literature (i.e. Heaton, 2011; Heaton and Tong, 2019, *Front Line Review*, 2019). By focusing on this subset of the organisation, I was able to analyse how their understanding of risk, blame and scrutiny

influenced their policing practices, and to what extent the claims made in the literature were reflected in the occupational environment of Stonecastle Police.

My findings regarding risk established that by default, officers adhered to the precautionary principle (Furedi, 2009, EPRS, 2015) when dealing with perceived hazards, assessing critical situations, and making key decisions. This process is reflected in how the organisation also abides by this principle, as it attempts to provide policies and procedures that safeguard against all potential reputational risks, while claiming officers do indeed possess the agency they claim to lack. Although policy documents and force guidance seemingly provide articulate instructions for dealing with the risk that is an inherent aspect of the policing role, there is an obvious contrast between what official policy dictates and the lived experience of policing on the ground, which leads officers to experience uncertainty and discomfort regarding how to best address the risks they encounter (Flanagan, 2008: 51).

Blame, as Beardsley (1970: 176) highlights, is a powerful resource, with the potential for damaging consequences for those who find themselves targeted by it. Officers are all too aware of the damaging potential blame has, and consequently work to avoid this at all costs. This results in intensive efforts being invested in avoiding blame, which ultimately draws attention away from meeting their mandate: protecting the public. Additionally, fear of blame is likely to lead officers to choose the 'safest' option over the best fit for the situation at hand. This is not a consequence of an inexperienced workforce, as much of the literature suggests, but arises because of fear of blame. To investigate this, I analysed various instances of blaming through Malle et al.'s (2014) path model, and considered how notions of capacity, intention, and

obligation are made when attributing blame towards officers. The research also discovered that potential criticism, responsibility, and accountability are often synonymous in the minds of officers. Officers typically experience accountability institutions, such as the IOPC, as formal blaming mechanisms (Black and Lumsden, 2018: 76), and their behaviour is consequently tailored to avoid being brought into their sights. What officers often neglect to consider when discussing blame is the part they play in sustaining internal blaming practices within policing. There were many instances in the fieldwork of staff perpetuating blaming practices in their actions and behaviour, yet continued to claim they themselves were unfairly subjected to blame, both by the organisation and its accompanying accountability bodies.

It is also important to note there were some differences between the various policing departments in respect of how they made sense of the concepts of risk, blame and scrutiny. Persistent fears regarding attracting potential blame were particularly prevalent in frontline roles characterised by intensive time pressures, where staff were typically expected to make quick decisions, often with very little information to hand. Such fears were most noticeable in response and the PSC, who are tasked with allocating and responding to emergency incidents. In contrast, roles where staff often had ample time to make decisions and were able to consult with colleagues prior to deciding, seemed less concerned with matters of risk and blame. This suggests, in line with Qin's (2022: 10) observation, that crisis situations inherently lend themselves towards increased likelihood of blame. It should be noted that all aspects of the organisation shared these concerns to a degree. It may be the nature of policing, which involves dealing with matters of crime and disorder, increases the likelihood of attracting

blame, while the strength of such concerns is moderated by the individual's place within the policing organisation.

Having summarised the findings of this thesis, we can now examine how the fieldwork addresses the key questions underpinning this research.

How do officers make sense of the concepts of risk, blame and scrutiny?

This thesis undertakes an analysis that aims to move past assumptions around how officers handle risk, to critically investigate claims that officers are typically risk averse in how they choose to fulfil their mandate. Doing so allows me to develop an understanding of exactly what officers mean when they refer to matters of risk and blame. To understand their behaviours around risk, this research engages with the concept of the precautionary principle, which is designed for situations where it is difficult to predict the presence of potential hazards (EPRS, 2015:1). This approach influences officers' understanding of risk as something to be avoided at all costs, and ultimately fuels their desire to avoid the unwanted attraction of blame.

My research establishes what exactly officers refer to when they speak of risk, and by extension, what so-called risk avoidant behaviours might look like in a policing context. Initially, the literature around supposed risk aversion describes this as officers unthinkingly adhering to prescriptive policies because they are afraid to deviate from tried-and-tested methods (Flanagan, 2008). What requires further attention is why this is typically cast as risk averse behaviour, as there is often little evidence linking such practices to risk aversion. Throughout the thesis, I demonstrate how officers are typically comfortable with assessing and dealing with risk, particularly in their official

capacity as 'risk experts', for instance when assessing the risk to a victim when a crime is initially reported. In such instances, officers feel they have adequately managed risk, but become concerned external actors may not perceive this as such, and they will be subjected to negative consequences if their actions are perceived to fall short of expectations. It is for this reason I characterise this fear as blame avoidance rather than risk aversion. Behaviours driven by anxieties regarding blame risk are primarily concerned with deflecting potential criticism, rather than nervousness in relation to perceived hazards. While other literature has established the existence of risk aversion in policing, with specific reference to the behaviours discussed above (Campbell, 2004: 697; Bacon, 2023: 14), my research is novel in its ability to associate such behaviours with a desire to avoid blame. Conceptualising these behaviours in this way helps us understand and subsequently reframe the claims that officers are risk averse. When looking at these behaviours through the lens of blame avoidance, we can understand how officers and staff are in fact afraid of being blamed, which makes them more reluctant to undertake activities which may potentially attract risk.

I also explore the prevalence of blaming practices in the policing environment, and the potential consequences that arise should staff come to be blamed. Additionally, I detail the existence of blaming practices that occur between the ranks. The extant literature has long established the divide between the rank-and-file, and those in management positions (Reuss-Ianni, 1983), and my research adds to this literature by considering the methods they use to deflect blame to other areas of the organisation by using the work of Hood (2013). In the research, the rank and file were often quick to apportion blame to senior officers for any failings in the occupational environment, while

those in management positions regularly blamed those further down the organisational ladder for their lack of confidence in decision making, often citing such behaviours to be examples of risk aversion. Both parties often sought to deflect blame away from themselves, typically by assigning it to those who occupied positions elsewhere in the organisation. These behaviours were also found to occur *within* ranks as well as *between* them. For instance, front line officers would regularly castigate those in investigatory roles for their slow response for requests for assistance, believing they had an 'easy life' free from the pressures of the front line, whereas those in safeguarding roles would often complain that other members of the rank-and-file frequently failed to treat situations involving vulnerable victims with the seriousness they warranted. Such instances demonstrate how blaming regularly occurs throughout the policing organisation, regardless of their position within the institution.

Overall, the research demonstrates how officers perceive themselves to be continually at risk of attracting blame; a feeling enhanced by the accountability frameworks and subsequent perceived scrutiny they are subjected to. This feeling is sustained, in part, by their interactions with other members of the policing organisation, who also share the perception that policing is operating in a time of heightened scrutiny, with staff expected to assume responsibility for organisational-level failings where they occurred. This perception was rarely challenged by other staff members, and most participants were unified in their belief that policing is currently subjected to a blame culture, both from inside and outside of the organisation. Although the notions of blame, accountability and responsibility discussed here are separate concepts in their own right, officers frequently experienced attempts to assign accountability as blame,

regardless of the original intention. Having outlined the primary findings of my research, I will now move on to discuss how this work contributes to the existing policing sociology research.

Research contributions and their implications for policing.

My findings have implications for policing research in two key areas. Firstly, they add to the extant research regarding police accountability frameworks, and secondly, they contribute to the wider police sociology literature, particularly regarding the impact that officer perceptions of risk, blame and scrutiny have upon their ability to fulfil their mandate. I will now address each of these in turn, to highlight the contributions my work has for the existing research base.

Contribution to debates about police accountability

My research lends support to the assertion that the rank-and-file often experience formal accountability systems as blaming mechanisms. As discussed in chapter six of the thesis, while it cannot be stated that officers are merely passive recipients of such processes, it should also be recognised that such frameworks prioritise the identification of individual conduct over learning from mistakes, which officers subsequently perceive as seeking to apportion blame. Officers subsequently experience these organisations' endeavours to ensure accountability (for instance, tweeting to encourage members of the public to make a complaint if they witness any wrongdoing, as discussed in chapter six) as scapegoating attempts (Metcalf, 2017: 159). For officers, even if they are found not guilty of misconduct, undergoing an

extended misconduct process is experienced as a form of punishment, regardless of outcome.

Although there is clearly a need for accountability in policing, for this to be experienced by officers as blame is far from ideal. It is worth considering whether there is a world in which policing would not experience accountability mechanisms as attempts to assign blame. As mentioned in the thesis, both previous and current iterations of accountability mechanisms have met with fierce resistance from officers and organisations alike (Smith and Grey, 1985). Given the extensive history of these defensive responses, it is likely that officers will continue to interpret the need for accountability as a potential path to blame. Despite this, it should be noted that several changes to the misconduct system have taken place to facilitate an approach that focuses less on assigning blame to individuals when wrongdoing arises, primarily in the rebranding of the IPCC to the IOPC, with its increased focus on lesson learning, and the introduction of the new Police (Conduct) Regulations (2020). At present, it is too early to establish what the impact of this has been, but the research indicates officers continue to perceive accountability and blame as synonymous regardless of such changes. Furthermore, the accountability system still requires a mechanism for identifying and punishing bad behaviour when it arises, which will inevitably be experienced as blame by those who are subjected to it. However, where lessons are to be learned and overall performance improved, such an approach only serves to hinder openness and transparency on the part of officers and organisations alike, which may further influence their fear of coming to be blamed.

There has been some discussion in the extant literature of making the police accountability system more akin to that of the aircraft industry, which focuses on collective learning over assigning blame to individuals (House of Commons, 2018: 70; Police Foundation, 2019: 1). Syed (2015) notes how in the aviation business, mistakes are not stigmatised, and instead collective lesson learning is encouraged, with pilots enjoying immunity from prosecution as a result. However, it should be noted that the airline industry and policing are very different industries, and the systems that exist in aviation may not transfer to policing with equal success. As Heaton and Tong (2023: 541 - 542) note, when an accident occurs during flight, the reason for such an incident is often obvious, and is usually either the result of a mechanical fault, or the pilot's error. Whereas policing, in contrast, consists of infrequent and often adversarial interactions between the police and the public. These interactions are also affected by a variety of external influences, few of which the police can directly control. The authors (*ibid*) go on to note investigations into police wrongdoing that have taken a more fact-finding approach, such as the Bloody Sunday and Hillsborough enquiries, failed to satisfy those involved, who were more interested in identifying those responsible for the events that unfolded. It is unlikely such an approach would satisfy external calls for accountability, ultimately rendering them ineffective.

Contribution to the police sociology literature.

As discussed throughout the thesis, it is important to make the distinction between a sociology *for* the police, versus a sociology *of* the police (Banton, 1964), with the former being chiefly concerned with resolving obstacles most likely to impact upon operational

policing, and the latter aiming to theorise and develop the academic knowledge base (Manning, 2005: 30). The current funding landscape does not typically lend itself to in-depth research and much of the research conducted for policing organisations tends to be brief in nature and focused upon offering solution to policing problems, which limits its utility with regards to contributing towards the academic knowledge base (ibid, p. 39). Many of the accounts that detail so-called 'risk averse' behaviour in policing belong to the former, highlighting a need for a more thorough investigation of the phenomenon outside of the policing sphere. This thesis has uncovered that many of the assumptions around the existence of risk averse behaviour do not hold up to academic scrutiny, and that conduct previously thought to fall under this umbrella is in fact a form of blame avoidance. In questioning the assumptions the extant literature has made, this research has established how officer attitudes and values are sustained in relation to risk and blame, which stem from a different source originally identified in the literature. It is imperative policing continues to be studied by sources outside of the organisation itself, to challenge the extant assumptions contained within 'for the police' sociology, to ensure policing remains open to external scrutiny.

This research was conducted at a time when policing is under renewed pressure and significant scrutiny. Since 2013, the complexity of cases policing is expected to deal with has grown exponentially. There has been an increase in the number of high-harm offences reported to the police, in particular serious sexual offences, which have increased by over 50% since 2015. There has been an extensive amount of digital evidence investigators are required to process when investigating criminal complaints, which often demands a significant degree of resource to analyse, further increasing the

burden placed upon policing (Home Office, 2023). Additionally, escalating attention is being drawn to the informal policing culture because of a wave of high-profile scandals, with the Sarah Everard investigation, David Carrick case and regular police attendance at protests all ensuring the activities of the police remain in the news (Mead, 2021; Vigil, 2022; Brown and Hobbs, 2023). This attention is experienced by policing organisations and their staff as extensive scrutiny, which may go some way to explaining why officers are experiencing increased nervousness around potential blame. There are an increasing number of academic accounts that discuss the impact such scrutiny has on policing, particularly in relation to the recent attention the police killing in Ferguson has received, causing officers to shy away from activities likely to attract negative media coverage, known as the 'Ferguson effect' (see Premkumar, 2019; Capellan, Lautenschlager & Silva, 2020, Gau, Paoline and Paul, 2022), and the impact this has on fear of blame. Scholars such as Heaton (see Heaton, 2011 and Heaton and Tong, 2019) link the fear of blame to potential risk avoidance. However, there is no recognition in the literature that what has been typified as risk aversion may be a form of blame avoidance, which my research attempts to do here.

There have been several well-established ethnographic studies into the informal culture of the police (i.e. Loftus, 2010; Fassin, 2011; Campeau, 2015). This study aims to add to the extant body of work by examining the behaviours of the police in the current social and political context, which strongly affects how matters of risk and blame are perceived by officers and policing organisations alike. The fieldwork took place between 2020 to 2022 and examined officers and staff operating in a post-pandemic world, which as of yet remains relatively underexplored in the literature. The impact of

the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the increased media attention and high-profile scandals that policing has faced in recent years, has inevitably impacted upon how risk, blame and scrutiny are perceived by those who operate within this occupational world. While existing ethnographic studies have focused on the cultural attitudes and values of the police more broadly, this study has examined their specific behaviours around risk, blame and scrutiny, which has achieved limited attention in the literature, outside of research conducted by policing actors.

Future research directions

An interesting instance of future research would be to see if my findings are replicated across other policing organisations. More specifically, it would be useful to see if other policing institutions face similar pressures in respect of risk and blame. Research with external accountability organisations, such as the IOPC, would also allow us to understand how these institutions regard their role in securing police accountability, as well as how they respond to police claims they are perpetuating a potential blame culture. Research with PSD officers would be useful to gain an alternative perspective on blaming practices said to exist within the policing institution. At present, there is no research that specifically focuses on these officers, who are often treated with disdain within the policing organisation itself, due to the role they undertake in sustaining accountability systems. Future research also needs to consider the impact that reforms under the recent Police (Conduct) Regulations (2020) have had. Although these reforms came into effect several years ago, police organisations are notably slow to amend their practices (McConville et al, 1991: 193), and this research did not see any notable

impact of these reforms. At present, it is difficult to ascertain whether this was due to the recent implementation of such reforms, or whether such changes are unlikely to impact upon the police perception that they are continually subjected to unfair blaming practices.

Final remarks

Instances of risk aversion have long been discussed in the policing literature (Flanagan, 2008; FLR, 2019; Heaton, Bryant, and Tong, 2019). This thesis attempts to shine a light on such processes by conceptualising these as instances of blame avoidance rather than avoiding risk, which allows for a deeper understanding of why such processes occur. By undertaking this research, I hope to provide clarity regarding the root causes of these practices, which have previously been identified as risk avoidance, undertaken on the part of officers. By uncovering the true nature of blame avoidance, this will allow researchers, accountability bodies and policing organisations to understand the problem more accurately. The research aims to add to the existing body of policing literature, specifically in relation to policing sociology, in terms of how attitudes, values and behaviours are created and sustained, as well as the ongoing discussion regarding police accountability frameworks. It is a piece of work that has been conducted outside of policing and is therefore particularly necessary, as it does not seek to solve the problems of operational policing, but instead aims to develop our understanding of police behaviour from an academic perspective.

This research has clear implications for practices relating to blame and risk within policing. In particular, the findings of the research can be applied to the way policing

approaches potential hazards, more specifically the continual consideration of the worst-case scenario over a realistic appreciation of likely risk, and the ways in which this approach hinders rather than helps police accurately identify and manage potential danger. This work is also important in relation to formal blaming practices, most notably misconduct processes to which officers are subjected, which place identifying a culpable individual over fact finding or identifying forms of potential organisational learning. As discussed, it may be the case that policing will always experience accountability systems as excuses for blame; however, there are ways the current approach can be softened, to lessen the impact of being subjected to conduct examination should this occur. This thesis has thus provided us with an understanding of what drives such behaviours, and how they impact upon policing practice.

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