**3 - Culture and leader-follower relationships in policing**

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1. **Introduction**

The financial year 2022-2023 saw the highest number of voluntary police leavers overall and as a proportion of the workforce since records began in 2003 (The Home Office, 2023). Despite initiatives to improve matters, research of police leavers continues to highlight poor leadership as a dominant influence upon the decision to resign (Charman and Bennett, 2022). Including a perceived lack of support, autonomy, and voice in leavers relationships with leaders. This study seeks to contribute to addressing this situation through examining the link between police culture and leader-follower relationships. Consequently, it is relevant to police personnel, but also to the myriad of organisations, Government bodies and regulators associated with policing today. Many of which have been involved in the multiple reviews over the last decade which have advocated for the transformation of police leadership toward more participative modes.

1. **Literature Review**

Leader Member Exchange (LMX) is theory of leader-follower relations predicated upon long term relationships in which the socioemotional exchange and the associated perception of obligation and reciprocation are ongoing processes (Shore et al., 2006). High quality LMX relationships are characterised by greater degrees of mutual influence, reward, engagement, trust, communication, commitment, support, and respect (Bauer and Green, 1996). Given the link between police leadership and the decision to quit it is important to observe the interplay of LMX, organisational commitment and procedural injustice. In high quality LMX relationships the leader encourages employee commitment to the organisation (Graen, 1976) through frequent interactions and development opportunities, whilst high quality LMX is also proposed to result in a higher perception of procedural justice (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

Follower and leader characteristics, and context will influence LMX quality (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Individuals will generally show greater attraction toward those with whom they are similar (Byrne, 1971). Including in respect of their interests, attitudes, and values. Which in the work context may encompass facets of the organisation’s culture (van Breukelen, Schyns and le Blanc, 2006). LMX consensus will be higher in organisational cultures associated with supportive leadership (Tordera et al., 2008). Further, organisational culture influences the development of trust in relationships through shared values (Farnese, Benevene and Barbieri, 2022) which are also aspects of high quality LMX relationships (Markham et al., 2010).

The concept of police culture concerns the norms, values and beliefs shared by policing practitioners (Bacon, 2022). Including the wealth of knowledge and experience upon which practitioners draw and interpret in their daily lives when dealing with the unique challenges presented by their roles (Cockcroft, 2020). The central tenets of police culture including the possession of specific values, the importance of identity, the meaning ascribed to police work and an action orientation; coupled with characteristics of pragmatism, solidarity, cynicism, mission focus, machismo, and conservatism (Caveney et al., 2020). Classical approaches emphasising adherence to hierarchy, discipline, command and control ethos (Myhill and Bradford, 2013). In addition to the strong in-group mentality and internal solidarity expected of police personnel (Myhill and Bradford, 2013) which include suspicions of leadership and their ability to deliver positive change in the organisation (Villiers, 2003). All of which will have significant influence on leader-follower relationships.

Whilst the prevalence of these characteristics continues to be recognised, greater subtlety has emerged in academic and professional discourse as understanding of the influences on culture develops (Caveney et al., 2020). Particularly in respect of the individual differences between practitioners and the consequences of these for behaviour (Ingram et al., 2013). Such that previous simple depictions of police culture are increasingly superseded by more complex and contingent conceptualisations (Caveney et al., 2020). Including recognition of the social, organisational, political, and technological factors which will influence the culture of a policing organisation and their dynamism (Reiner, 2015).

Given the link between organisational culture and LMX, the author proposes that the culture a police professional experiences in their working environment is a function of the overall culture of policing, the unique culture of the specific police force in which they work and the subculture(s) of their individual division, unit and/or team. These are mutually influencing, as well as collectively and individually influenced by the wide range of factors exerting forces upon culture. In turn, each of these cultural facets will manifest in their own distinctive values, norms, and discourse. Though there may be commonalities between them given their inter-dependency. Collectively, these cultures will influence the development and quality of leader-follower exchange relationships, though individual and contextual factors will also play their part.

1. **Research Question, Aims & Objectives**

Given the interplay of leader-follower relationships, leadership in policing and organisational cultures, this project will seek to answer the following **research question**: *From the perspective of practitioners, what factors influence leader-follower relationships in the policing context?*

This research project therefore **aims** to *explore leader-follower interactions in the policing context through developing understanding as to the influences upon these*. Consequently, the project seeks to achieve the following **objectives**:

* *To engage police practitioners in the exploration of their in-work relationships with colleagues across the rank, role, and specialisation structures.*
* *To explore the potential existence of themes amongst influences upon interpersonal relationships, including the extent to which these may have a positive or negative impact.*
1. **Contribution To Knowledge & Professional Practice**

This is potentially the first research project to explore influences upon interpersonal relationships in policing, including the potential consequences of police culture upon the dynamics of engagement between leaders and followers. Any recommendations arising from this research therefore have the potential to address, at least in part, the challenges identified by Charman and Bennett (2022) in respect of perceived organisational injustice. Through their incorporation into leadership development programmes and wider professional guidance. Whilst also recognising the importance of leadership development for all which conceptualises leadership as a process encompassing all parties to the relationship (Day et al., 2021). In addition to generating conversation and reflection amongst police practitioners in respect of their interactions. Increasing the likelihood of the benefits of enhanced interpersonal relationships being more widely realised in policing, including improving retention.

Further, the study seeks to potentially contribute to the fields of police and leadership studies in three areas.  Firstly, responding to the recognition by Oc et al. (2023), amongst others, that it is necessary to examine both sides of the leader-follower dyad to gain a holistic understanding of leadership. Particularly when investigating themes integral to this research proposal, including interactions, exchanges and reciprocity between leaders and followers, and the characteristics of dyadic relationships (Kim et al., 2020). Secondly, Oc et al. (2023) recognise limited attention in empirical work to specific follower characteristics and their influence on relationships with leaders. Particularly follower behaviours and group interactions. Given that both aspects are significantly influenced by organisational and/or occupational culture (Schein, 1997), this research therefore has the potential to expand understanding of their influence on leader-follower relationships. Finally, this study aspires to extend the work of Charman and Bennett (2022) in relation to perceptions of organisational justice in policing, particularly in respect to the behaviour of leaders.

1. **Methods**

This two stage multi-method qualitative study will engage participants from two police forces in virtual semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore their experiences of and perspectives on police leadership and culture. Participants will be drawn from across the ranks, roles, and divisions of each force. The results will be thematically analysed between phases one and two, to inform the latter which will include the generation of ideas for future leadership development initiatives.

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