



Leaving the table: Organisational (in)justice and the relationship with police officer retention

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Abstract

Policing has been beset by controversy in recent years predominantly concerning issues of justice, fairness and trust including widespread concerns over police misconduct. Alongside the continued fallout of budgetary controls and a global pandemic, policing in England and Wales is facing another growing problem – police officer retention. This article takes the conceptual framework of organisational justice, incorporating both distributive and procedural elements, to qualitatively examine voluntary resignations from the police in England and Wales. The findings indicate that those voluntarily resigning from the police service experience a lack of voice, lack of recognition of skills and experience, and barriers to career development and progression which focus on both organisational processes and outcomes. This article significantly contributes to the scarce academic literature on organisational justice within policing organisations from a qualitative perspective and can have a direct impact on policing services in addressing the rising numbers of preventable voluntary resignations.

Keywords

Organisational justice, organisational voice, police resignations, police retention, police workforce, voluntary resignation

In England and Wales, Home Office data revealed 3433 voluntary resignations in the year ending March 2022, a rise of 72% from the previous year and a rise of 196% since

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the year ending March 2012 (Home Office, 2016, 2022a). Put another way, 2.45% of the total police population voluntarily resigned in the year ending March 2022, while this figure was 0.86% of the total police population in the year ending 2012. It is undoubtedly the case that employment patterns in the United Kingdom are changing and that 'portfolio careers' made up of one or more moves throughout a career span are increasingly common (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022). However, it would be speculation to assume that this has been the sole, or even major, cause of increasing numbers of voluntary resignations from the police service. Policing has also been beset by controversy in recent years, perhaps as intensely as at any other time in its modern history. This has included widespread concerns over police misconduct and gross misconduct, dangerous levels of vetting failures within police recruitment and continued concerns about misogyny, racism and sexism within policing (HMICFRS, 2022; IOPC, 2022). This has precipitated new appointments in key strategic positions within the policing hierarchy, the establishment of new projects and enquiries (e.g. Operation Soteria Bluestone and the Angiolini Inquiry (Home Office, 2022b, 2022c)) and overarching strategic reviews of the future of the police service (e.g. the Strategic Review of Policing, 2022). What unites much of this activity is a focus upon justice, fairness and trust.

Police officers are no different to other workers in being sensitive to fairness issues and organisational fairness forms part of the psychological contract or social exchange between employees and employers (Noblet et al., 2009). Fairness and justice matter because their presence within the workplace is associated with many positive outcomes and their absence is linked with a host of more negative outcomes for both the organisation and the public. As Tyler and Blader (2003) have argued 'Justice has an impact . . . [and] is central to people's evaluations of social situations' (p. 349). Fairness is not a new concept within policing and indeed features as one of the policing principles associated with the College of Policing's (2014) Code of Ethics alongside others such as honesty, integrity and respect. This focus however has been externally positioned within the police service in its pursuance of a more procedurally just approach to police-public encounters. This has also contributed to a growing academic literature in this area. However, there has been much less attention paid to the importance of addressing issues of fairness and justice *within* the organisation and the potential benefits of doing so for the policing organisation itself and indeed for the wider public in terms of enhancing legitimacy, trust and confidence. Where research on organisational justice within policing has taken place, it has in the majority of cases adopted a quantitative, survey based approach and has focussed upon issues such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, misconduct and wellbeing (e.g. Bradford and Quinton, 2014; Farmer et al., 2003; Trinkner et al., 2016; Wolfe and Lawson, 2020). What the research evidence has so far not provided is a qualitatively focussed analysis of voluntary resignations from the police using the lens of organisational justice. The research outlined in this article reports on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 27 former police officers who had voluntarily resigned from an English police force between 2014 and 2019. The conceptual framework of organisational justice provides the theoretical framework for an enhanced knowledge of voluntary resignations among police officers and an appreciation of perceptions of fairness and justice within policing. In doing so, this article also acknowledges the existence of enduring and challenging structural and cultural processes and

practices within policing. However, their existence alone cannot solely account for the rates of voluntary resignations of police officers and it is our contention that a significant contributory factor is the failure of the organisation to challenge and/or reform these processes and practices. This article therefore seeks to both significantly contribute to the academic literature on organisational justice within the policing organisation and also have a direct impact on the police service in England and Wales in addressing the rising numbers of avoidable voluntary resignations.

The evolution and development of organisational justice

Organisational justice and perceptions of fairness within organisations have been a central concern of social psychologists and management researchers since the latter part of the 20th century. The relationship between these perceptions of justice and job satisfaction, organisational commitment, job performance and more have been primarily analysed through the collection of quantitative research data (Donner et al., 2015). Organisational justice has been conceptualised as encompassing three key related but distinct elements which are: distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). These elements are loosely defined within the policing literature and at times used interchangeably. Indeed, the term organisational justice is not used universally with some references to it as ‘internal’ procedural justice (Trinkner et al., 2016; President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). It is important therefore to briefly explain these different constructs and assess their prominence at different points in time.

The first element of organisational justice is distributive justice. This embryonic focus within an organisational context was upon people’s reactions to the fairness or otherwise of the *outcomes* of decisions (Adams, 1965; Tyler and Blader, 2003). The influence of distributive justice however began to wane as there was a growing interest in the *processes* connected with these decisions. The move towards procedural justice, the second element of organisational justice, began slowly and still incorporated aspects of distributive justice – first still considering equitable outcomes but linking this with fair decision-making *en route* towards those equitable outcomes (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). The move therefore was from a focus on the ‘ends’ or outcomes of decision-making to a focus on the ‘means’ or processes (Lowe and Vodanovich, 1995; Tyler and Blader, 2003). It was also around this time that researchers began to conceptualise distributive justice and procedural justice within organisations under the more general term of ‘organisational justice’ (Greenberg, 1987). Whereas a more distributively based justice focus might consider ‘outcome security’ as the ultimate goal of an organisational procedure, Tyler and colleagues focus much more closely on ‘identity security’ (Tyler and Blader, 2003). This closely resonates with Giddens’ (1991) work on ‘ontological security’ which is central to the maintenance of a coherent and stability enhancing sense of identity. Of specific interest in this regard is the centrality of ‘voice’ in an assessment of fair procedures, not necessarily in its ability to influence decision-making but simply in its importance in bestowing respect or recognition (Tyler, 1987). Organisations where voice is not encouraged can find that a culture of silence permeates and with it a decline in both commitment and satisfaction (Smith et al., 2022).

This evolution of social justice theories brings us to a third tenet within the justice framework, that of interactional justice which focusses upon the nature and quality of the interactions during the decision-making process (Bies and Moag, 1986). This consists of first informational justice with its focus upon how procedures used or decisions made were adequately communicated with employees and second interpersonal justice with its focus upon voice together with dignity, politeness and respect (Bakhshi et al., 2009; Colquitt et al., 2001). Recent discussions of organisational justice therefore concentrate more upon discussions of fairness in how people are treated during the decision-making process rather than in the equitable distribution of resources.

We have established therefore that organisational justice, which draws from the theories of distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice, has developed and evolved into an important framework for understanding the complex working relationships and perceptions of justice within the employee/employer dynamic. This literature review will first outline the broad findings on the impact of a positive organisational climate before focussing specifically on the scarcer policing literature in this area. Mainly quantitative results from research in management studies and social psychology have concluded that a positive organisational climate has a direct relationship with job motivation, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, staff retention, compliance with organisational rules, extra role behaviour, organisational citizenship behaviour, self-legitimacy, staff wellbeing and job performance (Blader and Tyler, 2003; Bradford and Quinton, 2014; Brimbal et al., 2020; Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Roberts and Herrington, 2013; Tyler, 2011). This positive organisational climate includes a strong focus on perceptions of fairness and an environment where procedures are applied consistently, free from bias, accurately used in decision-making, able to be corrected, ethical and resulting from a process of consultation (Leventhal, 1980). In addition, it is deemed by employees to be legitimate (Tyler et al., 2007). Where organisations are not perceived to be organisationally just from the perspective of their employees, there are higher rates of absenteeism and rule breaking (Colquitt et al., 2001), low perceived organisational support (Kurtessis et al., 2017) plus a negative impact on workplace harmony, productivity, stress and compliance with organisational goals (Noblet et al., 2009; Roberts and Herrington, 2013).

In relation to the specific policing literature, it is important to understand the impact of organisational justice both internally within the policing organisation and externally with regards to police-public relationships. Fairness within policing organisations has been linked to enhanced identification with the organisation and its goals, compliance with procedures (Brimbal et al., 2020; Myhill and Bradford, 2013; Wolfe and Lawson, 2020), higher levels of officer wellbeing (Kyprianides et al., 2022; Trinkner et al., 2016), less cynicism towards the job (Bradford and Quinton, 2014; Donner et al., 2015) and greater job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Farmer et al., 2003; Qureshi et al., 2017). In addition, research considering organisational support for police officers found that low perceived organisational support leads to the compromising of resilience (Brunetto et al., 2023), demotivation of staff (Nix and Wolfe, 2016), high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion (Smith et al., 2022) and higher turnover intentions (Andreescu and Vito, 2021; Hilal and Litsey, 2020). Three rare qualitative analyses of organisational

justice in the field of policing found evidence of perceptions of inadequate support among officers who considered their organisational climate to be unjust (Reynolds et al., 2018), most particularly after periods of work absence (Bullock and Garland, 2020), affecting both morale and organisational good will (Martin et al., 2023).

It is also clear from research on organisational justice in policing that the benefits of employees' sense of trust and fairness within their organisation goes far beyond the internal walls of the police environment itself. Wolfe and Lawson's (2020) meta-analysis of organisational justice research in the area of policing found that employees' perceptions of organisational justice were intrinsically linked to positive work outcomes and were central to the successful operation of the 'business' of policing. Officers who believed in the fairness of their organisation were more inclined to favour the policing principles associated with community policing and procedural justice (Bradford et al., 2014) and more supportive of democratic policing (Trinkner et al., 2016). Furthermore, they were less likely to engage in misconduct (Bradford et al., 2014), less likely to adhere to the protection of other officers through the 'blue code of silence' (Wolfe and Piquero, 2011) and less likely to support the use of force (Kyprianides et al., 2022). This link between internal and external procedural justice is rudimentary. Procedural justice demands fairness and the calls for a procedurally just style of policing coming from police management are likely to be more successful should that call come from within an internal environment of trust and fairness itself. Research provides that link between a fair organisational climate and a willingness to implement change and reform (Brimbal et al., 2020). The encouragement of democratic ideals within the policing organisation can work to encourage that same approach in the relationships between the police and the public (Bradford and Quinton, 2014; Marks and Fleming, 2006). The President's Task Force in the United States (2015) and the Strategic Review of Policing in the United Kingdom (Police Foundation, 2022) placed internal procedural justice (an alternative description of organisational justice) or a positive internal organisational climate at the heart of their proposals to build community trust.

It is clear from the evidence reviewed that organisational justice provides for its employees a sense that they are supported and listened to. In turn this leads to higher levels of commitment, identification and satisfaction with the organisation and adherence to both its procedures and its goals. This impacts not only upon employees themselves but also on the public whom they police. Colquitt et al. (2005) have suggested that employees who perceive their organisational environment to be unfair will engage in behaviour to restore a sense of fairness and equilibrium to their working lives. They will do this to protect the ontological security which is central to the maintenance of a coherent identity. The review of literature has outlined a number of outcomes of a perceived sense of organisational injustice which include negative work behaviours which have the potential to have a detrimental impact on police-public relationships. However, the body of work on organisational justice has yet to qualitatively examine the views of police officers who respond to what is perceived to be a negative organisational climate through voluntary resignation. This article seeks to be the first to do that.

Method

Study design

Following research conducted by Charman and Bennett (2022) involving an online survey sent to 254 police officers who had resigned voluntarily from one medium-sized police force in England, purposive sampling was used to invite the 46 survey participants to take part in follow-up interviews. All participants had voluntarily resigned between November 2014 and June 2019 and 27 agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews in Autumn 2020. Interviews were conducted using online video-conferencing software, with interviews audio-recorded and lasting 60.4 minutes on average. The sample was 48.15% female (13) and 51.85% male (14), with an average length of service of 14 years (ranging from 4 to 25+ years) and the rank held ranged from Police Constable to Chief Inspector. In relation to the background of the participants, 15 (55.56%) had undergraduate university level qualifications, a further 5 participants had a postgraduate university level qualification (18.52%) and 5 participants (18.52%) had worked within the armed forces prior to joining the police.

Data analysis

More than 260,000 words from the interviews were transcribed, with the transcripts analysed with the aid of an NVivo software package (QSR NVivo 12). The semi-structured interview schedule initially guided the scoping of the transcripts and through thematic analysis, involving a process of data familiarisation, coding, theme development and recoding, two main themes were identified as to why individuals resigned from the police service – *impact on identity* and *organisational injustice*. The former is explored in Charman and Tyson (2023), while the focus of this article will be on organisational injustice. Initial analysis resulted in the coding of five themes under this umbrella, but these were then narrowed to three. The sentiments expressed in the following section provide a necessary insight into the lived experiences of these officers, but also highlight the intersecting elements of organisational justice, or injustice.

Findings

Analysis of the data resulted in three main themes as to why officers were voluntarily resigning from the police service – *lack of voice*, *lack of recognition of skills and experience*, and *barriers to career development and progression*. While singularly these issues could result in an individual feeling as though they are not benefitting from fair or equitable experiences from their organisation compared with their efforts and input, combined, they appear to have a far more damaging impact and result in a disengagement and ultimately exit from the organisation. These three themes are discussed in the context of organisational injustice.

Lack of voice

A prevailing theme shared by more than half of the participants was that they were not heard by the organisation and participants discussed the lack of opportunity to voice their

opinions or be involved in decision-making on issues that impacted upon their day-to-day role. The implied or explicit inability of officers to express any concerns or share feedback results in the perception that the organisation is not willing to listen to nor interested in hearing their views. Some officers who had resigned from the police service felt that those who were seeking promotion or those officers of a higher rank were particularly dismissive of alternative suggestions or feedback:

People come up with these ideas generally to get promotion to make a change without actually asking anybody, asking the people that they're making that change for. (P10)

I was just getting told, no, you're wrong, I'm in charge, this is the way we're doing it . . . what's the point of all the hours that I've done, all the money you have invested in me to get me to where I am now, and you're not going to listen. (P18)

If you get listened to but then actually something tangible happens as a result of what you're saying . . . I think that would be such a simple thing but it just seems to have got lost amongst the bureaucracy and red tape and the need to get promoted. (P27)

For many participants, this lack of voice was also felt when they were moved to a new post or role, with no communication, consultation or involvement in the decision-making. It was not the change in role or post per se that was problematic, but rather the process in achieving this outcome:

I think it was during the time that I was on maternity leave, there was a reshuffling of the departments . . . and I just really wanted that one to one, a proper discussion with someone who could really know who I was, and what I could offer, and listen to some of my experiences. (P4)

I think that if they had handled the move thing from that specialist role better, had given me some real clear rationale for it, that would have made a difference. I think I would probably have still been there now if that hadn't have happened. (P11)

Internally, we were just again, numbers. We didn't really have that voice. (P26)

At the point of exiting the police service, participants reported that there was no opportunity to feed back their feelings and opinions on their experiences and reasons for leaving, further signifying a lack of voice. Of the 27 participants, only five were offered an exit interview, with four accepting and participating. Two further participants were offered conversations with the Chief Constable, but neither accepted this invitation. Exit interviews were not referred to favourably, with participants referring to them as informal chats or a 'tick-box exercise' (P5 and P17) and some viewed the senior officers conducting them as not being 'remotely interested' (P21). For one participant, the exit interview was conducted by the officer that was part of their reason for leaving. Interestingly, participants often referred to their participation in our research interviews as being cathartic:

I think one of the reasons why I did this was I never really felt I got the opportunity to say my true feelings about it when I left . . . to actually have that message put back to them does feel like a bit of closure for me. (P11)

You're giving this interview now, I didn't have an exit interview with [force name removed], I had literally nothing from them at all. (P24)

The sentiments expressed here are reflective of the general attitudes displayed in the interviews of participants not being heard by their organisation during their policing service or during the leaving process. Thus, this experience of leaving only reaffirms such feelings regarding the lack of voice. Given the low numbers of exit interviews offered and completed, there is minimal opportunity for feedback to be provided to the organisation as to why police officers are leaving, which prevents any organisational learning and limits the potential for tackling avoidable turnover.

Lack of recognition of skills and experience

The organisational inability to recognise skills and experience within promotion processes was another area where feelings of organisational injustice were experienced. Participants discussed the frustrations they had with the promotion process, their eligibility for promotion and disagreements with the outcomes of promotion boards, where they felt that their skills and experience were not recognised by the organisation:

Because I had a Masters degree, I thought that I would be material . . . for promotion. But really everything that I had done enabled me to get in, . . . when I was there, nobody cared, nobody really wanted my individual skills. (P4)

I did a lot of courses . . . The most frustrating thing in the world is when people come up to you and they say . . . 'I can't believe you didn't get promoted'. I'm not going to lie to you I was seeing people that were getting promoted that were half the officer I was, and it's frustrating . . . it's not good for you and that ultimately was what caused me to leave. (P9)

I have decades worth of experience as a leader and there are things that I could have brought sooner to the organisation, rather than this really painful, slow, everybody has to do their time . . . So there's, again, no acknowledgement of the experience I would have had then externally, completely relevant to policing. (P19)

Similar disappointments were also raised by participants regarding the deployment of officers to particular posts:

The organisation puts people into a little box . . . And they've never realised that that person was also capable of doing the next job along, you know? (P1)

You've got people who are excellent in their job, specialised, doing really well, getting commendations and congratulations from superintendents and judges and then you say, oh, no, you need to go and do something else. (P13)

Comments such as this echo the exasperations that participants illustrated when discussing a lack of voice, with procedures and decision makers being viewed as questionable and exclusionary and decisions inaccurately reflecting the skills of those officers. This contributes towards perceptions that the organisational climate is not a positive one.

When placed within the framework of organisational justice, such views are only conducive to officers feeling a strong sense of organisational *injustice*. Within our research, these feelings were experienced by participants across the rank structure sampled (Police Constable to Chief Inspector) and were not confined to one particular rank.

Barriers to career development and progression

Lack of opportunity and a perceived avoidance in challenging the poor performance of other colleagues were the most prominent sources of frustration raised by participants in relation to career development and progression within the organisation, leading to a perception of an unfair system:

So, there was a lot of unfairness I thought . . . Lots of work avoidance that wasn't challenged. I got told I was cruel by my inspector, 'cause I fronted somebody out about their poor work record. (P1)

They were really bad at recognising not only just people's strengths, but people's weaknesses as well. (P9)

I thought I was going to climb the ladder . . . When I joined, they told you everyone can be a sergeant. Everyone can do their sergeant exams. And it turns out, no, you can't, 'cause they haven't got the places. (P12)

The perception of unfairness was also evident within the attitudes towards promotion processes, with participants desiring a process that reflects ability over performance and encourages difference. Instead, their experiences suggested that the existing processes focus on an immediate assessment of performance, rather than considering the work an officer has completed prior to the promotion assessment. As a result, participants felt that there was a 'type' of officer achieving promotion or progressing which they had to ascribe to:

I had passed my sergeants exams, and everything, but the hoops they wanted you to jump through to be a sergeant was just ridiculous . . . it shouldn't be done on how you perform in an interview, it should be how you do the job. (P6)

The whole promotion structure was designed to promote the same person as the person above . . . or the same person type 'cause the structured interviews and the way you had to answer questions and . . . organisationally I just found it so depressing, actually, that I didn't want to go any higher. (P14)

When you go for a promotion in the police, everyone's looking for that perfect example . . . You're not promoted on merit, in terms of what have you done over the last 12 months . . . it's all done on a 15 . . . 45 minute interview, when you have to sell yourself. (P16)

The issues of *lack of voice*, *lack of recognition of skills and experience*, and *barriers to career development and progression* discussed within this findings section led to our participants questioning their continued engagement and employment in the police

service. The phrase ‘is this really worth it?’ was a common feature of our interviews. Our participants decided that they were not receiving equitable *outcomes* from their inputs, but more importantly that such outcomes were the result of poor decision making *processes* and interpersonal treatment, and therefore voluntarily resigned. Notions of justice and fairness were not evident to our participants in either a distributive or a procedural sense and the decisions to resign were not knee-jerk reactions for any of our participants, but rather the result of lengthy and considered decisions. The findings discussed here also highlight communication issues and the existence of long-standing, traditional and inflexible processes and practices (such as the promotion structure) When explored collectively through an organisational justice lens, the lack of transparency, fair decision making and feeling heard are significant determinants of organisational injustice. For our participants, their voluntary resignations were not prompted by the occupational challenges of being a police officer, but rather frustrations and conflicts with the policing organisation itself.

Discussion

Colquitt et al. (2005) suggested that employees who perceive their organisational environment to be unfair will engage in behaviour to restore a sense of fairness to their working lives. Our results indicate that to restore this sense of fairness, our participants felt voluntary resignation was the necessary action and points to some of the reasons why officers perceive there to be a negative organisational climate within policing. The perceived lack of voice, transparency and fairness in decision making (particularly regarding those decisions that directly impact the working conditions and role of police officers) have impacted upon the perceived safety of ‘the self’. Perceptions of a positive organisational climate would allow individuals to be reassured that negative stereotypes will not be applied to the group (the police), or to them by association (due to the quality of decision making), and that they are valued by the organisation and other group members (due to the quality of interpersonal treatment) (Tyler and Blader, 2003). This is not about outcome security as one finds with social exchange theories (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut and Walker, 1975) but identity security, or as Giddens (1991) would term it ‘ontological security’. Perceptions of organisational justice can provide this identity security and limit the perceived threats to one’s identity, as discussed in Charman and Tyson (2023).

Our research findings support the work of Bullock et al. (2020) on retired police officers and highlight some similarities between retirees and voluntary resigners. Bullock et al. (2020) found that officers at the point of retirement felt let down by the organisation and perceptions of their treatment did little to mediate any feelings of uncertainty or assure their social identity as an officer. Such sentiments are similar to those expressed by our participants in that the lack of voice and the uncertainty in what is expected to enable career progression were facilitated, not resolved, by the police force, leading to a sense of organisational injustice. Wolfe and Lawson (2020) propose that supervisors are a key determinant in such perceptions as employees are alert to the interpersonal treatment by their supervisors. For our research participants, this treatment was often perceived to be unfair, especially surrounding the experience of exit interviews, promotion boards and discussions on alternative ways of doing things, with poor communication at

the centre of this. Organisationally fair treatment provides a sense of security to its employees that the organisation ‘has their back’ and will support them, should they come under any external scrutiny (Nix and Wolfe, 2016). It also increases organisational commitment and satisfaction, reinforcing the feeling of identity security. When this is missing or questioned, organisational injustice can result in individuals voluntarily removing themselves from the organisation – the ultimate demonstration of dissatisfaction. This article therefore highlights the impact of organisational injustice on the decision to voluntarily resign from the police service; an area that has not been qualitatively explored within the policing literature.

Much like Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) argue that legitimacy is an ongoing dialogue that requires participation and engagement from both audience (the public) and power-holders (the police), a successfully functioning police service must also be considered along similar lines with the existence of a framework of both external and internal pillars of fairness and justice being prerequisites of procedural justice. Officers cannot be expected to provide a ‘procedurally just’ service to their community if they do not experience such service from their own organisation (Nix and Wolfe, 2016), hence organisational justice should be a priority for the police as it impacts upon the delivery of procedural justice for members of the public and is key to successful criminal justice ‘business’ (Wolfe and Lawson, 2020: 636). Where attention has traditionally been focussed on policy changes in the public-facing working environment of police officers to reform policing, this article calls for further attention to be paid to cultural and procedural changes within the organisation itself and with an enhanced focus on employees themselves – a people-centred approach. In what follows, we will discuss the implications of these findings for policing organisations and the retention of police officers.

In order for the police service of England and Wales to enhance organisational justice, Myhill and Bradford (2013: 351) suggest concentrating on the least procedurally fair aspects of the organisational climate and this research supports the emphasis on the following areas; transactional and/or poor leadership, unexplained decision making and poor interpersonal treatment. These are also mirrored in the suggestions for police managers made by Wolfe and Piquero (2011: 349) whose recommendations among others include the fair allocation of promotions and the communications that run alongside them plus a genuine commitment to wellbeing with an honest attempt to hear officer voices. These recommendations are of particular importance to this article but are also reliant on each other. If promotions are allocated fairly and the rationale behind them clearly communicated but officers continue to feel as though they are not being heard (perhaps because they are relocated to another role or their ideas dismissed by higher-ranking officers), the impact of the former on improving organisational justice will be negligible. Similarly, if officers do feel heard but the promotion process is still opaque, this will also have minimal impact on the organisational environment. Job satisfaction relies upon career development and growth (Ahmad et al., 2019). A promotion process that allows for the voice and skills of officers to be recognised, placing a greater emphasis on previous experience rather than interview performance, will help to increase the feeling of support and value from the organisation (Nix and Wolfe, 2016). This in turn can help to strengthen organisational justice, legitimacy, identity security and ultimately the organisational commitment of officers.

Of course, the very nature of policing means that contact between police officers and supervisors can be infrequent, but the influence of police managers on the workplace environment is extensive (Roberts and Herrington, 2013). There is however a need to go beyond the introduction of new mission statements, policies or procedures, instead focussing on how officers can be involved in such change and how this is communicated. Williams and Sondhi (2022) found that younger officers also have a desire for an environment that encourages greater transparency and involvement in decision-making processes relating to strategic decisions. We are not ignorant of the wider, cultural change that is associated with achieving this or the recommendations outlined above, but police leaders are themselves pivotal in the creation of such an organisational culture. Myhill and Bradford (2013: 351) state that ‘injustice is more salient than justice’ and while we appreciate the longer term challenges involved, the potential benefits on the police workforce outweigh such efforts.

A further, more straightforward suggestion for reform revolves around fundamental change towards exit interviews for all police leavers, particularly voluntary resigners. Our research shows that a broken feedback loop exists in this regard. If police officers are not offered or do not take up the opportunity for an exit interview, then two barriers exist – police forces will not know the reasons officers are resigning, nor can any issues be addressed to help improve the retention of officers. Forces should therefore ensure that all police leavers are *routinely* offered a meaningful exit interview, but it is the second of these barriers that is arguably more difficult to address. Officers need to feel that those conducting the interviews are invested in the process, otherwise the rejection of such invitations will continue. It may also be appropriate to afford officers a choice as to whether the exit interview is with a higher-ranking officer they are familiar with or someone they are not. Meaningful exit interviews have the potential to impact upon those with an intention to leave and improve organisational learning even if they come too late for the individual themselves. However, police forces should also pursue more proactive retention measures to more effectively combat growing levels of turnover. Greater Manchester Police’s ‘stay interview’ initiative would be just such an example (Potter, 2022). Role exit theory explains that individuals with waning organisational commitment exhibit ‘cueing behaviour’ to others and the extent of the reactions and interactions with those doubts impacts upon the length of this phase (Wacquant, 1990: 398). In the early stages of signalling, managers have more potential to successfully negotiate these doubts but these either go unnoticed or are not yet deemed serious enough to warrant attention despite it often being the final stage where successful intervention could be enacted (Ashforth, 2000).

These research findings focus on one police force and with a relatively small number of interviewees. However, the findings of this research contribute significantly to the qualitative knowledge gaps in how police officers respond to a negative organisational climate (through voluntary resignation) and to areas that need reform. This qualitative approach towards voluntary resigners provides a voice to these former police officers in an organisational context where their voice had not been heard. A consideration of those with an ‘intention to leave’ was beyond the remit of our research but organisationally unjust treatment can result in deviant identities and oppositional cultures being developed (Blader and Tyler, 2003; Myhill and Bradford, 2013). Future research should

consider those with an ‘intention to leave’ and assess the extent to which those negative behaviours, associated with police-public relations and officer self-legitimacy, may be present. In addition, while our research has focussed on those who feel failed by the organisation and voluntarily resigned, the knowledge gained presents useful information for those who currently feel failed and remain and for those who may feel so in the future. Understanding the experiences of those who have resigned from the police service therefore has implications not only for the *retention* of officers but also the *recruitment* of new officers. Future research should explore the impact that voluntary resignations have on those who remain in service and the impact on training and supporting new officers. Charman and Bennett (2022) found that police officers become frustrated when forces do not manage demands placed upon them and struggle with the resulting negative, personal impact, particularly on their non-work environment. If the number of voluntary resignations continues to increase, the increased workload for those who remain will only enhance such struggles.

Conclusion

The 2019 Uplift Programme in England and Wales to recruit an additional 20,000 police officers reflects one of the biggest recruitment drives seen within modern policing (Home Office, 2019). However, the increasing numbers of voluntary resignations from the police service add fuel to the discussions on whether the Uplift Programme will see a return to staffing levels pre-austerity (Kadry and Lambert, 2022; Williams et al., 2019; Wood, 2020). Furthermore, the intended professionalisation of the police service through the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) is also at risk if officers are leaving due to frustrations caused by a lack of promotion and progression opportunities. With 55% of our participants holding a university-level qualification of a bachelor’s degree or higher, there already exists a perception that the individual skills and qualifications of officers are not being recognised and this will become more problematic when a greater number of officers hold such qualifications. While the current focus of government and police forces is on recruitment, this should not distract from the necessary attention towards existing staff. Efforts to retain knowledgeable and experienced officers are necessary for the development of new recruits, to tackle changing and complex patterns of crime and non-crime demand and to demonstrate that the police service does value and reward the work, efforts and contributions of serving police officers. An organisational and non-defensive focus on understanding the large increases in voluntary resignations will enable efficient improvements for retention and recruitment. If forces do not do this, it becomes an organisational risk for the police.

It is clear as Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) have suggested that any claims from the police as to their legitimate status must first look inward to ensure that officers themselves have a belief in the rightness of their own legitimacy which as we have seen from the evidence assessed here is closely intertwined with an organisational climate focussed upon justice and fairness. Importantly, an analysis of the data using the lens of organisational justice has required a consideration of both distributive and procedural elements within that justice framework. The key themes in our research of a *lack of voice*, *lack of recognition of skills and experience*, and *barriers to career development and progression*

focus as much upon the organisational *processes* which are deemed to be fair as they do upon organisational *outcomes*. The literature reviewed in this article highlights the benefits of organisational justice both within and outside of the police service and while the research findings focus on the former, there are clear implications for the latter in terms of the links with a more democratic style of policing. A focus on becoming more transparent, making fairer and more impartial decisions, and enabling officers to be heard have the potential to improve job satisfaction and organisational commitment, thus reducing the likelihood of officers voluntarily resigning.

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