Is there ‘discretionary space’ in rank-based police constabularies for graduate constables to think critically and make autonomous decisions?

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Abstract

The Police Education and Qualification Framework (PEFQ) mandated that from 2020 police recruits must be educated to degree level. This change has generated much debate around the relationship between academia and the police. There has been less discussion about parallel organisational change. To explore the opportunities for graduate officers to find the 'discretionary space' to employ the skills associated with university study, 234 police constables were surveyed. Analysis revealed that officers faced barriers to decision making from bureaucratic and managerial procedures. Findings suggest that police organisations may need to make changes structurally and procedurally to benefit from a graduate workforce.

Key Words: *critical thinking, discretionary space, professionalization, police.*

The role of a police constable in the UK in 21st century is more complex and challenging than ever before. The typical response officer must be able to police a diverse community of individuals with an array of needs and expectations, from complex online crimes to resolving neighbourhood disputes. Officers are expected to *act as* 'paramedic' and 'mental health worker' to safeguard the vulnerable in addition to responding to the more traditional Saturday night disorderly behaviour. In response to these challenges the Government, The National Police Chiefs Council and the College of Policing agreed that policing should be a profession, putting police officers on a par with the social workers, doctors and lawyers with whom they regularly collaborate (Neyroud, 2011; College of Policing, 2016; National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016). They proposed that professionalising the police would not only recognise the work that the police already do, but would help to create a workforce of accredited practitioners confident in making decisions based on skills and knowledge rather than rank (Lee and Punch, 2004; Jones, 2016; National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016; College of Policing, 2018).

It is generally accepted that professions require practitioners to have undertaken tertiary education before they can practice (Greenwood, 1957; Evetts, 2011). Until recently, the police were regarded as an artisan trade meaning that educational qualifications were not a pre-requisite to employment as a constable (Lee and Punch, 2004; Heslop, 2011a; Jones, 2016). However, in response to the professionalisation agenda, the College of Policing introduced the Police Education Qualifications Framework. The framework states that from 2020, police recruits will have to hold a policing degree before they are confirmed in post (Cox and Kirby, 2018; Ramshaw and Soppitt, 2018; College of Policing, 2019). It is claimed that graduate entry will ensure that recruits possess critical thinking skills enabling them to make autonomous decisions by assessing and balancing complex risks. A move intended to elevate policing to a profession (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016; College of Policing, 2018; Ramshaw and Soppitt, 2018). However, while there has been widespread acceptance that policing should be a profession it is argued by some that the concept has not been has not been rigorously examined either conceptually or practically (Fleming, 2014; Sklansky, 2014; Holdaway, 2017).

A core concern is the potential conflict between critical thinking graduate recruits and the long-established pattern within policing; where police leaders, without any consultation or workforce involvement, introduce policies and procedures, that effectively 'micro-manage'

officers and restrict discretion (Heslop, 2011b; Bradford and Quinton, 2014; Goode and Lumsden, 2018).

Professional discretion is considered an inherent attribute in defining a profession, it is generally accepted that constables have unusually high level of personal discretion. Constables operate out of sight of their supervisors in idiosyncratic situations that are not easily recreated for subsequent independent analysis (McLaughlin, 2007; Savage, 2007). However, unlike in the medical or legal profession, police discretion is not viewed as the natural professional judgement of qualified and knowledgeable practitioners. Instead police discretion is problematic, often seen as the subjective and capricious use of police power against marginalised and minority groups, undermining public expectations of the fair and universal application of the law (Rowe, 2007; Phillips, 2016). Police discretion is seen as fundamental to effective policing because the law cannot be enforced in every situation, judgement in its' application is often required (Lustgarten, 1986; Reiner, 2010). Despite this, police leaders arguably attempt to control and limit their officers' discretion through the introduction of regulations that define appropriate practices in certain policing situations and employ information technology to check that officers have complied. Compliance is typically assessed through detailed and rigorous reporting systems, where officers outline their actions in each situation. Any deviation from the policy must be explained and justified. This approach is argued to be driven by risk aversion and has been applied to a range of situations, including: stop search procedures, positive arrest policy in domestic violence cases and the use of body worn video cameras (Diemer *et al.*, 2017; Wood and Williams, 2017; Rowe, Pearson and Turner, 2018; Black and Lumsden, 2020).

Such a policy driven approach not only limits discretion but is more in keeping with the organisational professionalism as described by Evetts. Evetts (2011 a) focus is on managerial control and authority maintenance through hierarchical structures. This contrasts with the occupational professionalism promoted by the College of Policing, which espouses practitioner autonomy and independent professional judgement (Evetts, 2011; College of Policing, 2019). This issue of discretionary control is exacerbated by the quasi-military rank structure that is embedded in police organisations. The hierarchy defines meaning and convention and there is a reluctance to challenge or even question decisions of senior officers (Davis, 2020). This combination of rank hierarchy and the limitations around performing discretion define the boundaries of 'discretionary space'. It is within this space that the critical thinking graduates of PEQF will have to work to establish their professional

autonomy and potentially challenge the status quo (Wood and Tong, 2009; Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Goode and Lumsden, 2018).

While the creation of a professional body (College of Policing), the introduction of a Code of Ethics, and the development of a professional knowledge base have all been broadly accepted on the road to the professionalisation of the police. The final step, however, graduate entry, may be met with greater resistance (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017; Norman and Williams, 2017; Wood, 2020). It has the potential to challenge the current rank-based structure of authority and decision making (Sklansky, 2014). It may also require supervisory officers at all ranks to adopt a more transformational style of management, one that allows graduate recruits to utilise their skills and knowledge in order to reap the anticipated benefits promised by the promotors of professionalism (Bacon, 2014; Fleming and Wingrove, 2017). This raises a key question around the extent to which the organisation is prepared to make these changes.

The Drive to Professionalise

The College of Policing has claimed that the police need to professionalise because policing in the 21st century is characterized by increasing complexity, (College of Policing, 2016, 2018). The challenges include: a necessity to understand diverse communities, the assessment and sensitive handling of vulnerable individuals and situations, the ability to work with other agencies, and to ensure that safeguarding is in place and harm is minimized (Flanagan, 2008; National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016). These challenges are part of a wider societal change in which individuals are largely intolerant of risk and are suspicious of state authority. This means that the police must deal with a complex mix of public expectations that interweave notions of public protection, vulnerability, risks and rights, (Heaton, Bryant and Tong, 2019). Professionalisation, through the development of an evidence based and graduate entry, has been promoted as a way of providing officers with the knowledge and critical thinking skills that facilitates complex risk assessments and produces defensible decision making to deal with these challenges (College of Policing, 2015; National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016).

The Police Organisation

The current organizational structure of police forces is almost identical to the Metropolitan Police force that was created by Sir Robert Peel in 1829, with the same clearly defined rank structure from Constable to Chief Constable, (Critchley, 1972; Neyroud, 2011; College of Policing, 2015). It has also retained some of the same organisational tenets, a rigid hierarchical management structure, with promotion from within, and based on demonstrating knowledge and experience gained from within the organisation (Silvestri, 2006; Mawby and Wright, 2008). While some of the more overt militaristic affectations, such as marching and saluting, have fallen away, there is still a reliance on rank as the final arbitrator and an expectation that commands will be obeyed without question (Silvestri, 2006; Fleming and Rhodes, 2017; Davis, 2020). The idea that decisions are made by those with rank is an unquestioned orthodoxy and is deeply entrenched throughout the organisation, so that even minor decisions are flagged for the approval of senior officers as a matter of routine (Norman and Williams, 2017; Davis, 2020). This has led to the general acceptance of command and control management, even in day to day decisions, and despite attempts to introduce a more transformational management style, transactional management is the institutional norm (Golding and Savage, 2008; Neyroud, 2011).

The National Police Chiefs' Council (2016) and the College of Policing (2015) have recognised the limitations of this management style. Both organisations describe a future vision of flatter organisational structures and accredited professionals operating autonomously without the need for close rank-based supervision. However, recent research of the experiences of officers who have obtained academic qualifications whilst serving in the police suggest that there are substantial hurdles to be overcome before this vision can become a reality. Hallenberg and Cockcroft (2017) interviewed officers who had undertaken academic studies in policing at various levels; in general, the officers' reported that their achievements were either ignored, or met with hostility. One respondent, a constable with a degree in criminology, commented: 'Nothing, it means nothing in the [Police Service] to have a degree as a police officer ….' (p.280). Another stated that a colleague who has a PhD included this on his email signature only to be told to take it off as it '…. means nothing' (p.281), he went on to say that there was, '..... very much a culture of a degree is something that you ought to hide', (p.281). Norman and Williams (2017) found similar views amongst a cohort of serving officers who had completed a BSc (Hons) in Policing, they reported, 'a disconnect between the professionalism agenda coming from the COP and the operational reality in the organisation ….' (p.8). Despite the effort they had had put into their studies and

the knowledge they had gained they were frustrated and felt undervalued and deskilled by the top-down decision-making processes inherent in the hierarchy.

The resistance to higher educational qualifications in the police is both cultural and structural. It is perhaps unsurprising that those with rank are reluctant to power share with those further down the hierarchy (Gundhus, 2013; Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2017). It has been argued, that the police organisation, both at a leadership and operational level, is not yet ready to accept the idea of graduate officers providing solutions to problems based on knowledge acquired in through academic study. This lack of preparedness may frustrate both the individual graduate officers and the professionalisation agenda (Fleming and Wingrove, 2017; Norman and Williams, 2017; Ramshaw and Soppitt, 2018).

Historically, management concerns around police discretion have perhaps reinforced the need for structural rigidity(Reiner, 2010). The police are somewhat unique in that, whilst they have a strict rank-based organisational structure, the constable has been afforded latitude in how they go about the various tasks they are assigned. Moreover, they have been able to act in conditions of near anonymity, rarely directly supervised or monitored by their superiors (Bradford *et al.*, 2014; Haas *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, policy and procedural enforcement has presented significant challenges. Indeed, the police have faced considerable criticism over the years, with public outcries over corruption in the 1970s, racism in 1980s, and a failure to protect vulnerable victims today. The response from police leaders has been to adopt a risk adverse mentality (Heaton, 2011; Green and Gates, 2014; Heaton, Bryant and Tong, 2019). Risk adversity manifesting as complex bureaucratic procedures that need to be completed by the response officer in virtually every incident they attend, in effect regulating and limiting the discretion previously available to officers in street level policing (Heaton, Bryant and Tong, 2019; Black and Lumsden, 2020). The increasing use of information technology by constabularies to monitor incidents from the initial call from a member of the public to finalisation by a police supervisor means that officer discretion is limited and non-compliance with policies and procedures is easily highlighted and challenged (Chan, 2001, 2003; Rowe, 2007). This process has effectively limited officer discretion, 'micro-managed' them and arguably led to them feeling de-skilled (Rowe, 2007; Heslop, 2011b). This monitoring and control can be seen in the positive arrest policy in cases of domestic abuse (Diemer *et al.*, 2017; Myhill, 2019), the introduction of body worn video (Rowe, Pearson and Turner, 2018) and the detailed, time limited, demands of the National Crime Recording

(McFadzien and Phillips, 2019). While these policies were designed in response to genuine concerns about the needs of victims and a desire to ensure that individual officers act conscientiously and with integrity, they do appear to conflict with a professionalisation agenda (Heslop, 2011b; de Maillard and Savage, 2018; Williams, Norman and Rowe, 2019). If the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council are serious when they describe the police professional as an autonomous decision maker, empowered to make professional judgements they will have to consider changes both to the rank-based hierarchy of the police organization and the policies and procedures that they operate.

There have been a number of studies into police discretion, e.g. (Rowe, 2007; Myhill and Johnson, 2016; Dymond, 2019) but none have considered discretion in the context of the current agenda of police professionalisation as set out by the College of Policing. A new questionnaire measure was therefore designed to explore how serving officers view 'discretionary space'. The aim of this study was to explore whether police officers in 'North Force' report having the opportunities and confidence to make autonomous decisions in indeterminate situations. Decision making of this nature is considered to be a fundamental attribute of a professional and a central ambition for the College of Policing for PEQF graduates. 'North Force' is a pseudonym for a police force based in the North of England, it is one of the smaller constabularies and polices a mainly rural geographical area with some urban areas that have problems of low income and unemployment. The professionalisation agenda is predicated on the assumption that graduates will be more autonomous and so more prepared to make decisions than their non-graduate counterparts. However, it is also possible given the current structure and management ethos of the police, that those with considerable service may also feel supported in using discretion and displaying autonomy, as a result the following hypotheses have generated to examine these possibilities,

$H_{(1)}$ officers with more police service will differ in their rating of autonomous decision making opportunities compared with their less experienced colleagues.

$H_{(2)}$ officers who have an undergraduate degree or higher will differ in their perception of decision making opportunities compared with their colleagues without a degree.

$H_{(3)}$ there will be an interaction between graduate status and length of service in terms of these perceptions

Method

Design

Questionnaire development

To generate items for the questionnaire a purposive sample of 29 constables were recruited and asked to give their views and experiences of discretionary space within policing. These were existing officers with a range of experience spanning careers within the force of different lengths, their selection was solely based on the timing of their attendance at the training centre. The participants were the first cohort of constables selected to attend a particular mandatory training programme. This selection was not undertaken by the researchers, the process of selection was administered centrally. The timing of attendance reflects officers shift patterns and availability, it was not based on their individual characteristics. Consequently, each cohort included constables who were new to the force, quite experienced and very experienced. Selecting the sample by following typical police practices should reduce the opportunity for researcher bias and increase the likelihood that the sample is a good representation of the target population. The participants were briefed as to the nature of the research, the context of professionalization of the police was explained, and that their opinions would be used to inform a questionnaire for their colleagues. They were asked to consider and then write down their thoughts on whether their opportunities to make decisions in their role as operational front-line officers was either limited or facilitated by the Constabulary. The data were subjected to a Thematic Analysis (TA) as described by Braun and Clarke. Braun and Clarke proposed that TA involved six stages including: generating initial codes, searching for themes and naming the themes. Our analysis followed an inductive orientation as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The inductive process refers to adopting a data driven approach to generating the codes and organising the themes. This is a useful approach in questionnaire development where a small sample of stakeholder views are being sought to support the development of a tool for a wider population (e.g. Nicklin *et al.*, 2010; Wong *et al.*, 2013). In addition to adopting an inductive orientation, a semantic approach was taken to the analysis, unlike a latent analysis where implicit meanings are interpreted by the researcher, a semantic analysis focuses at a more explicit and perhaps superficial level (Terry *et al.*, 2017). The main themes identified from the analysis were

management and supervisor issues; policy and procedure, and officer discretion. Thirty-Eight statements were developed to reflect the themes identified from the participant data; Table 1 below provides a range of example statements.

Table 1

Example statements from the initial questionnaire

Key Constructs	**Example Statements**
Supervisor Management	When a decision is made by an officer, but the outcome is not as expected supervisors do not support officer.
	Often supervisors who are not at the job see a decision differently therefore do not support your decision.
	There is too much involvement from senior managers in the process of lower level decisions.
	Many sergeants like to micro supervise everything must go through them.
Officer Discretion	We don't get to make that many decisions on our own as there are other departments / officers / processes which monitor and guide our decision making.
	There are people who are sat in offices making decisions about ongoing jobs telling officers on the ground how to deal with the job.
	Officers no longer seem to be able to use their discretion, pointless arrests.
	Clearly the use of discretion is virtually over. The only time this can be used is if the officer come across it themselves.
Policy	Common sense is limited by incessant policy change and being entirely risk averse as an organisation.
	I often find that I am bound by national guidance that does not meet the needs of the community or investigation that is being conducted.
	Too much bureaucracy whilst trying to make common-sense decisions or deal with an incident or crime.
	Financial constraints not enough police officers or back room support.

To provide an opportunity to check the reliability of the tool, the questionnaire was pilot tested on a further 34 officers (this group of officers were also selected because of their attendance at mandatory training). Following reliability testing using Cronbach's item analysis, the final questionnaire was produced. Thirty one of the 38 original statements were retained. The final questionnaire was deemed to have high reliability $\alpha = .86$ These included; 'Bureaucracy prevents a common-sense approach to decision making', 'Supervisors are unwilling to make decisions outside of policy', 'Supervisors give officers the freedom to handle difficult situations', 'My supervisor has a risk averse approach to my decision making'. The final statements included in the questionnaire could be organised into three groups and as such were assessing three distinct constructs, Supervisor Management issues: Officers' Discretion, and Policy related issues (see Table 1 above for examples).
The questionnaire was designed so that participants who felt they lacked opportunities and managerial support to make autonomous decisions would score highly, (Strongly Agree = 5), whilst those who were happy with their opportunities' and support would score low, (Strongly Disagree = 1).

Participants and procedure

All operational officers at constable rank within North Force were given the opportunity to participate in the study. At the time the target population was $N = 650$. One hundred and ninety-seven officers completed the questionnaire whilst attending the training centre for mandatory training, a further 56 completed the questionnaire in an online format via Online Survey. In total 253 constables completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 39%. There were 14 cases with missing data and a further 4 cases did not include years of service, these were excluded, so 234 cases were included in a two-way ANOVA using SPSS. Respondents included, officers ranging in years of service from 0 to 15+ years. These were broadly classified as probationary (0-2 years, n=62) or experienced (post-probationary, n=191), of these 40% were graduates (n=102) and 60% not (n=132; the full breakdown for this can be seen in Table 2).

Table 2

Sample groups sizes by graduate status and years of service

Graduate		**Non- Graduate**	
Years of service	***N***	**Years of service**	***N***
0 – 2	41	0 - 2	21
3 – 8	24	3 - 8	32
9 – 14	19	9 - 14	40
15+	18	15+	39

Ethical Procedures

The research was ethically approved by the associated University Ethics Committee on 22nd January 2017 and the Police Constabulary. Permission to conduct this research was obtained on the basis that officer participation would be voluntary, and the Constabulary would not be named in the research, hence the use of the pseudonym 'North Force'. The lead researcher is a police constable serving in North Force and is therefore an insider in the research setting. This provided relatively easy access to police officers willing to participate in the research and meant that the participants trusted and accepted the researcher who understood the language, jargon of policing, all of which can be difficult for researchers outside of the police (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Greene, 2014).

Results

Data was coded to calculate the overall total scores for perception of autonomy, as well as the three sub-scales. Table 3 details the means and standard deviations for total perceived autonomy scores by graduate status and years of service:

Table 3

Autonomy means (and standard deviation) for graduate status and years of service

	0-2	**3-8**	**9-14**	**15+**	**Total**
Graduate	97.80	98.04	105.89	105.00	100.64
	(10.05)	(13.40)	(19.75)	(14.30)	(14.08)
Non-Graduate	95.00	98.19	105.45	108.64	102.97
	(14.99)	(17.27)	(11.22)	(12.190	(14.58)
Total	96.85	98.13	105.59	107.49	
	(11.90)	(15.59)	(14.34)	(12.88)	

The minimum possible score would be 38 and the maximum possible would be 190.

The range of scores (lowest and the highest) obtained for the graduate sample for *Perceived Autonomy* was 68; (minimum of 72, maximum of 140).

The ranges of scores (lowest and the highest) obtained for the non-graduate sample for *Perceived Autonomy* was 85; (minimum of 57, maximum of 142).

The descriptive statistics show an overall increase of score across the number of years of service indicating the longer officers are in service, the fewer perceived opportunities for autonomy are seen. This was a similar pattern for both graduates and non-graduates.
The data were treated as interval as is typical for Likert scale questionnaire measures (e.g. (Boone and Boone, 2012). The two-way ANOVA was chosen to explore the effect both independently and in combination of whether an officer was a graduate or not and their length of police service, on how they viewed their opportunities to make autonomous decisions.
A 2 x 4 between subjects factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was chosen to allow for the examination of both main and interaction effects of graduate status and length of service on

perception of opportunities to make autonomous decisions. The Levene's test of equality of variance was statistically significant (p = .002). This suggests that the variance across the dependent variable is not equal, therefore a more stringent value for *alpha* was adopted of p =.01.

There was a significant main effect of length of service (F (3, 226) = 7.65, p <.001, η^2 = .09). Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that the majority of the group differences were significant (p <.01) with the exception of 0-2 and 3-8 years (p = .515) and 9-14 and 15+ (p = .676). This finding supports the first hypothesis that the years of service impacts on perceptions of opportunities to make autonomous decisions; with increasing years of service came a perception that there were decreased opportunities to make autonomous decisions. The ANOVA further revealed no significant main effect for graduate status (F (1, 226) = .01, p = .944), indicating there was no difference between graduates and non-graduates in terms of their perception of autonomy, this does not support the second hypothesis of the study. There was also no significant interaction between graduate status and years of service: (F (3, 226) = .483, p = .695) which does not support the third hypothesis.

The next stage of analysis involved exploring whether these two factors (length of service and graduate status) impacted on specific constructs within the overall perception of opportunities of autonomy. The questionnaire was designed to examine three underlying constructs based on the issues raised by officers in the pilot study; management and supervisor issues, policy and procedure, and officer discretion. To explore how the length of service and graduate status impacted on these constructs 2 x 4 between subjects multivariate analysis of variance was performed to explore the impact on the combined dependent variable, as well as the individual univariate constructs. Preliminary assumption testing revealed no serious violations of assumptions, except that Levene's test of equality of error variances was statistically significant for the Supervisor Management group, (p = .024) and Policy group (p < .001.) Therefore, a more stringent value for *alpha* of .01 was used; this along with the use of the MANOVA protected against Type 1 errors. Table 4 details the means and standard deviations for this part of the analysis:

Table 4

Construct means (and standard deviation) for graduate status and years of service

		0-2	3-8	9-14	15+	Total
Supervisor	**Graduate**	34.02	34.00	38.89	38.17	35.66
Management		(4.64)	(7.20)	(8.99)	(6.22)	(6.79)
	Non-Graduate	34.14	34.38	38.78	39.97	37.33
		(7.48)	(7.04)	(5.94)	(6.00)	(6.90)
	Total	34.06	34.21	38.81	39.40	36.60
		(5.70)	(7.04)	(6.99)	(6.07)	(6.89)
Officer	**Graduate**	25.15	25.75	26.68	27.06	25.91
Discretion		(2.71)	(3.65)	(4.60)	(3.44)	(3.50)
	Non-Graduate	24.57	25.84	26.45	27.05	26.18
		(3.99)	(4.24)	(2.96)	(3.39)	(3.65)
	Total	24.95	25.80	26.53	27.05	26.06
		(3.18)	(3.97)	(3.53)	(3.37)	(3.58)
Policy	**Graduate**	38.63	38.29	40.32	39.78	39.07
		(3.93)	(4.65)	(7.54)	(6.40)	(5.35)
	Non-Graduate	36.29	37.97	40.23	41.62	39.46
		(5.01)	(7.06)	(3.98)	(4.74)	(5.53)
	Total	37.84	38.11	40.25	41.04	
		(4.43)	(6.10)	(5.32)	(5.34)	

This can also be seen in Figure 1 below:

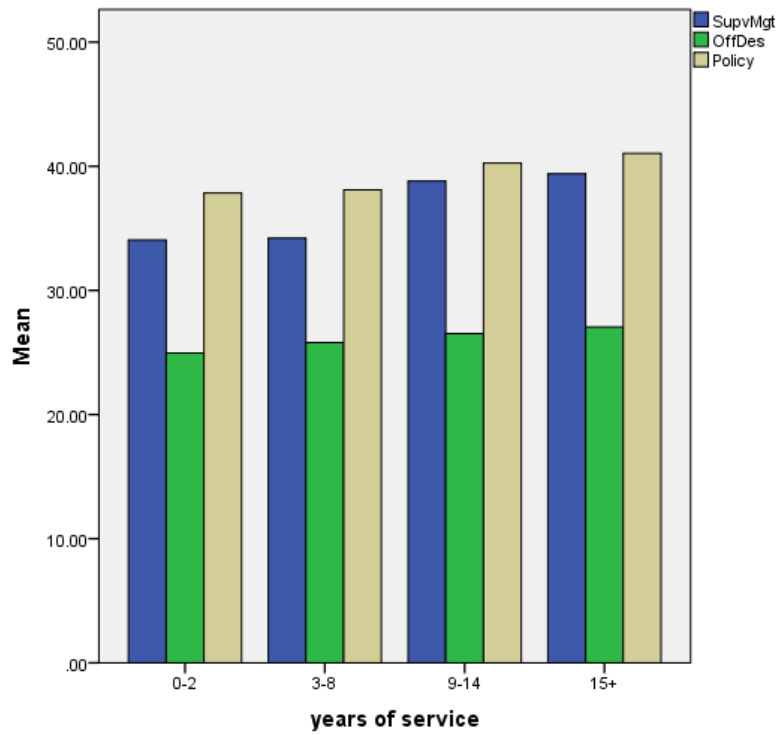

Figure 1: Means for three constructs across years of service

Both the table and graph illustrate a clear increase in dissatisfaction with the capacity to make autonomous decisions across the three different constructs. The table further showed that this did not seem to differ very much between the graduate and non-graduate group. Multivariate tests revealed that there was a significant overall effect of length of service on the combined dependent variable (F (9, 545) =3.68, $p < .001$; Wilks Lambda = .87; $\eta^2 = .05$). The univariate tests were significant for all constructs, supervisor management, (F (3, 266) = 9.64, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .11$), officer discretion, F (1, 226) = 3.87, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .05$) and policy group (F (3, 226) = 4.71, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$), indicating length of service impacted on scores on all three constructs.

For supervisor management the pattern was very similar to that described above for overall perceptions, Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that the majority of the group differences were significant (p <.01) with the exception of 0-2 and 3-8 years ($p = .999$) and 9-14 and 15+ ($p = .962$); supporting that the longer officers are in service, the more dissatisfied they are with constabulary policies and procedures. Officer discretion and policy construct showed a similar pattern, yet the only significant group difference was seen between the 0-2-year group and the 15+ group, (for both p <.01). This indicates that the more years of service,

the more dissatisfied they are with opportunities to be autonomous for these constructs, but these only differ when compared over the longer service period.

The multivariate result revealed no overall significance for graduate status as a main effect, (F (3, 224) = .82, p = .486; Wilks Lambda = .99), and no significant interaction (F (9, 545) = .80, p= .617; Wilks Lambda = .97), so the above findings around years of service was similar across the graduate and non-graduate group.

Discussion

The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in the attitude of graduate officers and non-graduate officers, both groups indicated that they faced barriers to independent decision making and felt their opportunities to make autonomous were restricted by police management, and policy and procedures. This result suggests that having a degree does not provide officers with enhanced capacity or motivation to persevere in making autonomous decisions in the current policing environment. This finding reflects a position held by (Wood and Williams, 2017) that whether they have a degree or not appears to make little difference to the performance or employment of currently serving officers. This is perhaps not surprising as it is well established in the literature that police culture and the hierarchical structure of policing coalesce to devalue and undermine the alleged benefits of a university education (Paterson, 2011; Cox and Kirby, 2018; Goode and Lumsden, 2018)**.**

The findings also indicated that experienced officers expressed more negative attitudes towards opportunities for decision making in the police than their newer colleagues. This may infer that coming in to contact with the realities of policing, frustrates and narrows officers' approach to autonomous decision making. The insistence to follow policy regardless may offer some explanation for why the longest serving group were the least satisfied, however, they were also the least likely to hold a degree. Although this research did not find a significant difference between graduate and non-graduate. It could be argued that, over time as these officers retire, the proportion of officers who are graduates will rise, and this will increase positivity in decision-making. However, previous attempts to encourage organic change via recruit policies have largely failed, for example, the increase in female officers

has not led to a fundamental change in police culture (Holdaway and Parker, 1998; Silvestri, 2006).

The effect sizes for the influence of managers and supervisors were large and there was a significant increase in negativity the longer the officers had remained in the force. While this suggests that supervisors and managers are the largest barriers to autonomous decision making it should be noted that they may only be implementing policy and therefore as constrained in their decision making as the response officers.

These findings are consistent with the findings of Hallenberg and Cockcroft described above, in that officers with or without degrees seem to have few opportunities to influence practices or participate in meaningful decision making. The combination of decision making based on rank and the use of policies that constrain decision making discussed earlier in the article are borne out by these findings see also (Rowe, 2007; McFadzien and Phillips, 2019). Some senior officers have acknowledged that the current reliance on rank for decision making has limitations. Ian Drummond Smith, a senior officer in Devon and Cornwall, argues that while command and control is appropriate in a crisis, for more mundane day to day policing an approach that trusts staff to ask questions, raise concerns, make suggestions and decisions is more appropriate in modern policing (Drummond-Smith, 2017).

Research conducted by Fleming and Wingrove found similar concerns about organisational structure and policies restricting the options for change in professionalising the police (Fleming and Wingrove, 2017). These concerns have also been raised by other commentators who have called for police forces to develop procedures, policy and decision-making practices that allow officers to participate in decisions and practice professional autonomy. Whether by adopting organisational justice within constabularies to encourage officers to inculcate procedural justice which will then influence officers' interactions with the public (Bradford *et al.*, 2014; Haas *et al.*, 2015), or by encouraging critical reflective practice as a way of developing police autonomy, allowing officers to critically reflect on all aspects of their role, law, procedures, policies. This process challenges the orthodoxy and turns problematic situation into learning experiences. Critical reflective practice further encourages the development of 'moral agency' the capacity to question what is going on around them and to have confidence in their own judgement (Christopher, 2015; Wood, 2020).

While neither of these approaches neglect the importance of legislation or police policy, or indeed the rank structure. They both require a working environment that allows appropriate levels of dissent, meaningful reflections and a willingness to listen and change (Christopher, 2015; Wood and Williams, 2017; Wood, 2020).

While supporting other findings in this area of research, this research does present new insight into the views of serving officers. As presented in this paper other researchers have studied the views of officers who have obtained academic qualifications whilst serving. This research explores the views of serving officers and provides insight into the organisational climate that new graduate officers created by the PEQF process will be exposed. This research suggests that a combination of rank-based control of decision making and polices has effectively restrained individual officer discretion. This has resulted in an occupational milieu in which officers' 'discretionary space' is tightly bounded and shrinking. These are not the conditions in which an occupational style professionalism is likely to take root or organically grow. Professional autonomy requires organisational support and freedom if it develop in the way envisaged by the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council. This research suggests that changes to the organisational structure of policing will have to be made to accommodate to allow the creation of a true occupational profession.

Limitations of the Research

The findings are novel and important; however, it is important to note that there are limitations in this research. Most noteworthy perhaps, this was a single force design that only recruited constables to participate. While the rank of constable was particularly relevant to this research the views of police supervisors and managers are also important and relevant. A single force design has the obvious drawback that the views expressed may be a reflection of something inherent to the specific force and so a cross force sampling protocol may be advisable in future studies. This questionnaire, while a useful device for obtaining an overview of the issue, did not allow respondents to provide detailed views on the issues and consequently any nuances surrounding perceptions of autonomy and decision-making remain unknown. Further research should be directed towards developing an understanding of how officers from across England and Wales forces understand and deal with these issues.

Conclusion

The police have been an artisan trade since 1829 and the current organizational and occupational culture accepts norms of practice that have existed since its inception (Critchley, 1972; Neyroud, 2011). The necessity and appropriateness of the rank-based hierarchy is accepted almost without question. Allied to this is the mantra that all senior officers must have served as a constable if they are to understand policing and therefore be able to lead. This is mirrored in the privileging of experiential knowledge gained whilst policing over knowledge gained in a classroom, especially a classroom outside of policing training. This research has shown that the ambitions of the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council are unlikely to become a reality in a timely manner without organisational change. Currently, officers do not feel they are empowered to make decisions and their autonomy is restricted by policies and procedures. It is unrealistic to expect the introduction of a graduate entry scheme to bring about the necessary changes to create a flatter organisational structure, encourage more transformational management and increase the autonomy and decision-making power of the response constable.

It appears that the police organization will have to make changes to both management practices and policies if they are to create a decision-making milieu that facilitates graduate officers in the use of their critical thinking skills and discretion in 21st century policing.

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