“Their Normal is Just Different to Ours”: How Does Police Occupational Culture Contribute to Their Understanding of Autism?

Diana Hepworth

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Abbreviations

AA	Appropriate Adult
ASC	Autism Spectrum Condition
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
D.C.	Detective Constable
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
MHA	Mental Health Act
NPAA	National Police Autism Association
PACE	Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984
P.C.	Police Constable
PPJ	Perceived Procedural Justice
ToM	Theory of Mind

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"Doing a PhD is challenging. It is hard. Otherwise, everybody would have one."

Abstract

This exploratory, qualitative PhD study aimed to explore how police occupational culture theory can be used to view police behaviours and attitudes towards autism, and how autistic individuals perceive the police following experiences as suspects. Police occupational culture is a key component of understanding the motivations and attitudes of police officers, and how they interact with the public and is vital to inform training and reform. Understanding how occupational culture impacts on learning, attitudes and actions of police officers towards autistic suspects allows us to improve future training and policy in ways that may have the most impact.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 police officers from forces in England and Wales and five autistic adults with direct experience of the police as suspects. These interviews were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis with deductive and inductive coding. The key findings revealed that while police officers had a superficial awareness of autism, their understanding was rooted in stereotypes and medicalised language. Aspects of their occupational culture resulted in them feeling unsupported and disappointed in the job role, having joined the police with the goal of being *crimefighters,* when the reality requires them to be *peacekeepers*. A unique and key finding was that the use of *suspicion* as a positive tool, used to detect differences and adapt their responses accordingly, contradicting previous literature on occupational culture. Police officers had a desire to treat people fairly and justly, but were lacking the appropriate knowledge. However, the experiences of autistic participants did not echo the positive attitudes of the police participants. Overall, they were dissatisfied with their treatment during encounters and custody, and conveyed a lack of trust and suspicion towards police motives. Drawing on the findings, suggestions for changes to training, policy and procedure are discussed, as well as future research directions.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in our awareness of autism spectrum condition, both in society and academia. Since my academic journey and interest in autism began, much literature has been written and it continues to be an emerging topic within the social sciences. This is due, in part, to the mass media reporting of high-profile cases involving police misconduct with autistic individuals, such as the most recent case of a young schoolboy being threatened by a police officer in his school in Merseyside (Fallon, 2021). These cases demonstrate the real need for police officers to receive specific autism training, to provide them with the knowledge to interact with autistic individuals appropriately and safely. The legitimacy of the police force is perceived by the public with relation to the procedural justice that the public see demonstrated, and these high-profile cases with vulnerable autistic individuals negatively impacts on that perceived procedural justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988). This is also true of the autistic individuals that come into contact with the police; their experiences will form their perception of the police force, and this perceived procedural justice and police legitimacy will have implications for future encounters.

Studies have illustrated the lack of police awareness, understanding and ability to satisfactorily deal with autistic suspects, and to make appropriate adjustments for them during encounters (Chown, 2010; Crane et al., 2016; Holloway et al., 2020; Love et al., 2022; Maras et al., 2018; Modell & Mak, 2008; Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020; Wallace et al., 2021). This lack of training and knowledge can lead to situations being handled inappropriately, for instance, if an autistic individual has a sensory sensitivity, police sirens and officers shouting instructions may cause the individual to experience a meltdown, which will not result in the desired result from the police. The situation may escalate to the use of force when it could have been avoided with the necessary training. This lack of knowledge, training and adaptation of procedure also has an effect on the autistic individual's experience of the police encounter, and poses risks for stress, anxiety and trauma following the experience (Bogdashina, 2003; Nyx et al., 2013).

Police occupational culture is frequently cited as being the biggest barrier to reform, training and policy change (Goldsmith, 1990; Greene, 2000; Loftus, 2009; Paoline, 2003). Others argue that it is a vital, positive tool in the process of reform (Crank, 1997;

Skogan & Hartnett, 1997). Either way, it is a helpful theoretical framework in understanding police behaviours and training. Since the early development of the theory, occupational culture has continued to be researched by criminologists, and while some aspects have aged and evolved, the fundamental aspects of the theory have stood the test of time. The concept of crimefighter or peacekeeper continues to emerge in literature, perhaps especially pertinent due to the shift towards community policing and the duty of care towards the public (Chan, 1996; Paoline et al., 2004). Themes of suspicion, solidarity, masculinity, and mission are echoed in the literature, which will form the basis of the theoretical lens through which, perceptions of autism and experiences can be explored through (Barker, 1999; Brough, Chataway & Briggs, 2016; Crank, 2014; Fielding, 1996; Loader & Mulcahy, 2003; Loftus, 2010; Punch, 2010). While historically, studies have looked at individual features of occupational culture, Paoline (2003) proposes a framework for the theory, drawing together these components, the perceived environment (environmental and operational), the coping mechanisms employed and the outcomes. In adopting this theoretical framework, we can better understand how the police culture shapes perceptions and behaviours, and how best to deliver training and policy reform to ensure that police officers are equipped to deal with autistic individuals with fairness, respect, and equitability, to ensure that they are afforded the same human rights as neurotypical peers.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

This PhD study aims to explore how police occupational culture can be used to view police behaviours and attitudes towards autism, and how autistic individuals perceive the police following experiences as suspects. The purpose of this thesis is to explore whether facets of police occupational culture impact on their approach to autistic suspects, and whether autistic people with direct experiences of the police feel they are treated fairly. This will contribute to the existing knowledge base and inform best practice, with a hope that autistic people are afforded equitable treatment within the criminal justice system. The unique intersection of police occupational culture, procedural justice and autism may help to further our understanding of how the police milieu impacts on the treatment of autistic suspects, and how best to structure future training and policy reform in a way that can overcome any barriers and effect real change.

In order to address this research question, this research will explore *a)* the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of police officers with autistic individuals (particularly as suspects or offenders), *b)* how police occupational culture may frame the actions of police officers during encounters with autistic individuals, *c)* how autistic individuals with direct experience of the criminal justice system perceive their treatment by police, and *d)* any areas not currently covered in autism training, as perceived by police officers.

Hence, the research objectives of this study were:

1. Review the extant empirical research regarding autism and policing and theoretical literature on police occupational culture.
2. Conduct interviews with autistic individuals to explore their experiences and perceptions of the police, and also to guide the research
3. Conduct interviews with serving police officers to examine their knowledge, perceptions and experiences with autistic individuals
4. Analyse data using reflexive thematic analysis to generate and explore themes within the theoretical framework
5. Make suggestions for future research and training improvements

1.2 Thesis Structure

This thesis begins by exploring the literature on Autism Spectrum Condition, common characteristics and traits, historical development and changes to diagnosis guidelines, as well as introducing the gap in knowledge with regards to the police knowledge and understanding of autism. The historical development of autism is important to understand the way in which autism has been understood within research and society; having been labelled as a disorder based on deficits for decades, the struggle to accept the concept of neurodivergence and move towards an inclusive society for the autistic community has been a difficult one. This medical model and deficit-based way of perceiving autism has led to a negative stigma surrounding autism. Comorbidity and gender differences in autism are discussed with reference to how these add to the potential vulnerability of autistic individuals during contact with the police. Offending behaviour with autism is explored, and culpability for criminality, helping to contextualise the possible police interactions as a suspect. Past studies exploring autism within the criminal justice system are discussed, framing the gap in knowledge for the current study.

The next section of the literature review explores perceived procedural justice literature, and how this applies to autistic individuals who have encounters with the criminal justice system. Perceived procedural justice allows us to understand how experiences with the police can shape future perceptions, beliefs of and trust in the police as a legitimate organisation. The few extant studies on perceived procedural justice and the autistic community are discussed, and gaps in knowledge are identified. Finally, the literature review goes on to explore the extant literature on police occupational, both classical works and moving on to contemporary discussions. Despite the age of the early studies, they hold importance as the fundamental roots of occupational culture, and some of the concepts are still very relevant today. The contemporary literature provides a more refined approach to studying culture, and important critiques of the traditional monolithic nature of early studies is discussed. Key themes within contemporary occupational culture provide a framework to explore how police culture might influence interactions with autistic individuals, particularly suspects. Procedural justice provides an important theoretical insight when discussing police experiences with autistic suspects; the manner in which these interactions are handled has lasting effects on not only the individuals, but

on society's perception of the police legitimacy and hence, their cooperation (Bradford, Huq, Jackson & Roberts, 2014; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Watson & Angell, 2007). This theoretical approach has not yet been applied to any research seeking to explore police training, knowledge and experiences of autism, and results in a unique study which is able to make informed suggestions about the future of training schemes.

Chapter 3 thoroughly discusses the methodology of this study and the methods utilised. This study uses semi-structured interviews with both police officers and custody staff, and autistic individuals who have direct experience of being arrested by the police. Police participants were primarily recruited by developing connections with key 'gate-keepers' within the police force, and the support of The College of Policing, The National Police Autism Association, and various research and charity groups, such as The Neurodivergence in Criminal Justice Network, who forwarded the study details to their members. The direct experience sample group were recruited by word-of-mouth, and online study advertisements on social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). All participant interviews took place online, transcribed and transferred to NVivo for analysis. Chapter 4 goes on to discuss the analysis process, using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020; 2021).

The findings of the police participants are explored in Chapter 4, with main themes (*perceptions of disability, understanding of autism, barriers to equitable treatment, insufficient training, occupational culture* and *ability to adapt procedures)* and sub-themes discussed. These main themes were found to have interactions with each other, which is explored in the following discussion chapter. Chapter 5 explores the findings of the direct experience group, with main themes identified: *Vulnerabilities during police encounter, culpability, procedural justice* and *suggestions for improvement.*

Chapter 6 critically discusses the findings of this study with relation to the extant literature in the topic area, summarising the unique contribution of this thesis, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis and findings, and finally, Chapter 8 discusses recommendations and future research.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review chapter is to explore and evaluate the extant literature in the topic areas, in order to establish the context of this thesis within the existing literature base. While this area has been rapidly expanding for the last few years, much of the autism and policing literature and research focuses on certain areas of the criminal justice process; custody, interviewing and court trials. However, research has found that autistic people report being unhappy with their experiences of initial police contact (Crane et al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). This thesis firstly explores the extant literature on Autism Spectrum Condition, common characteristics and traits, historical development and changes to diagnosis guidelines, as well as introducing the gap in knowledge with regards to the police knowledge and understanding of autism. The historical development of autism is important to understand the way in which autism has been understood within research and society; having been labelled as a disorder based on deficits for decades, the struggle to accept the concept of neurodivergence and move towards an inclusive society for the autistic community has been a difficult one. This medical model and deficit-based way of perceiving autism has led to a negative stigma surrounding autism. Comorbidity and gender differences in autism are discussed with reference to how these add to the vulnerability of autistic individuals during contact with the police. Offending behaviour with autism is explored, and culpability for criminality, helping to contextualise the possible police interactions as a suspect. Past studies exploring autism within the criminal justice system are discussed, framing the gap in knowledge for the current study.

Please note, that occasionally within this thesis, the term 'neurodivergence' will be used as an umbrella term to refer to a number of conditions, such as autism spectrum condition, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, developmental disorders and cognitive impairments. While this study refers specifically to autism, 'neurodiversity' is a term used by a lot of papers and governmental reviews when referring to the above group of conditions, and indeed by autistic people wishing to embrace their differences and individuality within society (Bottema-Beutel, Kapp, Lester, Sasson & Hand, 2021; Saunders, 2018). It is argued to be a more empowering term for those with autism, shunning the negative connotations of 'difference', and challenging the

notion that the aforementioned conditions, including autism, are disorders that require treatment or curing, and moving away from the medical model typically used in society (Woods, 2017). Indeed, the neurodiversity debate has become a core concept within discussions about the treatment, rights, and ways of life for autistic people, and with that has come controversy (Hughes, 2020). While it is not in the remit of this thesis to discuss at length the ways in which discourse impacts on research and society, it is something that the researcher was mindful of throughout the project. This thesis will use the term *neurodiverse* when referring to multiple different conditions, and otherwise will use autism for clarity throughout the project and without prejudice. While my previous academic writing has followed the norm in literature, which is to use person-first language (e.g., 'person with autism'), there was a conscious decision to write this thesis using identity-first language. After having consulted the autistic participants involved in this research, as well as the consultants who helped to check my research materials for accessibility, and previous researchers, identity-first language was the preferred representation in discourse (Kapp et al., 2013; Beardon, 2017; Milton, 2017). Indeed, it may have been easier to continue following the medicalised language utilised in other literature, but throughout this research, I learned more about the history of disability and the impact that language in discourse has on individuals. This also had an effect on how I perceived research, policy and influenced my perceptions throughout the research process. While this change in writing may seem a small gesture, it is reflective of my hope for a pathway to more inclusive academic literature that supports the neurodiversity movement.

2.1 Autism Spectrum Condition

2.1.1 Introduction

Autism Spectrum Condition (hereafter 'autism'), is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, diagnosed in 1 in 59 people, which can have diverse characteristics and severity (Baio et al., 2018; Fakhoury, 2015). Named a 'spectrum' condition, because while autistic people share core characteristics, there is much variability in the presentation of these characteristics (Veselinova, 2014). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) is the standard manual used to diagnose health and mental conditions by healthcare professionals in the USA. The UK also uses the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 11 (ICD-11). The DSM-5 defines autism as the

presence of rigid, repetitive behaviours, and persistent impairments in social communication and imagination (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013). Similarly, the ICD-11 characterises autism as 'persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication, and by a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour and interests' (6A02, ICD-11, World Health Organization, 2018).

The DSM-5 brought about significant changes for autism diagnosis. Previously, the DSM-IV had distinguished between four different pervasive developmental disorders (DPP); Asperger's Syndrome, Autistic Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and DPP not otherwise specified (DPP-NOS). The DSM-5 now uses 'Autism Spectrum Disorders' as an umbrella term for all of these sub-groups. This change was justified by the APA because the separate diagnoses were being applied differently across different clinics, resulting in inconsistent diagnoses using the manual. It was anticipated that the broadening of the autism diagnosis would result in a more standardised manual and improved diagnosis of autism without affecting the sensitivity of the data (*DSM-5 Autism Spectrum Disorder Fact Sheet*, 2013; Swedo et al., 2012). However, many reports have criticised the changes, stating that the new criteria are too restrictive, and are not sensitive to Asperger's syndrome and DPP-NOS (Gibbs et al., 2012; Mattila et al., 2011; Mazefsky, McPartland, Gastgeb, & Minshew, 2012; McPartland, Reichow, & Volkmar, 2012). Not only does this change endanger the identity and labels of those previously diagnosed with sub-group disorders (such as Asperger's syndrome), but also may well affect the diagnosis statistics, and result in issues when comparing data and studies from pre- and post-DSM-V (Grant & Nozyce, 2013; McPartland et al., 2012; Wing, Gould & Gillberg, 2011). It is also suggested that the new criteria in the DSM-5 pose a risk of misdiagnosis for females, as the inclusion of the new disorder – Social Communication Disorder (SCD), which shares similar criteria as autism but with the exclusion of restrictive and repetitive behaviours (Tanguay, 2011). As females already find it more difficult to receive a diagnosis due to masking or camouflaging their atypical behaviours (see below for more detail on gender and autism), they are more likely to be misdiagnosed with SCD.

The impairments are still often described in terms of the 'triad of impairments', despite the DSM-5 moving social communication and interaction under the same criteria (National Autistic Society, n.d.; Wing, 1996):

- Social Communication – challenges speaking with and understanding other people
- Social Interaction – difficulties understanding and recognising how other people feel
- Social Imagination – unable to understand the thoughts of others, or alternatives to their own understanding

Simon Baron-Cohen's work on Theory of Mind (ToM) has long been a central theoretical tenet within literature on autism and perception (Baren-Cohen et al., 1985). ToM refers to the ability to understand that others may have different beliefs, perspectives, and intentions than your own. Therefore, according to ToM and the DSM-5 diagnosis criteria, autistic individuals lacking these social skills have impaired ToM and have difficulty imagining the feelings, intentions and perspectives of other people, and using this information to predict future behaviours. This is often discussed with relation to autism as a 'lack of empathy'. However, there has been growing criticism in this framing of autism as social and empathetic deficits and impaired ToM; one pertinent argument is that these impairments are measured against neurotypical normative standards and are therefore inaccurate and disempowering to autistic populations (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019; Milton, 2012, 2018; Reveley & Dickie, 2023). Rather, Milton (2018) suggests that it is equally difficult for a neurotypical person to interpret situations from an autistic perspective.

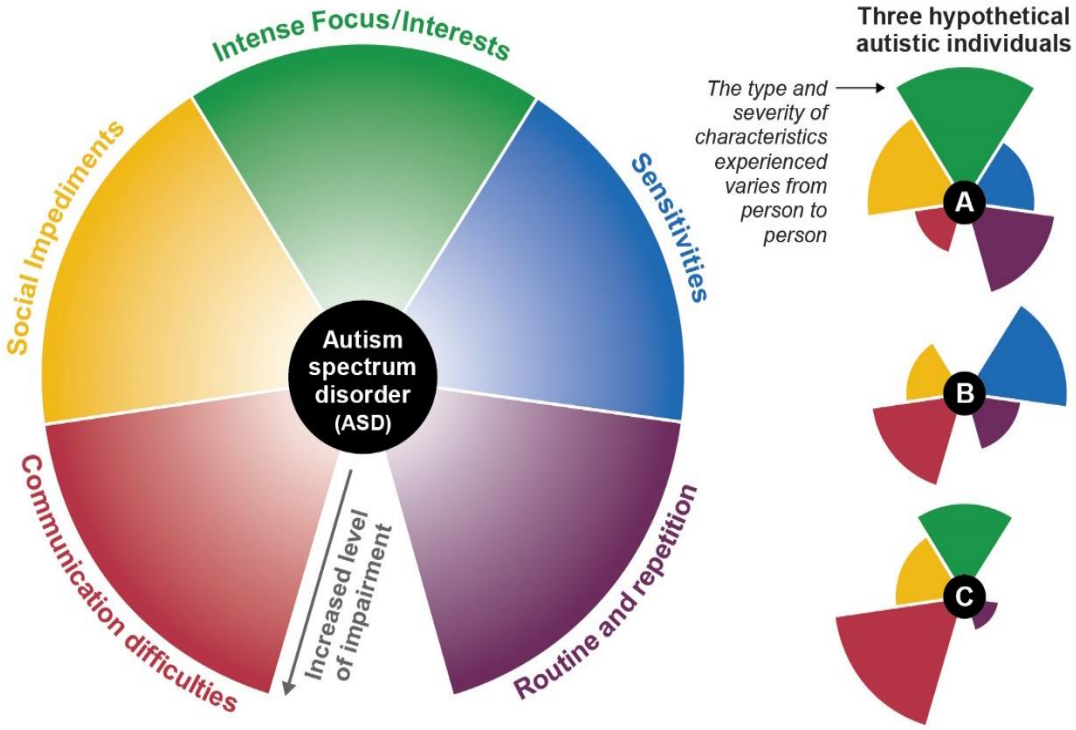
Double Empathy theory essentially suggests that when two people have different life experiences, they will have challenges in understanding each other. Conversely, if two people have shared experiences, they are more likely to understand one another and share a connection. Heyworth (2020) explains that the differences in autistic experiences contribute to an 'empathy divide', which is experienced by both parties (an autistic person and a neurotypical person). While this divide is experienced by both parties, it unequally affects them; each side lacks insight into the other's culture, but neurotypical people are not expected to learn, understand and adapt to autistic culture and perceptions (Milton, 2012; Reveley & Dickie, 2023). By challenging the notion of ToM, double empathy theory

reframes differences between autistic and neurotypical people's perceptions and interpretations as just that: difference.

Many believe that the spectrum exists in a linear, 'mild to severe' sense, and that individuals lie somewhere on that sliding scale, but that is not true. The below diagram provides a good illustration of why autism is referred to as a 'spectrum' condition (GAO, 2017). Rather than a linear scale, an autistic individual can have any combination of impairments, to any different severities, which understandably, makes it very difficult to identify and diagnose.

Figure 1. *Variation in Autism Spectrum Condition Characteristics*

GAO grouped the characteristics associated with autism into five broad categories, with some overlap between categories.



Source: GAO analysis of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). | GAO-17-109

Autistic people can present socially differently to the neurotypical population, such as avoidance of eye contact, challenges with sensory stimulations of different types (such as touch or light), obsessive routines and challenges with motor skills and gait (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Chiang, 2008; Delafield et al., 2018; Hill & Frith, 2003; Teitelbaum et al., 1998; Turner, 1999). Not only can these behaviours cause the individual challenges in social situations with neurotypical people, but they can also be misinterpreted as suspicious to police. This can render them particularly vulnerable if they encounter the criminal justice

system and might even be the reason that the contact occurs in the first place (Clare & Gudjonsson, 1993; Haas & Gibbs 2020).

Possible autistic behaviours that might appear as suspicious or 'guilty' are:

- Avoidance of eye contact
- Inappropriate facial expressions or emotional reactions to situations
- Echolalia, or repeating words or sentences out of context
- Avoidance of touch or escapism (fleeing from an encounter)
- Self-stimulatory behaviours (such as hand flapping or rocking)

To those with little or no knowledge of autism, these behaviours alone could be perceived as suspicious, evasive, arrogant or suggestive of being under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Hepworth, 2017; Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020). However, if these behaviours are presented at the same time as the police wanting to stop and speak with an autistic person, there is opportunity for the encounter to escalate into one with negative outcomes. To give an example, if the police were to arrive at the scene of a crime, and be met by an individual who will not answer questions, avoids eye contact and visibly flinches, or runs away when the officer tries to place a hand on their arm, it is easy to imagine that the police officer's reaction would be to detain the individual, by force if necessary. However, in doing so, it is entirely possible that the autistic individual may react in an atypical and unexpected manner. The sense of touch may be hyper-sensitive for somebody with autism and may be physically painful and cause psychological trauma (Bogdashina, 2003; Nyx et al., 2013).

Being up to seven times more likely to experience contact with the criminal justice system than a neurotypical peer, it is vital their risk of vulnerability is minimised and that they are dealt with fairly and equitably, and to ensure that their human rights are not violated (Debbaudt, 2004; Hepworth, 2017; Ortoleva, 2011). However, this does not appear to be the case in the UK or USA. Reports and academic literature propose that the criminal justice system in England and Wales is ill-equipped to deal with autistic individuals (Browning & Caulfield, 2011; Crane, Maras, Hawken, Mulcahy & Memon, 2016; Dickie & Dorrity, 2018; Holloway et al., 2020). While the topic of autism within the criminal justice

system is becoming recognised as an important area of research, there are still significant gaps in literature and knowledge. Railey *et al* (2020a) conducted a PRISMA systematic review of extant literature regarding law enforcement officer's training regarding autism, following the systematic review process suggested by Kahn *et al* (2003). Carried out in 2018 across 13 relevant databases and 28 journals, the search returned 606 papers using the search terms *autis*, officer,* and *training*. These were then assessed for relevance and inclusion of empirical data, which yielded a final result of only two papers. While the majority of the 606 papers were related or transferrable to autism and law enforcement training, they did not address it specifically – such as those which focus on the autistic experiences and perceptions of police encounters, or studies which examined knowledge of disabilities in general. This demonstrates the lack of research within this field specific to police officer training and knowledge regarding autism, which this project aims to add to.

Railey *et* al (2020b) carried out a second PRISMA systematic review of extant literature, broken down into five subsections; *prevalence of autism within criminal justice system settings, characteristics of autism in criminal justice system, autism experiences and perceptions of the criminal justice system, interviewing autistic individuals within the criminal justice system, and knowledge, perceptions, training, and awareness of criminal justice system professionals related to autism*. The search was also carried out in 2018, across 13 databases and 28 journals, and returned 678 articles, which were refined to 55 articles after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Within the final section, knowledge, perceptions, training and awareness of criminal justice system professionals, they found 12 articles of relevance, only four of which were carried out in the UK. Of these four articles, only three were exploring police officer's experiences with autistic suspects, and all used online or postal survey methods. This identifies that despite the increased interest in this area, there remains a gap in literature of qualitative, in-depth studies into police officer's knowledge, perceptions and training on autism, particularly from a criminological approach. It is, of course, possible that these two PRISMA reviews may have not successfully identified all of the published research within the topic area, despite following the strict protocol for the review and the broad search terms used. Both reviews only considered papers that were published in the English language, which may have omitted some results. However, the literature review carried out for this project agrees

with their findings. Although the topic area seems to be gaining more attention over the past five years, there is still a significant lack of rich, qualitative empirical research, particularly with a criminological perspective. As the police are usually the first point of contact with the criminal justice system, it is essential that they can effectively and appropriately deal with all members of society, including those with disabilities in a manner which ensures due process and the protection of their human rights. This literature review will explore extant literature on the autism and how certain autism characteristics, or features can provide the context of vulnerability for engaging in offending or violent behaviour.

2.1.2 Framing Neurodiversity – Models of Disability

MEDICAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

As the name of the model suggests, the medical model has informed the majority of treatments, interventions and strategies for disabilities (Massoumeh & Leila, 2012). It frames disability as being the result of a health condition, neurological dysfunction, biological error or some such diagnosable cause (Brittain, 2004). Such as with ill health, any impairments (such as a missing limb, or a learning difficulty) are viewed as something which requires fixing, so that the individual can fit into the standards dictated by society (Brandon & Pritchard, 2011; Chamak, 2008; Forhan, 2009). Encouraging us to focus on the deficits that the individual has, rather than their abilities or strengths, it provides a dichotomous framework; people are either disabled, or they are not (Mitra, 2006). It is through this narrative that they are defined by their impairment, and when this occurs, it influences the perceptions of non-disabled people (Fitzgerald, 2006).

The medical model encourages a focus on the aetiology; autism becomes an epidemic that has a cause which needs to be cured, whereby the disability is located *within* the person, and the solution is external (Areheart, 2008; Pellicano & Stears, 2011; Russell, Kelly, & Golding, 2010; Shyman, 2016). Although this focus is appropriate for certain disabilities, it has led to criticisms of the model due to the underlying assumptions that disability is not normal, and not wanted (Shyman, 2013; 2016). If the dichotomy of *disabled* and *non-disabled* is adopted, then it provokes a subtle social dichotomy of *normal* and *abnormal;* disability becomes a deviation from social norms and gains negative connotations. When the impairment cannot be cured, such as autism, the individual is

perceived to be in need of help from charities and such, rather than from adaptations in society (Roush & Sharby, 2011). Within the medical model, it is presumed that any barriers that the disabled person faces are from their impairment, rather than from socio-economic or political environments, or physical conditions.

Critics also argue that this approach creates a power imbalance between those whom have a disability and those with access to the 'cure' or treatment, hence creating a social hierarchy of which disabled people would be placed at the bottom (Shyman, 2016). Any doctor, medical professional or even teacher, who oversees the treatment possesses influence and control over the person with an impairment, and can act as gatekeepers in society (Humpage, 2007). These gatekeepers can have a serious influence on the options presented to the individual and may not be acting with the desires or interests of the individual in mind when they make decisions about their care, which can leave the individual feeling as if they have few options or no agency (Humpage, 2007; Barton, 2009). This feeling of a lack of options and agency can be compounded by the way that the person's goals and dreams are discussed (Brittain, 2004). When the notions of *disability* and *sickness* are conflated, which it is argued that the medical model may contribute to, the expectations of disabled people are significantly lowered (Brittain, 2004). For example, in a school environment, if an autistic child aspires to be a television presenter when they grow up, this might be in direct conflict with common perceptions of autism. This might result in the child being mocked for their dream, due to stigmas of autistic communication deficits, due to the deficiency-based focus and definitions by the medical model.

Indeed, it is this model that many of today's autism therapies and interventions are based on. Applied behavioural analysis (ABA), one of the more common UK autism therapies, adopts scientific trials and data methods to modify an individual's behaviour with an outcome-based intervention. In ABA therapy, the therapist trains the individual to exhibit socially desirable behaviours, rewarded with a chosen positive reinforcer. For example, the 'patient' may be rewarded with a short game of catch, in return for successfully completing a literacy task. In this way, it is argued that this framework gives the therapist almost total power over the patient (Shyman, 2016). All reinforcements are given at the discretion of the therapist, despite organisational definitions and standardised training plans, and the therapy requires no individual consent from the patient. This

therapy, similarly to other behaviour modification interventions, defines the chosen and developed natural behaviours as dysfunctional, because they do not meet societal norms.

Such interventions have come under fire from autistic activists for labelling natural behaviours as dysfunctional and forcing autistic individuals to adopt 'normal' behaviours. Broderick (2011) posits that interventions such as ABA, and the underlying medical model, frame autism as the 'enemy'; autism is conceptualized as either an *epidemic* and the therapy becomes the rehabilitation. This framing can make parents of autistic children feel that they ought to enlist an intervention such as ABA. And so, the autistic child has their agency removed, and has their natural behaviours trained out of them, despite how they feel about them. The medical model makes this justification possible, by framing disabilities as pathological conditions which can be cured. In a society where neurotypical people are the norm, it is their needs that are most considered, with those who are neurodiverse having to either change themselves to 'fit', or being the 'outsiders' (Owren & Stenhammer, 2013). Hence, this perpetuates the medical model of disability, which adopts the assumption that disabilities should be fixed in order to be more 'normal' (Lewiecki-Wilson, et al., 2008). The neurodiversity movement is challenging that assumption, and encourages difference to be accepted and celebrated, not as *disorders*, but as *difference* by aligning with the social model of disability (Beardon, 2007).

Social Model of Disability

Whereas the medical model was developed by professionals with a focus on symptom reduction, normalization and treatment of deficits, the social model was developed by disability activists and British scholars as a counter to the medical model (Baker, 2011; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). The medical model tends to be followed by parents of autistic people, with autistic people themselves favouring the social model (Bagatell, 2010; Chamak, 2008; Orsini & Smith, 2010). There are several different sub-models within the social model of disability – the discrimination version, independent living version, human variant version, impairment version, social constructionist version, and the neurodiversity version (Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman & Hutman, 2012; Mitra, 2006). Each sub-model has slight variances in language and definitions, but for the purpose of this thesis, the social model will be discussed in general terms, as one model.

While the social model does not ignore the existence of disabilities, it shifts the emphasis from the physical impairments towards the obstacles in society which present restrictions (Oliver, 1996). By switching this focus, disability is therefore caused by society, rather than the condition. It makes a clear distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability': 'impairment' is defined as lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body", whereas 'disability' is defined as "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (UPIAS, 1976, p14). The 'normal' environments and processes that society has constructed are discriminatory and exclude those with impairments, and so it is proposed that the disability is created by society (Bingham et al., 2013; Brandon & Pritchard, 2011). This 'disabled' label created by society serves to segregate those with a disability, separating them from the mainstream education, work, and society (Owens, 2015). The struggle to fit into neurotypical standards and expectations within society is difficult and exhausting for autistic people and may lead to stress and higher rates of suicide (Beardon, 2017).

2.1.3 Comorbidity

Autistic people can also have co-occurring mental and/or physical conditions, and the autistic population is thought to have a higher prevalence of comorbid psychiatric conditions than the general population (Cawthorpe, 2016; Dawson et al., 2009; Lai et al., 2019; Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2007; Roper et al., 2003). A comorbid condition is a second diagnosis, which presents different symptoms than the first diagnosis. Mannion, Leader and Healy (2013) found that of 89 autistic children and adolescents surveyed 78.7% had a comorbid condition such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, epilepsy, psychopathy, sleep problems or gastrointestinal symptoms. The most common co-existing condition is an intellectual disability, with studies suggesting that the prevalence of both an intellectual disability and autism is 3 to 5% of the general population (Srivastava and Schwartz, 2014), with research suggesting that the prevalence of a comorbid intellectual disability in the autistic population could be anywhere between 16.7 to 84% (Postorino et al., 2016). The display of atypical movements or gait in autistic children were also found to be more common than in neurotypical matched peers,

suggesting mobility differences for some autistic individuals (Delafield-Butt et al., 2018; Ming et al., 2007; Teitelbaum et al., 1998). The existence of comorbid conditions may further complicate an autistic person's encounter with the police; either by confounding difficulties during the initial encounter, or by putting the individual at a higher risk during the encounter (Howlin, 2004; Heeramun et al., 2015).

The presence of mental illness alone presents a risk during police encounters, without any complications from autism or other forms of neurodivergence. Those with mental health conditions are suggested to be more vulnerable to police use of violence, coercion, and arrest, compared with those without (Johnson, 2011; Kane et al., 2018). During police interactions, they are also more likely to show levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and suggestibility (Geijsen, Ruiter & Kap, 2018). Those with mental illness disorders alongside autism are likely to be in an even more vulnerable position (Burns et al., 2016; Croen et al. 2015; Levy et al. 2010; Taylor et al., 2019; Thoresen et al., 2015).

Physical disabilities and health conditions are also common comorbidities alongside autism, such as deafness, blindness, motor impairments, Down Syndrome seizures and obesity (Curtin et al., 2010; Matson et al., 2011; Ming et al., 2007 Rydzewska et al., 2018). These co-occurring disabilities are often more likely to be noticed by others, and there is a risk that they may over-shadow or mask the autism. Autistic people are more likely to have depression and anxiety disorders than non-autistic people and are twice as likely to have eating disorders (Sedgewick, Leppanen & Tchanturia, 2020). If this is the case during an encounter with the police, the officer may make adjustments for the noticed disability or impairment and may fail to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate the individual's autism. This puts the autistic individual in a vulnerable position during the encounter, open to distress, trauma and lasting harm, as well as miscarriages of justice (Hepworth, 2017; Nyx et al., 2013). Additionally, a comorbid condition may prevent the individual from being engaged with the encounter and may give the impression of nonchalance towards the seriousness of the situation (Haas & Gibbs, 2020). Comorbidity is one of the intersecting factors which make identifying autism more difficult for police officers, and has the potential to negatively impact on police interactions with autistic individuals.

2.1.4 Sex and Gender Differences

While autism is diagnosed in both male and female populations, it is significantly more prevalent in males; around four males are diagnosed with autism for every female (Brugha, McManus, Bankart, Scott, Purdon et al., 2011; Fombonne 2009; Giarelli et al., 2010; Loomes, Hull, & Mandy, 2017; Volkmar, Szatmari, & Sparrow, 1993). Although there is limited research on the characteristics of autism within females, it is widely thought that females present autistic symptoms differently to males (the 'female autism phenotype'), and that they mask their social behaviours and adopt 'camouflaging' techniques, perhaps due to an increased social gender expectations placed on females during development (Cridland et al., 2014; Haney, 2016; Hull et al., 2020; Wood-Downie et al., 2021). This camouflaging or masking leads to autistic females being diagnosed much later in life, or not at all, and is reported to be exhausting to perpetually maintain (Hull et al., 2017; Hull & Petrides, 2017; Rivet & Matson, 2011). It is also believed that autistic characteristics differ in females, with females not exhibiting stereotypical repetitive behaviours to the extent that autistic males do but displaying more significant behavioural and cognitive issues, though this is contested in recent studies (Dworzynski, Ronald, Bolton, & Happé, 2012; Wood-Downie, 2021). Autistic females are likely to be more passive in social situations and have a tendency to mimic others (Lai et al., 2015). This presents vulnerability in interactions with the police, as they may not fully understand what is happening legally but might imitate others they have seen in order to 'blend in' with the situation; this could be others in the current environment or people they have seen on television, and could have detrimental effects on their situation without them realising the consequences.

The DSM-5 provides a statement addressing this gender bias; autistic females without comorbid intellectual disabilities or language delays may go completely unrecognised, due to the subtler difficulties in communication and social skills (APA, 2013, p.57). In order for females to meet the diagnostic criteria for autism, they are required to present a greater severity of autistic symptoms (Russell et al., 2010). This difference has great impact on not only the diagnosis of autistic females and their ability to access support, but whether the autism is identified by people, particularly criminal justice professionals (Smith et al., 2020). As autism research, literature and medical practice has largely been centred around White males, there is still a dearth of knowledge regarding

females, and non-White autistic individuals and symptomology (Christensen et al., 2016; Matthews, 2019). Despite the almost identical prevalence of autism in a study of Black and White eight-year-old children, official prevalence rates do not reflect this similarity in prevalence between race (Baio et al., 2018; Travers & Krezmien, 2018). Systematic reviews have suggested several problems that autistic minorities face, such as barriers to accessing support services (Smith et al., 2020), health disparities (Bishop-Fitzpatrick & Kind, 2017), and poor gender and non-binary focused services (Glidden et al., 2017; Loomes & Mandy, 2017; Øien et al., 2018). Although this study is not focused on one specific gender over another, nor one race over another, it is important to acknowledge these issues within the literature, and how that presents itself as an intersecting factor in police interactions. Not acknowledging these factors of multiculturalism, gender and race will compromise the research, and reflect a lack of awareness of the issues that these factors can cause (Dyches et al., 2004; Wilder, Jackson & Smith, 2001).

2.1.5 Offending Behaviour and Culpability

It is a contentious subject to discuss whether autism is linked to higher rates of criminal behaviour, or a predisposition to offending behaviours (see Allely & Faccini, 2018; Faccini & Allely, 2017; Chown et al., 2018). However, this thesis cannot ignore literature on the topic when discussing the vulnerability of autistic individuals within the criminal justice system. This topic carries tension, in part, due to the sensationalism of media stories about criminal acts committed by autistic individuals in previous years and the lasting impact that has on the perception of autism (Brewer et al., 2017; Del Pozzo et al., 2018). Previous literature is conflicting – studies claim that autism is over-represented within the prisons, which naturally infers that this is also true of police encounters (Allen et al., 2007; Hare et al., 1999; Myers, 2004; Scragg & Shah, 1994; Siponmaa et al., 2001). However, reviews of academic research propose that there is no evidence to conclude autistic individuals are any more likely to commit criminal acts than the general population (King & Murphy, 2014; Mourisden, 2011; Woodbury-Smith et al., 2006). However, some studies suggest that there are certain crimes that autism may lean towards certain types of crime, such as sex offences (Cheely et al., 2012; Kumagami & Matsuura, 2009), arson (Hare et al.,1999), drug offences (Allen, 2008) or assault (Cheely et al., 2012). This can be due to their obsessive interests (Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2004; Haskins & Silva, 2006;

Helverschou et al., 2015; Woodbury-Smith et al., 2010), failure to acknowledge consequences (Howlin, 2004) or misunderstanding of rules and laws (Allen et al., 2008). Allen *et al* (2008) suggest that from a small sample, violent behaviours were as a response to an increase in stress, with an inability to communicate or relieve that stress successfully. A larger sample of autistic youths and adults followed by researchers over the course of 12-18 months found that 16% had involvement with the police during the study period (Tint et al., 2017). Most of these interactions were reported to be due to verbal or physical aggression, which were then escalated to involve police. These aggressive behaviours, as explored earlier in this chapter, can be due to autistic symptomology, and a frustration with communication deficits. Should the police officers attending not have knowledge of autism, these autistic behaviours may be criminalised in situations where they could be de-escalated with the appropriate responses.

Some consideration must be given to the possibility that these offenders in studies may have also been diagnosed with comorbid disorders or have additional extenuating circumstances in the act of crime. Autistic people can be vulnerable to 'mate crimes' a subcategory of hate crime, in which they are taken advantage of by others to commit crimes for them (Thomas, 2011). Mate crimes can include servitude, exploitation, humiliation, acts of cruelty and theft, and are often carried out by a perpetrator familiar to the victim (Quarmby, 2011). It is thought that autistic people are disproportionately targeted for mate crimes; a survey by the Wirral Autistic Society (2015) surveyed autistic adults and found that over 80% had experienced being the victim of a mate crime. In these types of crime, the victim can also be guilty of carrying out criminal activity, persuaded or coaxed into doing so by the perpetrator of the 'mate crimes'. For example, a 15-year-old autistic schoolboy was found to have been trafficked by a gang in Swansea in 2021, exploited into transporting illegal drugs across county borders (Lewis, 2021). In situations such as this, there is potential for the victim of a mate crime to be arrested for criminal acts carried out. If the individual being subjected to mate crimes does not have the ability to articulate this position to an arresting police officer, and in turn, the police officer does not investigate the circumstances of the autistic individual, it is possible that the autistic victim might enter the criminal justice system without ever having realised that they have committed any wrongdoing.

Additionally, autistic traits have been related to cyber-crime in literature, with studies suggesting that autistic individuals, particularly male, are at risk of committing acts of cyber-crime (Payne et al., 2019; 2020). The findings of these studies identified a number of themes in the motivation to engage in offending behaviour, such as a lack of understanding, entertainment, an interest in cyber skills and the majority of the participants referenced peer influence as a motivator. That peer influence was reported to be both from encouragement and support from friends, and also from a lack of social engagement. This suggests that autistic individuals may be particularly susceptible to social influences in many different ways when it comes to offending behaviour.

There are also risk factors for offending that have been identified within vulnerable populations, such as the autistic population, as well as in the general population. Autistic samples of offenders have reported prevalence rates of 13 – 83% for comorbid psychiatric diagnoses, with psychotic and personality disorders among the most common reported disorders (Allen et al., 2008; Helverschou et al., 2015; Långström et al., 2009; Søndenaa et al., 2014). In the general population, family and childhood adversity is a well-researched risk factor in offending behaviour, with many different potential factors such as socio-economic status, parental offending (Murray et al., 2013), childhood abuse (Cuadra et al., 2014; Reckdenwald et al., 2013) and being placed into foster care (Derzon, 2010). These factors have also been found within autistic samples; lower family income, separation, and parental offending have been suggested to increase the likelihood of violent offending (Heeramun et al., 2017; Helverschou et al., 2015). With 29% of autistic children having been placed into foster homes, or institutional care, this risk factor is particularly pertinent within the autistic population (Helverschou et al., 2015). Substance abuse is also a factor in both the general and autistic population, with autistic individuals more likely to suffer from substance abuse than neurotypical individuals (Joshi et al., 2013; McManus et al., 2016). Studies have found that substance abuse was a factor in up to 38% of autistic offender's cases (Allen et al., 2008; Helverschou et al., 2015; Søndenaa et al, 2014). Another commonly associated risk factor within offending is conduct problems and disorder. Autistic individuals, as explored earlier in this chapter, can present behavioural difficulties such as overactivity, aggressive behaviours, and destructive behaviour (Allen et al., 2008). These conduct problems are reported to be an increased risk factor within the

autistic population than within the general population, that when combined with other risk factors and potential comorbid diagnoses, provide significant risk of offending behaviour (Allen et al., 2008; Payne et al., 2021; White et al., 2009). Of course, these risk factors are rarely found in isolation; they are often co-existing and can interact with each other.

A study using mock jurors explored the influence that an autistic diagnosis disclosure has on a jury in a case of aggressive behaviour involving a male, having been given a vignette to read which referred to behaviours consistent with autistic symptomology when reacting to a high-stress environment and disruption to routine (based on previous published research) (Maras, Marshall & Sands, 2018). The mock jurors were split into two groups, one was told about the autism diagnosis and given details about the traits and characteristics of autism, while the other group was not given any information about the autism diagnosis or information. The group given the autism information responded more empathetically to the defendant, and treated his autism as a mitigating factor, while the second group perceived the defendant as rude, deceitful, aggressive and unremorseful. The group given information perceived that the autistic defendant was less culpable of the charged crimes, and were more likely to issue a 'not guilty' verdict, with more lenient sentencing given. In the thematic analysis of open questions, the participants in the group without information suggested that punishment was necessary for the crime in order to act as a deterrent for society, whereas the information group expressed concerns that any punishment would have on the individual, instead recommending that rehabilitation would be more beneficial to the autistic defendant. This study demonstrates the effects that disclosure of an autism diagnosis can have on people's perceptions and reactions to interactions, and has findings consistent with those suggested in previous studies (Berryessa, 2016; Berryessa et al., 2015). Maras *et al* conclude that the disclosure of an autism diagnosis is important to lead reasonable adjustments so that a fair trial can be ensured, and human rights are not breached (p.1004). As police officers are in positions of power, with the ability to remove a civilian's liberty, it is imperative that they are able to identify vulnerability, or have procedures in place to encourage individuals to disclose their diagnosis so that they are able to adjust their reactions accordingly.

2.1.6 Autism within the Criminal Justice System

INITIAL POLICE CONTACT

Contact with the police can be intimidating for any individual, but for autistic people, it is riddled with opportunities for distress, misunderstanding and potential miscarriages of justice. Due to the nature of autism; the differences in communication styles, sensory challenges, and an impairment of social skills and understanding (as judged by societal norms); autistic individuals are a particularly vulnerable population within the criminal justice system. The autistic traits and behaviours can be misinterpreted by police officers, which can put them at a disadvantage during an interaction and could be the reason for the initial contact. If the police encounter an individual while on patrol, who avoids eye contact with them, doesn't verbally answer when spoken to, and tries to escape the situation, they are likely to suspect that the person has something to hide, and seek to arrest this person to investigate further. This may escalate a situation, in which the autistic person simply had communication difficulties and was displaying avoidant behaviours. Similarly, if the police are searching for a suspect for a crime, these apparent 'guilty' behaviours may put the individual at risk of becoming a suspect, simply for their neurodivergence (Salerno & Schuller, 2020). These encounters can cause distress and psychological trauma, as well as physical harm to the autistic individual (Nyx et al., 2013). This will likely have a negative impact on the individual's perception of the police, which could influence future decisions regarding the police (Cascardi et al. 2000; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Livingston et al. 2014; Watson & Angell 2007).

The initial points in a criminal investigation rely heavily on social communication, theory of mind, social imagination and the ability to form relationships – all domains which can be 'impaired' to varying degrees in autistic people (Young & Brewer, 2019). Failure to make appropriate adjustments to accommodate autistic suspects could result in discrimination, and a violation of articles 5 and 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998: their rights to liberty and to a fair trial (Allely & Cooper, 2017; Hepworth, 2017). Howlin (2004) outlined specific circumstances in which an autistic individual more likely to perform acts that draw the attention of the police; an inability to recognise that their behaviour has implications for others, lack of social situation understanding, disruption to their routines, a rigid adherence to rules, or pursuing an obsessional interest. Common autistic traits,

such as a lack of eye contact, giving literal or blunt answers, 'inappropriate' emotional responses (laughter during serious moments), could all be interpreted as evasive, morally cold, or defiant reactions and may falsely point to signs of guilt, or result in the individual being labelled as intentionally difficult (Allely & Cooper, 2017; Cea, 2014; Gillberg and Billstedt, 2000; Hartley et al., 2008; Van Maanen, 1978). According to Milton's double empathy theory, this misinterpretation by police officers is more likely to occur if the police officer does not have any direct experience or knowledge of autism and are therefore more reliant on stigmas and stereotypes (Milton, 2012; Patton, 2019). For clarity, in this research, 'stigma' refers to negative stereotypes and assumptions that people may hold. Goffman (1963) defined a stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p.3). Stigma and knowledge have been researched in combination in both knowledge assessment and intervention studies, such as the Autism Stigma and Knowledge Questionnaire (ASK-Q: Harrison et al., 2017; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Ling et al., 2010; Obeid et al., 2015). Researching potential autism stigma alongside knowledge allows us to identify potential knowledge deficits that lead to these negative attitudes. For example, in the ASK-Q questions, items such as *"Autism is preventable"* and "*Most children with autism are extremely impaired and cannot live independently as adults"* are used to measure stigma (Harrison et al., 2017). These stigma and negative assumptions can lead to people being 'othered': they are viewed as being inherently different and therefore treated differently. While this may be that they are provided with accommodations, it may also be that they are treated discriminatorily (Huws & Jones, 2011; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012).

Communication

Equally, during an encounter, an autistic person may not be able to communicate effectively to allay suspicion of the officer. Young and Brewer (2019) conducted a study in which two groups of participants (one autistic, one neurotypical control) were given scenarios to play out in which they were suspected of a crime but had to prove their innocence to a police officer. All scenarios given had key pieces of information which would indicate their innocence of the alleged crime, but they found that the autistic group was significantly less likely to disclose the facts which proved their non-involvement. This suggests that the theory of mind impairment present in autistic people may put people at risk of being wrongly arrested of crimes for which they are innocent. Studies have shown

that the police fail to make the necessary accommodations during arrest and custody to support an autistic suspect, which can leave the individual distressed and at risk of breaches of procedural justice and their human rights, as well as at risk of making a false confession to escape the situation (Crane et al., 2016; Hepworth, 2017; Helverschou et al., 2018; Hollaway et al., 2020; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Woodbury-Smith & Dien, 2014). These necessary accommodations could be anything as simple as turning the lights off, providing a quiet space or ensuring that an appropriate adult is available to confirm that the autistic person understands what is being asked of them (Allen et al., 2018; Crane et al., 2016; Richards & Milne, 2020).

Should an autistic individual be arrested, there are further opportunities for miscommunication, self-incrimination, and miscarriages of justice due to a lack of autism awareness and knowledge. The police caution given to anybody under arrest: "*You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence*.", can be difficult for autistic people to comprehend in both spoken and written form. While the officer will usually ask if the detainee understands this, the individual might answer that they do understand because they believe it is the correct answer, or even because they are repeating what they have heard on television (Salseda et al., 2011). Failure to understand this caution puts an individual at risk of self-incrimination. Studies have shown promise when trialling symbol-based versions of information sheets in custody and would help to ensure the fair treatment of suspects and compliance with Code G within the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) which states that the individual must be given sufficient information so that they can understand why they are being detained (Parsons and Sherwood, 2015; Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 – Code G Revised, 2012). This communication barrier is a challenge that occurs in custody also, presenting risks of miscarriages of justice, although there is more research-based policy in place throughout the custody process (Poyser & Nurse, 2018).

Custody

During the booking in process, it is the role of the custody officer to identify vulnerable detainees and ensure their welfare. It is during this stage that it is determined whether the suspect requires any special accommodations or help while they are in

custody, such as an Appropriate Adult during interviews. An Appropriate Adult is a lay person, independent of the police force, and does not necessitate any prior training or qualifications. The role was introduced in 1984 and is to ensure that the suspect understands what is being asked of them during interviews, and to safeguard the rights, welfare and entitlement of vulnerable individuals in custody (Home Office, 2019). This role also helps to protect the vulnerable individual from misunderstanding questions, and potentially giving unreliable or self-incriminating evidence, while ensuring that the interview is fairly carried out (Cummins, 2007; Medford, Gudjonsson, & Pearse, 2003; Murphy & Clare, 1998; Pierpoint, 2011; Richards & Milne, 2020). This is vital to ensure that due process is followed, making sure that adaptations are made that allow an autistic detainee to have the same rights as a neurotypical peer (Jessiman & Cameron, 2017; King, 1989). Vulnerable adults have themselves expressed the need to have this scheme, and the importance of having somebody to explain what is happening during custody and to aid communication during interviews (Jessiman & Cameron, 2017). Indeed, the results discussed earlier in Young and Brewer's (2019) study support this need for assistance during interviewing for those with autism. In 2018, alongside the update in PACE guidelines, the definition for 'vulnerable adults' was amended to expand to "*any detainee who, because of their mental state or capacity, may not understand the significance of what is said, of questions or of their replies."* (p.14, Home Office, 2017). This new definition means that the police are required to call for an Appropriate Adult if they *suspect* that the detainee may be vulnerable, and no longer must '*believe'* that the individual is vulnerable (Dehaghani & Bath, 2019). However, research consistently finds that this is not the case, and that there are missed opportunities to provide an Appropriate Adult (Bath & Dehaghani, 2020; Dehaghani, 2017; Dent & O'Beirne, 2021; National Appropriate Adult Network, 2015).

Despite the many years since its introduction, including the revision of the PACE guidelines and added definitions for vulnerable adults, and the documented need for the role, it has received criticism on many grounds. There is little consistency between the schemes and provision in police forces (Bath, et al., 2015; Hepworth, 2017; HMIC, 2015; Jessiman & Cameron, 2017). There is also a concern more specifically that under Code C of the PACE guidelines, there are no distinct guidelines regarding the measures that can be

taken to decide if an interview is unacceptable; should behaviours such as persistent questioning, raised voices and sarcasm (which can be especially challenging for autistic individuals) be deemed inappropriate during a police interview (Cummins, 2007; Nemitz & Bean, 2001; White, 2002). Due to the lack of training required to become an Appropriate Adult, acting members may not have an awareness of autism and therefore may not be able to understand how the characteristics of autism might provide risks during the interview (Crane et al., 2016; Richard & Milnes, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, given that it is the custody officer's duty to identify vulnerability and ensure that an Appropriate Adult is provided, a lack of autism awareness and training in this role will severely hinder the ability to identify the need for the scheme to be utilised, hence impacting on the individual's right to a fair trial under Article 6 of the Human Rights Act (1998).

Every person who is arrested and questioned by the police has the right to free legal advice and can request to have a solicitor or paralegal present during questioning. Having a solicitor present during interviews acts as a form of protection for an autistic suspect, who may have communication challenges and offer potentially self-incriminating information without realising. However, it is up to the individual to decide whether they would like to request a solicitor, and there are several reasons why they may choose not to. They might not understand the importance of having a solicitor present or may not want to cause additional stress by having another stranger involved in what is already a confusing and stressful experience (Holloway et al., 2020; Mahoney, 2009). There is also the possibility that an autistic person may want to comply with police officers and speed the process up in order to resolve the situation as quickly as possible and leave (North et al., 2005). Despite the importance that legal advice plays within the custody process, there is currently very little literature on this aspect of the criminal justice system with regards to autistic suspects. This study will not address the provision or role of paralegals or solicitors with regards to autistic suspects, as their provision is not a decision made by police officers but it is important to acknowledge the limited research to date.

A unique study using a 'participative walkthrough' method of the custody process explored the autistic perspective during the process (Holloway et al., 2020). Two autistic participants and three police officers walked through a typical custody encounter at a station within Nottinghamshire police force and were observed and interviewed about

their experiences. The autistic participants reported the experience being negative due to communication barriers, increased feelings of anxiety and emotional impact, and heightened exposure to sensory demands. The authors proposed that the custody process and environment require adjustments in order to support autistic individuals throughout, and to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of autistic suspects in custody, as suggested by previous literature (Crane et al., 2016; Hepworth, 2017). The police officers reported three areas which limited their ability to support autistic individuals in custody: communication barriers, understanding and knowledge of autism, and the custody environment. The officers in interviews stated that the training they had received was online, and focused mostly on mental health, and that they felt that prior experience with autistic individuals would benefit their knowledge of autism and how to adapt situations and communications to better support autistic suspects. The study outlined that although police officers tend to have a good awareness and ability to detect 'differences' and vulnerability in detainees, they were lacking in autism specific training. Although this study is the first to use an interview method with police officers regarding autism in England and Wales, the focus was on the autistic participants and their experiences of the custody process. Indeed, a 'walkthrough' method will fail to mimic the real-life situation of being arrested and being transported into custody, and cannot replicate the levels of distress and anxiety that an individual may feel during this process. The interview schedule for the police officers consisted of only six questions in total, relating to their experience of the walkthrough process. Of course, it is vital that the research into the autistic perspectives of the criminal justice process involves the autistic community to guide recommendations and policy, but it is also important to better understand police experiential learning in order to understand how to improve the process and support for autistic individuals in the future.

Following this research, the East Midlands police force have started to create the UK's first 'neurodivergent friendly' custody suite, which includes dimmable lighting, relaxing wall murals and screens so that detainees can see who is speaking to them while they are in the cell (University of Nottingham, 2021). Part of this development includes specialist autism training for police officers, carried out with the consultation of Dr Chloe Holloway at the University of Nottingham, following her earlier published research. The training pack has been produced with autistic 'stakeholders', and includes a video and a

training booklet, as well as containing resources for detainees, such as easy-read legal rights, diagrams and flowcharts to help them understand what happens during the custody process. This example of the police force working with researchers, and neurodivergent consultants demonstrates the possibility for positive change, which still allows the police force to carry out their roles, while reducing stress and trauma for vulnerable individuals in custody. Unfortunately, due to the individual management of each police force within England and Wales, other police forces are yet to follow suit and form such a strong partnership with research bodies to inform their policies. This project is an important starting block for equitable treatment of autistic individuals by the police, but further research needs to be carried out to assess how police officers respond to this training, and the impact that it has on the autistic individuals who are processed through this facility. It also does not yet take into account any intersectional factors that may contribute to the discrimination of an autistic individual during the arrest and custody stages, nor does it address the police occupational culture which may be preventing successful training and reform.

Governmental Reports

Lord Bradley (2009) issued a report reviewing the current evidence within the criminal justice system in England and Wales, which was fundamental in bringing about attention to the issues that vulnerable people face during the criminal justice process. This report found that there were numerous problems throughout the policing stage of the criminal justice process, including a lack of training, unsuitable custody environments and a lack of information sharing between agencies. A follow up report stated that despite 'significant developments', there is still much progress to be made (Durcan, Saunders, Gadsby & Hazard, 2017). The report also found that despite there being some toolkits available for use throughout the criminal justice process, awareness of these was low and therefore they were not being utilised. The review highlights a lack of awareness, training and confidence of staff regarding neurodivergence, with a desire to learn about traits of neurodivergence and tools to appropriately deal with service users. A number of recommendations were made based on their findings, such as screening toolkits during the initial stages of the criminal justice process. It was suggested that by adopting a short checklist during the custody process, there was the potential to divert cases to liaison

officers where more appropriate, consider individual needs of detainees and provide legal support and Appropriate Adults, and to pass relevant information on to the following agencies dealing with the detainee. This would afford some consistency for the individual and ensure that they are given appropriate support during the criminal justice process. The current custody screening questions are criticised for being reliant on the custody officer to suspect or identify neurodivergence, something which relies on prior knowledge and training. The report also referred to sensory challenges that autistic and neurodivergent individuals might experience during the custody process, and made a number of suggestions for adaptations during this process (such as dimmed lights, having a quiet space to use, providing seamless clothing and fidget toys). This review demonstrates an inclusive research method, involving staff in all the departments discussed, 'service users' and external consultants, and makes some very valid, and easily implemented suggestions based on this research. The suggestions made follow those in past research and would help to make real change within difficult environments in society.

More recently, a Criminal Justice joint inspection review was conducted regarding neurodiversity within the criminal justice system (Justice Inspectorates, 2021). While this review was exploring neurodivergence within the criminal justice system, it does refer to some issues directly relating to autism. The review found that of all the police officers they surveyed and interviewed, only 28% reported to have received any training about neurodiversity. Those that did demonstrate knowledge generally suggested that it was gained from a personal experience or previous employment, rather than as part of the police training curriculum. Those that did receive training did so as part of the 'mental health' training sessions. The National College of Policing does not currently offer any specific training on autism, or neurodiversity, and the police forces questioned suggested that they would welcome mandatory training from the College as part of the policing curriculum.

Autism Awareness Schemes

A scheme that has the potential to make this identification of vulnerable adults easier is the Autism Alert card scheme. This scheme was developed in 2010, in order to allow autistic individuals to make the police aware of their diagnosis, but this has not yet been rolled out nationally across all police forces. Some forces have different versions of

'alert' cards, such as Pegasus (Bedfordshire, Nottinghamshire, Surrey and Sussex), Safe Places (Avon and Somerset) and Care Card (Derbyshire), while some forces have not adopted any. These variations of the alert card are linked to a database, which records each individual's personal details, diagnoses, and any specific information on how best to communicate with the individual. However, the use of these cards within a police force do not necessarily mean that officers have been given any specific autism training, and so the officer's perception and knowledge of autism still plays a role within these interactions.

Although these alert cards are a positive addition to the support of autistic and vulnerable individuals, there is little continuity between county borders which can be confusing when travelling within the UK. Some of the variants of the alert cards have an emphasis on the vulnerable card holder being a victim of crime, with specialist telephone numbers to call to get help from the police, which an autistic person might not think to use in a situation where they are approached by the police as a suspect. If an alert card is presented in another county, where the police force uses a different type of alert card, it might cause confusion for the attending police officers and may not carry the full weight that it should. This is especially the case in situations where there is a crossover between the Autism Alert card, and the Pegasus or Safe Spaces cards, given the different fundamental uses of these cards. In order to ease the identification of an autistic individual who may be vulnerable during a police encounter, these cards provide good potential should the police officers be trained on the use of them and have some basic knowledge and awareness of autism.

Real Life Cases

There are a number of cases that have gained media attention following police encounters with autistic people, highlighting a lack of autism knowledge by the police and the use of excessive force. The case of ZH *v* Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis (2013) is one of these cases. The police were called to an incident of a 16-year-old non-verbal autistic and epileptic male, who had become fixated on the waves in a local swimming pool while on a class visit. The arrival of the police and their actions escalated the situation, and the male jumped into the swimming pool. At this point, the police forcibly removed the male from the pool, with the use of handcuffs and leg restraints, before being put in the back of a police van. This resulted in psychological trauma and

increased epileptic seizures for the male. Following a High Court case, the police were deemed to have been 'ill-informed' and acted 'hastily'. Crucially, it was highlighted that they had violated articles 3, 5 and 8 of the Human Rights Act: prohibition of torture, right to liberty and security, and the right to respect for private and family life (Adebowale, 2013, p.44). Cases such as this demonstrate the need for the police to have an awareness and understanding of autism and to have access to best practices to appropriately deal with encounters with autistic people. It is vital to maintain procedural justice and due process, as well as human rights, that the police are able to treat all suspects with fairness, respect and dignity (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2019; Lind & Tyler, 1988).

More recently, an incident involving a 10-year-old autistic boy and a police officer have been reported in the news, with CCTV footage released showing the police officer grabbing the boy, dragging him along the floor and threatening to kick him while in a school in Merseyside (Fallon, 2021). The officer was based within the school's 'Safer School' unit, an initiative between local schools and Merseyside Police Force which stations an officer within a school to ensure the safety of pupils and staff, improve relationships and trust between young people and the police, and reduce the risk of young children being drawn into criminal behaviours (Hossack et al., 2006). Since the incident, the officer has been investigated and found guilty of gross misconduct, convicted of assault, and barred from policing in the future. Merseyside Police force have also provided with all the officers based in 'Safer Schools' with additional training. However, this serves to highlight the fundamental need for mandatory autism and neurodiversity training for all frontline officers. Although these cases are becoming rarer with improved autism awareness in society, there is still a gap in knowledge for those in power, and it is those in positions of power who must be given the training to ensure they carry out their jobs with insight and the tools to respond appropriately to situations.

Current Police Training

Currently within England and Wales, autism training is not mandatory for any police officers. While there are some forces that have added specific neurodivergent training (including autism), many others have not yet included autism as a mandatory training component. This is demonstrated by the results of research projects in the area demonstrating the lack of autism training and knowledge (Archer & Hurley, 2013; Chown,

2010; Crane et al, 2016). A freedom of information request was made to GMP which discovered that while some police officers in GMP receive a 2-hour training module that covers autism, this is not standardised across all police forces. Some forces cover autism training within the 'mental health' modules, mostly focusing on autistic victims and witnesses (Dickie et al., 2018; Hepworth, 2017; Holloway et al., 2020). Categorising autism under the umbrella term of mental health brings about confusion about the causes, presenting symptoms and impact of autism. By inferring that autism is a mental health issue, it implies that it is an unwanted, temporary and curable condition. Although autism can coexist with mental health diagnoses, it does not fall into this aetiology. This is demonstrated by significant confusion by surveyed officers in the differences between developmental conditions and mental illnesses (Chown, 2010; Modell & Mak, 2008). Without being able to distinguish between the two, officers cannot be expected to respond in an appropriate manner.

Modell and Mak (2008) were the first published researchers to have investigated the perceptions, training, and knowledge of police officers of developmental disabilities, including differences between intellectual disabilities, mental illness and physical disabilities. Using a ten-question survey, which contained one question directly relating to autism, they found that while the surveyed officers were able to identify key characteristics of disabilities, they were unable to distinguish between different types of disability. It was found that 80% of officers could not identify autism characteristics accurately, with a number of them listing "Rain Man" as an answer to a question asking them what autism meant to them. This highlights the importance of providing distinct training for neurodivergence, including autism; simply including a section within mental health training does not provide officers with the ability to identify neurodivergence, and hence they are unequipped to deal with neurodivergent suspects appropriately. While this study was ground-breaking, and has influenced much of the research since, it is worth noting that it was carried out in the USA and there are significant differences between the cultures and policing. While the methodology and findings from the study do hold intellectual weight, comparison between studies in the USA and other countries must take these differences into account. Additionally, having only used a ten-question, closed-question survey, this study was only an initial exploration into the topic area, and lacked enough depth and

understanding to appropriately inform any policy changes. It is, of course, relatively old now in terms of literature within the field given how far research, and our understanding of autism, has developed in the past two decades.

Chown's (2010) study assessed the knowledge and awareness of autism and Asperger Syndrome (previously a separate diagnosis in DSM-IV) in officers in England and Wales, using an eleven-point questionnaire survey, with questions based on those asked by Modell and Mak (2008). The study surveyed 120 police officers from two police forces within England and Wales through postal and internet surveys. Questions such as "*When you first hear the word 'disability' what thoughts come to mind?*" explored the understanding and stereotypes of disability, while "*What does the term autism mean to you?*" probed the officers' perceptions of autism. While many respondents could describe some key features of autism, there was confusion of autism being a form of mental illness, and 62% of respondents answered that they had never received any autism awareness training. This demonstrates the confusion caused when grouping autism with mental health training; something which could be rectified by providing specific neurodiversity training, including autism. Since this paper was published, there has been some developments in how we understand autism, and society has a greater awareness than it did a decade ago. However, this paper was the first investigative study in England and Wales, and drew attention to the lack of knowledge within the police force. Chown concludes his research by suggesting that future studies explore the "drivers for potential behavioural change" (p. 270) within the criminal justice system, which would help to inform future training packages. This is part of what this project intends to do, by employing police occupational culture theory as a lens through which to explore how police officers prefer to learn, how they share knowledge and experiences between peers and how this additional training sits within their view of their job role as a police officer. This will enable the project to make informed suggestions for future training packages and toolkits, in a manner that police officers will be receptive to. Additionally, this study seeks to gain a much more in-depth understanding of police officers' understanding and perceptions of autism, by employing one-to-one interviews that will allow the probing of emerging themes.

An online questionnaire-based study explored the experiences of police officers regarding autism within England and Wales (Crane et al., 2016). They gathered data from both police officers who had encountered autistic people, and autistic people who had encountered the police. Police officers (n = 394) were asked to rate different aspects of their encounters with an autistic individual, using a Likert scale (from easy to difficult), such as explaining procedures, interviewing, gaining a written statement and being able to provide an appropriate interviewing environment. They were also asked what accommodations they had made for autistic suspects and asked to evaluate how helpful they had been. The autistic sample (n=31) were asked about their interactions with the police, details about their encounter, what adaptations were made for their autism and whether they were satisfied with the experience. Of the police officers surveyed, 37% claimed to have received autism training and 48% stated that they felt knowledgeable about autism. However, only 42% of these officers were satisfied with how they had dealt with situations including autistic people. Of the autistic respondents, only 15% claimed that they found their experience with the police satisfactory, stating that they felt the police had no knowledge of autism, no suitable adjustments being made and that they felt they had been discriminated against. Of the autistic participants, there was mixed responses on whether they had disclosed their diagnosis to the police. 39% responded that they always disclose their diagnosis, while 36% stated that they never disclose it (the other 25% said that it depends on the situation). Many of the participants offered that they did not disclose their diagnosis, because they felt that they would be negatively stereotyped by the police, an issue addressed also by Huws and Jones (2011). This decision can also be influenced by the individual's perception of the police and procedural justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Without an individual disclosing their autism, it is left to the attending police officer to suspect the vulnerability of the individual in order to offer support or adaptations, such as an Appropriate Adult during interviews, which presents particular challenges. Lord Bradley (2009) spoke about the difficulties of relying on the disclosure of autism in custody, proposing that the custody environment itself does not encourage the discussion of mental health and cognitive impairments, and that there is little consistency between police forces in their approaches to identifying vulnerabilities during the custody process.

Like many other projects within this topic area, this study questioned officers about their experiences with autistic people in general (whether as a victim, witness, or suspect), and found that 43% of officers stated that they had experiences with autistic suspects. Given that such a substantial amount of the officers had experiences with autistic suspects, there must be more research and policy in place to ensure the police are able to treat autistic suspects equitably and fairly, in order to ensure due process is followed and that the individual does not have their human rights infringed upon during the criminal justice process. The findings of this study suggest that officers may over-estimate their ability and knowledge, and that autistic people leave the criminal justice system feeling discriminated because of their disability, impacting on their views of procedural justice and the police, which in turn may influence their future interactions.

While this study was an important exploratory step in exploring the knowledge and awareness of the police regarding autism, it does have limitations to be addressed. The online survey method, although allowing for qualitative analysis, gives only a 'screenshot' of the data. Despite the inclusion of a few open-ended questions, the online survey format removes the ability to probe points of interest, and so the data gained is not as rich as it could be. For instance, while the findings suggest that some police officers have received autism training, we do not know where that training is from – the police force or externally sought training. The authors acknowledge this in their paper and propose that future studies are required with different methodologies, something that this project will address by using an interview method in order to gain in-depth data and to find out where any training has come from. Due to the online nature of the study, a self-sampling method was used, and hence may provide a biased representation of knowledge – those with an interest in autism may have been more likely to take part. To remove the potential of this bias would require a lengthy application with police forces to gain their cooperation in conducting a recruitment strategy which reduces this potential bias.

Over-estimating Abilities

Copenhaver, Denney and Rapp (2019) published a study in which they surveyed police cadets in the USA regarding both their knowledge of autism and their practical knowledge in how to apply their profession to encounters with autistic individuals. Surveying 341 new police recruits over a three-year period using a 72-question survey, they

found that cadets who had stronger confidence in their abilities to interact with autistic individuals actually had less knowledge than those who had lowest confidence in their ability. This suggests that the new recruits had false confidence in their abilities and raises serious concerns for the authors regarding the officer's interactions with autistic individuals throughout their careers. Those cadets who had a better understanding of autism rated themselves as less confident about their ability to interact with autistic individuals. In both instances, those who scored highly on the general autism knowledge measure also scored highly on the interactional knowledge scale. These cadets were surveyed following a training course of over 900 classroom hours, and yet they still demonstrated a significant gap in knowledge, though it is not known how many, if any, of those training hours were dedicated to autism. The authors suggested that further research is required to understand general and interactional knowledge of autism in law professionals, and suggested that training should be carried out 'beyond a classroom environment' to allow experiential learning to new recruits. As with other previous studies, the measure in this research was a multiple-question survey using Likert scale responses, and while it did provide a relatively scientifically robust study, it did not address where the knowledge of autism had come from or evaluate the training received by new recruits. The use of qualitative research methods will allow for a deeper understanding of where knowledge is gained, and how that knowledge is transferred during experiences with autistic individuals. In turn, this will allow educated and informed suggestions for future training policies and toolkits.

A more recent study measured police officers' confidence in working with autistic individuals, and found that confidence was influenced by three factors: effective training, fixed factors (such as pressures of emergency situations, or communication challenges), and malleable factors (personal connections to autism, previous on-the-job experiences) (Love, Railey & Jones, 2022). Data was collected using online open-ended survey questions, and was analysed using thematic analysis. By asking the question *"what makes you feel (a) less confident or (b) more confident in your capabilities as a police officer to work with someone with autism?"*, participants were able to answer flexibly, without prompting from any additional questions or answer choices. Having received effective training from the police force was said to provide officers with the tools they need to

confidently support autistic individuals during encounters. Participants stated that this training needs to be substantial, rather than just a leaflet or short seminar, and in best cases, occur over multiple occasions. The malleable factors were said to strengthen this knowledge and confidence, with either personal experiences on the job, or personal connections to autism, allowed them to better understand how to provide support and effectively communicate. However, some fixed factors were uncontrollable by the police officers and had direct impacts on how confident they were able to feel when dealing with autistic individuals, such as the diversity of autistic behaviours and characteristics, occupational cultural factors, and the stress of emergency situations and time constraints. These fixed factors were suggested to frustrate the police officers in their dealings, preventing them from having full control of the situation and forcing them in to 'reactive' policing. The researchers concluded that further research into police officers' preferences for training, challenges and support methods is required.

BARRIERS TO JUSTICE

Dickie (2018; 2019) conducted a two-year long study which explored the experiences of both criminal justice professionals, and autistic individuals who have had experiences with the criminal justice process in order to assess barriers that autistic people may face with the criminal justice system. The first phase of the study interviewed 30 professionals working in the police, probation and rehabilitation services, and found that while some participants had knowledge and experience of autism, they struggled to accurately identify characteristics of autism and how they might impact on communication. The second stage interviewed four autistic adults who had direct experience of the criminal justice system, and found that they demonstrated challenges with lateral thought and interpretation. Dickie proposed that these challenges lead to vulnerability during police interviews and a likelihood of implicating themselves in crimes.

Police interviews follow the 'PEACE' framework, based on the cognitive interview technique (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992). Consisting of five sections, this interview framework is designed to gather information, test the accuracy of that information and to investigate the truthfulness of the interviewee's version of events (Williamson, 2006). Inaccurate information and testimonies can lead to wrongful convictions and miscarriages of justice (Huff Rattner, & Sagarin, 1996). The five sections of the interview are *planning and*

preparation; engage and explain; account, clarification and challenge; closure; and *evaluation* ("Investigative Interviewing", 2020). Each of these sections provides opportunity for autistic individuals to be discriminated against and ultimately, for deviation from due process and wrongful convictions, should the police not be aware of their autism and make accommodations. During the first planning stage of the interview, the officers have the opportunity to make amendments to accommodate an individual's autism, however, this relies on the interviewing police officer to be aware of it. As discussed earlier, there are factors which may prevent an individual from disclosing their diagnosis, and to identify autism without being explicitly told requires training. Even with disclosure of an autism diagnosis, the ability to make appropriate accommodations relies on the officer having sufficient knowledge regarding autism and any potential challenges. During the second stage, police officers are trained to build rapport with the interviewee, to reduce stress and improve the quality of information gathered during the interview (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Milne & Bull, 1999; Shepherd, 1993). In a case involving an autistic suspect, this rapport-building may in fact increase stress and anxiety, and the suspect may be interpreted by the police as being sarcastic, defiant or disrespectful because of communication challenges (Murrie, Warren, Kristiansson, & Dietz, 2002).

The third stage of this interview framework, *account, clarification and challenge*, is where officers are to gather the suspect's account of the situation and probe any discrepancies. Using open-ended questions, particularly in a stressful environment, may make it more difficult to gather the relevant information from an autistic suspect; the interviewee may give a long-winded account which provides a lot of irrelevant information, or may provide inaccurate information (Boucher 2001; Maras & Bowler, 2012; Maras, Mulcahy, Memon, Picariello, & Bowler, 2014; Murrie, Warren, Kristiansson, & Dietz, 2002; White, Burgess, & Hill, 2009). During this stage, it is recommended that the officers use a loop of questioning in order to disrupt the memory recall sequence and to change perspectives. This may confuse autistic individuals and lead to self-incriminating information being given, cognitive overload, a meltdown or mental shutdown (Allely, 2015; Archer & Hurley, 2013; Maras, 2011; O'Mahony, Milne, & Grant, 2012). Also, studies have found that autistic people can show high levels of compliance when compared with matched neurotypical peers, which presents the possibility that they could make false

admissions of guilt to 'please' the interviewer without realising the consequences (Gudjonsson, 2003; North, Russel & Gudjonsson, 2008; Vermuelan, 2012). The *closure* stage of the interview provides an opportunity for the interviewer to summarise the interview and allow the interviewee to make any clarifications to their statements. During this step, it is important for the autistic individual to understand the summary given before agreeing. Due to the possible impairments in theory of mind, autistic suspects may not fully appreciate the implications of agreeing with the police understanding of the interview and might be vulnerable to self-incrimination (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2004). This highlights the importance of having an appropriate adult present during interviews for vulnerable autistic individuals. The interview is trained to then explain what will happen following the end of the interview, which can be helpful for an autistic individual and reduce stress and anxiety about the unknown (National Autistic Society, 2011). Without the correct training and support, police officers will struggle to be able to support autistic individuals during interviews, and to conduct the interview in a way that follows due process and ensures the individual's human rights. Further research into the adaptations that police officers consciously make for autistic individuals is necessary to identify where the gaps in knowledge and training are.

2.1.7 Conclusion

Equality and equity for autistic individuals who encounter the criminal justice system is a growing area of concern, particularly in recent years. The topic is generating more interest with increased media exposure, and discourse both at a governmental and societal level. While the literature base is emerging, there are still many gaps in both academic and practical knowledge. Research shows that autistic behaviours and characteristics can make someone more likely to be involved with the police, as a victim or a suspect (Debbaudt, 2004; Howlin, 2004). During these encounters, they can experience challenges during each stage of the initial criminal justice process, from first police response (Howlin, 2004; Salerno & Schuller, 2020), custody (Crane et al., 2016; Holloway et al., 2020; 2022) and interviews (Maras & Bowler, 2014). There may be potential barriers with communication between autistic individuals and the police due to an empathy divide and increased anxiety experienced by the autistic individual (Crane et al., 2016) As previously highlighted by Young and Brewer (2019), autistic individuals may be at a higher

risk of self-incrimination than neurotypical peers during police interviews, and of understanding the expectations placed on them during interviews. This can result in them either providing too much information, or failing to provide relevant information that would prove their innocence (Young & Brewer, 2020).

Police training has been found to be insufficient in several studies, and does not currently provide officers with adequate tools and knowledge to support autistic people appropriately (Archer & Hurley, 2013; Chown, 2010; Hepworth, 2017; Maras et al., 2016). Governmental reports have also consistently concluded that current police training is inadequate, and appropriate accommodations are not made for autistic people (Bradley, 2009; Durcan, Saunders, Gadsby, & Hazard, 2017; Justice Inspectorates, 2021). Additionally, while the appropriate adult scheme is beneficial to autistic individuals, it is not consistently utilised across all forces in England and Wales (Bath et al., 2015; Jessiman & Cameron, 2017).

Similar findings were reported by Holloway *et al*. (2020) following their participatory custody walk-through. Autistic people report having negative experiences with the police due to increased anxiety, heightened sensory inputs and barriers in communication (Holloway et al., 2020). Following their participatory custody walk-through, police officers identified three areas which contain barriers to equitable treatment: knowledge and understanding autism, communication, and the physical custody environment. Having only received online training which combined autism and neurodiversity within the mental health module, police officers expressed a need for in-person and interactive training sessions.

Love, Railey and Jones (2022) proposed that the confidence of police officers in dealing with autistic individuals was impacted by three factors: effective training, experience, and fixed factors such as communication challenges. Personal experiences with autism, whether experienced during work or in their personal life, improved their ability to effectively communicate and treat autistic people fairly. These experiences allowed them to perform 'proactive' policing, whereas a lack of knowledge and experience resulted in 'reactive' policing and higher levels of frustration and stress.

As the police are typically the first point of contact for somebody with the criminal justice system, and hold powers against the public, it is vital that they are equipped to appropriately deal with the public that they police. Having the ability and power to decide whether somebody should be arrested, and enter the criminal justice system puts them in a position of power, which must be exercised with caution and knowledge. How the police treat (and appear to treat) autistic people can have an impact on the perceived legitimacy of the police, and as a result, can affect how people respond to them in future encounters.

2.2 Procedural Justice

In order for a police force to be able to control a public, that public must view the police force as legitimate enforcers of the law, and voluntarily cooperate with them. Moving away from coercive methods of controlling the public, and focusing more on crime control and reduction, it is suggested that the police rely more on public cooperation, which in turn, relies on that public trusting the police and their legitimacy (Tyler, 2011). Not only do the police rely on the public to cooperate with them personally, but also to help control crime by identifying and reporting criminal acts, as well as not committing any crimes themselves. This is a fundamental part of 'consensus policing', which has been a part of modern policing since the conception of the Peelian Principles in 1829, the need for public approval. The key to approval from the public in consensus policing is confidence, trustworthiness and legitimacy (Jones, 2008).

"The police, in any society, are often the most visible representatives of the state's power. Given the ability of the police to deprive citizens of the basic right of liberty, the maintenance of police legitimacy in a democracy is paramount. Additionally, the effectiveness of the police in a democracy is inherently tied to a community's perception of the police as a legitimate agent of the state" (Jones, 2008, p.581).

Trust and confidence in the police are based on people's perceptions of the police, and is proposed to develop from interactions (personal or witnessed), and a series of dialogues (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012). As such, police legitimacy is seen as a variable throughout time, in a constant state of flux. It can be reduced or increased with further interactions across space and time. Sklansky (2005) also suggests that this legitimacy can be shaped by the procedures and policies that shape the police. The police can be viewed

as “militaristic strong men who are effective in deterring, investigating and solving crime” (Davies et al., 2016, p.458). As such, this links with police occupational culture (discussed later in this chapter). This sense of police legitimacy, based on the public’s interactions and perceptions of the police is central to the procedural justice approach.

The procedural justice approach is based on socio-psychological theory, and proposes that compliance with the police is influenced by civilians perceiving the police as fair and respectful (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2006). Arguably, it does not matter whether the public witness these interactions in person, or relayed in the media, for the effects of procedural justice to occur. Nor does the outcome of the encounter, or indeed the following legal case, shape perceptions of the criminal justice system; it is whether the public perceives the individual to have been fairly treated during this initial contact (Watson & Angell, 2007). This is relevant in high-profile media cases of police misconduct pertaining to autistic individuals – if the individual citizen in the case appears to have been treated wrongly, with unnecessary force, then the public are less likely to view the police as a legitimate force and will be less likely to comply with them in an encounter. The public must feel a moral alignment with the police in order to be willing to co-operate and adhere to the law (Bradford, Huq, Jackson & Roberts, 2014; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Murphy & Cherney, 2012; Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Jackson, 2014).

The perceived procedural justice approach has four underlying factors*: voice, respect, fairness* and *trustworthiness* (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Murphy, 2009; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Firstly, people need to feel that they are ‘heard’ by the police, and are given chance to have their side of the story heard before any decisions are made. Secondly, being treated with respect conveys an important message of how they, as an individual, are viewed by the police as a member of a social group. Fairness and neutrality allow the public to see that the police apply rules consistently, and are not biased or influenced by personal beliefs. Finally, trustworthiness is an important factor in terms of understanding that the police are legitimately concerned for their welfare (or that of the citizens, in terms of the community), and their motives are good. To feel that they have been treated unfairly or disrespectfully would indicate that the individual is not seen to be a ‘full’ member of the social group being policed, and can lead to a loss of faith in the police as an institution (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Tyler, 2001; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Many studies have

shown perceived procedural justice to have an impact in shaping attitudes towards the police and satisfaction with police outcomes (Murphy, 2009; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2001; 2005).

Perceived procedural justice theory has been key in understanding perceptions of the police in vulnerable populations, with research suggesting that in cases of mental illness, the perception of fair and respectful treatment resulted in cooperation with the police, and less instances of resistance (Watson et al., 2008). The studies discussed earlier in the *Autism within the Criminal Justice System* section that explored the experiences of autistic individuals with police suggested that many autistic people who come into contact with the police, whether as a victim, witness or suspect, were left feeling unhappy with their experience, discriminated against and fearful of the police (Crane et al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Gibbs et al., 2021; Holloway et al., 2020; Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020; Wallace et al., 2021). This dissatisfaction with their experiences of the criminal justice process, according to procedural justice theory, will have an impact on their view of the legitimacy and their future interactions with the police. Whether that be that they feel less inclined to co-operate with them in the future, to report acts of crime or information relating to crimes, or are scared to be stopped by the police. This could result in future interactions with the police becoming more stressful or intense than they ought to be, because of the autistic individual's reaction to the police which has been shaped by their past experiences. Hence, it is vital that police officers are able to treat autistic individuals with dignity, fairness and respect.

2.2.1 Autism and Procedural Justice

Salerno and Schuller (2019) surveyed 35 autistic adults in Canada, and found that overall, participants reported that they were not treated with respect or fairness. All of the participants stated that the police officers were unable to independently identify that they had a disability, or recognise autism until it was disclosed to them. While five of the adults were happy with how the police officer adapted their responses following disclosure, and felt that the police were helpful following the diagnosis disclosure. Using an adapted version of the Police Contact Experience Scale (PCES), a standardised scale to measure various facets of a police interaction, the study found ratings of perceived procedural justice were all low (measuring below halfway on the likert scale) (Watson et

al., 2010). This adapted version of the PCES included three of four subsets: perceived procedural justice (PPJ), satisfaction and outcome favourability scales. All measures in the scales used a seven-point likert scale to measure responses. Scores were calculated by summing and averaging the score for each scale. PPJ (M = 3.35, SD = 1.95), satisfaction (M = 2.76, SD = 1.87), outcome favourability (M = 2.95, SD = 1.74). These ratings suggests that participants perceived that they had not been treated fairly, were displeased with the outcome, and were unsatisfied with the interaction. In addition to the PCES scale, participants were asked specific questions about their interaction. More than half of the participants described the incident as 'traumatic', and that they felt scared during the interaction. This trauma was reported to have been transferred to other emergency and professional services, such as paramedics. This trauma can prevent people from reaching out for help in future situations of victimisation, or having witnessed a crime and so, prevents the concept of 'consensus policing' from working at its full potential. It is worth noting that the questions used in addition to the PCES scale could have influenced the responses. For example, participants were asked "did you feel that the interaction was traumatic?". This closed-answer question style may have skewed results. In future research, open-ended questions may yield more reliable answers with attention paid to ensure questions are not leading.

Similarly, Gibbs and Haas (2020) carried out a study in Australia utilising online questionnaires, and interviews with both parents/carers of autistic people and autistic individuals who had interactions with the police. A total of 111 participants took part in the online questionnaires (50 autistic adults, and 61 parents/carers), and 30 autistic participants took part in interviews. The questionnaire asked participants about their interactions with the police over the past five years, and similarly to the Salerno and Schuller (2019) study, used the PPJ subscale, from the PCES (Watson et al., 2010). The PPJ subscale on its own, consists of ten questions, and in this study was answered using a four-point likert scale. Higher scores reflect higher levels of perceived procedural justice. Responses to this scale conveyed a low perceived PPJ, below the mid-point of the scale (M = 2.03, SD = 0.93). They also asked participants to rate their satisfaction with the interactions on a scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied), and found that there was strong positive correlation between PPJ and satisfaction in participants. However, the

parent/carer participants reported higher perceived procedural justice and satisfaction, with around half reporting interactions as being satisfactory or very satisfactory. This suggests that those with a parent/carer present during an interaction (and hence, more accountability for the police) may receive more appropriate accommodations. Though it is worth taking into account that the majority of the autistic adults that took part in this study were independently living, with higher-level educations and were not diagnosed until adulthood, whereas over half of the parent/carer participants reported that the autistic individual was under 18 years old at the time of police interactions. The authors reported a disparity in the disclosure of diagnosis between the parent/carer and the autistic adult participants. More parents/carers disclosed the autism diagnosis, whereas fewer autistic adults reportedly disclosed their diagnosis to the police during the interactions, failing to think that it was a necessary piece of information for the police officer at the time and being wary of negative perceptions of autism. The authors describe the dilemma of deciding to disclose an autism diagnosis as a 'double-edged sword', in which their confidence in the police plays a role in whether to disclose or not (p.4524).

Interestingly, in both the Salerno and Schuller (2019) and the Gibbs and Haas (2020) studies, the majority of autistic adult participants were females. Given the gender differences in diagnosis, it would be expected to have a higher proportion of males. As both studies had more females than males, this may have not been a representative sample of the autistic population.

2.2.2 Conclusion

While research on perceived procedural justice in autistic populations has been carried out in both Australia and Canada, it has not yet been studied in the UK. Given the awareness campaigns (such as autism awareness cards) and autism training rolled out in most of the police forces in England and Wales, it is an important area of research to consider. Perceived procedural justice plays a role in whether autistic individuals will disclose their autism diagnosis and have confidence and trust in the police, ultimately impacting on how they respond during interactions, and the potential outcome of the interaction. As discussed earlier in this section, perceptions of the police are formed not only by personal interactions, but also by media representations of police behaviour and judgements, interactions of those we speak to and stories that we hear (particularly in the

age of social media). The public, including those with autism, need to feel confident that they will be treated equitably by the criminal justice system. This necessitates an understanding and awareness of autism from police officers, and the ability to adapt their procedures and communication to ensure that autistic people are treated fairly. By understanding the perceptions of the police formed by autistic individuals, we are able to explore how best to improve these perceptions through training and awareness campaigns, to make interactions less traumatic and more understanding relationships between the police and the autistic community.

2.3 Police Occupational Culture

2.3.1 Introduction

Police occupational culture is a key component of understanding the relationship between the police and the policed public. As Reiner stated, "an understanding of how police officers see the social world and their role in it, 'cop culture' is crucial to an analysis of what they do" (1985, p.85). Police occupational culture theory has been developed over decades as a lens, through which to examine the informal norms and values that police officers hold, which plays a role in influencing their behaviour and decisions (Bowling et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2018; Skolnick, 1966; Westley, 1970). Occupational culture has been used to understand how new recruits learn the ropes of policing, how to use their time, how to understand the social world and how to interact with citizens within it while navigating the internal politics of the organisation (Chan, 2007; Loftus, 2010; Murphy et al., 2018; Reiner, 1985; Skolnick, 1966). The ability of occupational culture to facilitate, or restrict change within the police force has been well discussed (Crank, 1998; Dubord & Griffiths, 2021; Hunter & May, 2020; Loader, 2016, Punch, 2003). Research has applied occupational culture theory to gender, race, discrimination and political changes, yet it is still lacking in application to disability discrimination, particularly neurodiverse conditions such as autism (Chan, 1997; Holdaway, 1997; Marks, 2003; Miller et al., 2003; Westmarland, 2001). Police occupational culture and its potential to influence change, behaviours and policy reform is therefore an important factor to explore when exploring how police officers perceive, understand and learn about autism. This section will explore police occupational culture, definitions and how this occupational culture might influence police responses to encounters with autistic individuals.

2.3.2 A Brief History of Occupational Culture

Reviewing the historical development of police occupational culture literature provides context for the theoretical underpinnings. Rooted in social anthropology with foundational ethnographic and observational research, occupational culture has acknowledged the complexities of the realities of policing. How police officers *do* policing; how they view their role and their public, use discretion, deal with stress, learn the ropes and how their environment influenced their manner of policing.

One of the early police researchers in this field, Westley (1953; 1970) conducted an ethnographic study of the police force in the USA. Drawing on the psychological theories of symbolic interactionism and social learning theory, Westley was interested in the way that social interactions create meaning, and how this meaning impacts on the behaviours of police officers, laying the groundwork for the theory so widely researched today. His work describes a police force who were isolated and secretive, closed together to maintain their self-defence against a 'policed public' who were seen as a threat. New recruits leaned heavily on their senior officers to learn the ropes, which often included the use of force and violence to maintain their control over the public. Inside jokes and 'banter' was utilised to relieve tension that was caused by the police work, which were often based on sexualised behaviour, race and ethnicity within a primarily white, male police force. A common theme in his research was that police officers had their own views of the job role, which justified use of violence and aggression in order to assert their control, using 'discretionary deviations' from legal practices. This forms the basis of the police occupational culture that Westley describes: a sense of danger, paired with the tight-knit solidarity and secrecy of the officers, resulting in a cynical police officer. Combining anthropology, sociology and culture studies, Westley's research is argued to have paved the way for policing research for the following decades, having identified the sub-culture of the police, solidarity, decision-making and group norms resulting in a use of force (Greene, 2010; Skolnick, 2011).

In the UK, police research began with Banton (1964), who conducted the first scientific explanation of a sub-culture within policing and compared the UK with three police forces in the USA. Banton is revered for his empirical research into police work and its impact on social control and crime, collecting data from observations, interviews and police officer records. After reviewing two days' worth of recorded activity from police officers in Scotland, Banton concluded that very little of their activity was to do with crime at all. Instead, the officers spent most of their time was spent providing assistance to the public in a variety of ways; he believed that on the whole, they acted more as peacekeepers than "law officers" (p.127), something backed up by many other pieces of research (Bittner,1967; Cummings, Cummings & Edell, 1965; Punch, 1979; Shapland & Vagg, 1988). He found that observed officers often used great discretion when faced with potential

criminal offences – even in cases where the officer was not directly embedded within that community and culture. The leniency and under-enforcement was customary within the police culture, but not within police policy. Instead, the exercising of discretion was developed as a 'craft' to manage situations, instead of formally penalising individuals. This tendency for leniency and peacekeeping could be useful when dealing with autistic individuals, similarly to that proposed by Westley (1970). Instead of adopting a crime-fighter, macho approach, approaching a situation with a calm manner and an underlying intent to understand and resolve conflict would benefit an autistic individual who may well be experiencing sensory overload or a 'meltdown'. Banton's work identified characteristics of police officers that much literature has since supported; suspiciousness, social isolation and police solidarity, and is credited with helping to construct the basis for many aspects of occupational culture in the literature that followed (Reiner, 1992).

In the decades that followed, research into police occupational culture gained momentum. Skolnick (1966) developed a police 'working personality' which reflects cognitive similarities between officers. The notion that there are personality traits shared by police officers is something that is resonated in literature. He also proposed that the occupational culture observed within the police force arises from the struggles and tensions that officers encounter. Perhaps most importantly with regards to the current study, Skolnick speaks of the 'symbolic assailant': a status given to a citizen who arouses suspicion from the police because of their behaviour or mannerisms. This concept has been echoed in literature as the 'detection of difference', the ability to identify when things are 'not normal' (Bittner, 1967; Holdaway, 1983; Reiner, 1985; 2010; Smith & Gray, 1985). Because of the need to constantly be on the look-out for potential violence, the police officer develops schemata for potential assailants; certain language, hand gestures, or clothing. This could be anything from carrying a toy weapon, to the manner in which they carry themselves. This stereotyping enables the police officer to immediately identify potential danger, but also opens them up to discriminating against members of the public based on their traits or behaviours. Police officers are trained to be suspicious, to detect the unusual and to pre-empt the danger. To the outside public, this can appear as harassment, prejudice or discrimination. This is particularly relevant when considering the ways in which autistic, or neurodiverse, behaviours can vary from the neurotypical, and

how that may arouse suspicion from the police. There is a risk of the autistic individual being discriminated against for their neurodivergent behaviours, with literature suggesting that autistic individuals more likely to come into contact with the police than their neurotypical peers (Curry et al., 1993; Debbaudt & Rothman, 2001; Debbaudt et al., 2004; Dickie et al., 2018).

Cain (1971) explored the differences between rural and urban police forces in the UK. Placing a great deal of emphasis on the concepts of control, power and authority, Cain identified a tension between the police and the public, and also between formal and informal policing; a struggle to balance the community lead peacekeeping style, and the rule-bound, legalistic structure of formal policing. Holdaway (2016) suggests that the tension in policing that Cain identified is illustrative of a broader sociological issue of structure and action, in which researchers tend to cite interaction, or structure as the core basis of police roles, and critiques Cain's research for focusing on the concept of power, rather than actions linked with the structure. Van Maanen (1987) studied organisational structures in police forces in the USA. He suggested that policing in western cultures is centred around the idea that the police themselves have the primary role of enforcing the law, above the other facets of the policing role, such as preserving the peace or protecting life and property. This is contrary to much of the extant literature at the time – authors such as Banton (1964), Bittner (1967) and Cain (1973) had suggested that police officers actively choose to play more of a peacekeeping role. As was a common theme in the previous literature, Van Maanen refers to an underlying awareness of danger, a hostile public and conflict, which encourages solidarity between police officers. Meanwhile, Holdaway (1983) covertly carried out an ethnographic study in the police force in which he worked. He discussed how tales of violent encounters are recounted over and over between officers, which helps to bring attention to the danger and violence that threatens officers at every turn, as well as reinforcing the culture of policing - the 'us versus them' mentality. It is suggested that control and chaos are fundamental principles to the police officers and their job roles. The notion that a patrol area can be peaceful and quiet, but underneath the surface, the inevitable 'chaos' is waiting to surface and disrupt the social structure. Again, touching on the ever-present sense of danger that police officers feel (Skolnick, 1966; Van Maanen, 1978; Westley 1970). He claims that the lower ranks of

police define policing as “an action orientated, highly hedonistic occupation” and that officers primary concern is to make an arrest (p.112).

All of these authors discovered some form of occupational culture at the core of policing in various contexts and geographical locations. However, Chan (1997) criticised them for presenting this culture as a monolithic concept that did not take organisational influence, or human agency into account. She claimed that “a theory of police culture should account for the existence of multiple cultures within a police force and variation in cultures among police forces” (Chan, 1996, p.111).

Reiner (1978; 1992) proposed that the police culture, and its underlying principles of sense of mission, hedonism, pessimistic cynicism, and a love of action, all react and bounce off each other to create an environment whereby the legal principles of due process are threatened (Bowling, Reiner & Sheptycki, p.173, 2017). There are seven personality traits shared by police officers according to Reiner (1992); ‘*suspicion’, ‘mission-action-cynicism-pessimism’, ‘machismo’, ‘conservatism’, ‘isolation-solidarity’, ‘pragmatism’,* and *‘prejudice’*. Some of these traits have been suggested by previous authors (see Holdaway, 1983; Rubinstein, 1973; Skolnick, 1966; Westley, 1970), but Reiner does a good job of explaining how they interlink and applying them to the police role. It is these personality traits that are of interest to this study, and how they may influence interactions with autistic individuals. Despite the shifts in policing procedures, recruitment and training, these characteristics (and the notion of a shared identity and culture between police) have persevered (Campeau, 2015; Loftus, 2010).

2.3.3 Defining Occupational Culture

Scholars have suggested many varying definitions for police culture, though many focus around the notion that police occupational culture is essentially a group of values and occupational norms that influences the behaviour of police officers (Chan, 1996). There is, to date, no universal definition. Schein proposes that there are “expressions of culture”, as well as the “deeply embedded, unconscious, basic assumptions” that characterise police culture (Schein, 2004, p.25). Going on to define occupational culture as:

"A pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel..."

(Schein, 1985, p.9.)

This definition places emphasis on the passing on of culture through generations of police officers, from senior to new recruits, and references the fact that the assumptions and practices need not have been legitimate, but that they have 'worked well' for the officers.

Reiner (1985) defines it as *"an understanding of how police officers see the social world and their role in it – "cop culture" – is crucial to an analysis of what they do"* (p.85). Presenting a neutral stance towards police culture, without implying any specific shortcomings or criticisms, this definition allows the consideration of the autonomy of police officers, and the broader notion that each officer's experience can reflect their professional and social lives, while allowing for a sharing of knowledge through socialisation.

Skogan and Frydl (2004) define police occupational culture as "*a set of widely shared outlooks that are formed as adaptations to a working environment characterized by uncertainty, danger, and coercive authority and that serves to manage the strains that originate in this work environment*" (p.131). With a focus on some specific elements of police occupational culture, this definition serves to stress that the culture is formed as a result of their environment, rather than socialisation and does not touch on the idea that these values are passed on from officer to officer. O'Neill and Singh (2007) simply describe police occupational culture as "the way things are done around here… Not always by the book, but not always without it" (p.2), which succinctly acknowledges geographical and social differences possible between police forces – the culture is local, and is not necessarily independent of policy and guidelines, but by sometimes bending these rules. Some researchers believe that occupational culture is monolithic, and all officers maintain the same values and norms due to working in similar environments and contexts (Crank, 2004; Skolnick, 1975; Westley, 1970). Others argue that police culture is multi-faceted and complex, proposing that while some aspects are shared, different duties, ranks and

departments have different influences on police culture (Ford, 2003; Ganapathy and Cheong, 2016; Paoline, 2003).

2.3.4 Core Characteristics of the Police

Since Reiner's (1978) research, the core characteristics of the police that he proposed have remained pervasive in research. Loftus (2010) demonstrates that the defining elements of traditional occupational culture are still dominant within today's contemporary policing. Each of these core characteristics have been found in later research, such as *masculinity* (Herbert, 2001), *suspiciousness* (Kappeler et al., 1998), *solidarity* (Punch, 1999), *sense of mission* (Barker, 1999) and *cynicism* (Caplan, 2001; 2003). While this thesis does not claim that the police can be reduced to these characteristics, it is suggested that they do have influence on police behaviour and cognition, and must be considered when discussing the police. This thesis will focus on *suspicion, solidarity, masculinity, sense of mission,* and *pessimistic cynicism* below, and how they relate to interactions with autistic individuals. These specific characteristics have been chosen within this thesis because they provide the most scope for understanding perceptions and attitudes towards differences, and autism in particular. They will be discussed in further detail in the following sections with reference to autistic suspects.

SUSPICION

Police officers are trained to be suspicious, in order to minimise the uncertainty and surprise of working in dangerous environments. Sklansky (2007) proposed that police officers share a rigid and insecure mentality, one that aggressively opposes 'difference'. Indeed, the literature seems to hold a common theme; police work requires suspicion in order to navigate the dangerous situations that officers find themselves in (Crank, 2004; Paoline, 2003; Reiner, 1985; Skolnick, 1994; Tillyer, 2014). Crank (2004) proposes that suspicion is developed as a 'craft' rather than a characteristic, that police officers learn to mentally convert safe situations into the "darker world of lawbreaking" (p.143). Indeed, suspicion is a fundamental part of the legal process and legislation for arresting and detaining a member of the public, and so it is in the police officer's interest to be able to 'craft' reasonable suspicion. This need for suspicion has increased since the classic literature identified it as a characteristic within police culture; the increase in vehicle stops and the advancement of technology both mean that police officers are no longer looking

for traditional 'criminal' clues. Occupants are concealed in average looking cars, or concealing things digitally on their smartphones. The craft of suspicion has had to go further than simply looking for a person who looks physically out of place within a context. However, this now puts autistic people at risk of being stopped by the police due to their differences to neurotypical behaviour. While the suspicion of a police officer is undeniably part of the policing landscape, it must not be reason for disability discrimination.

Often referred to as a 'sixth sense', or police 'intuition', this suspicion allows officers to sense the abnormal in situations, assessing behavioural cues as a basis for police action (Crank, 2004; Miller, 2000; Rubinstein, 1973). Stroshine, Alpert and Dunham (2008) found that police officers have 'working rules' that help them to identify criminal behaviour, such as finding things that do not 'fit' the situation, or suspicion about somebody's behaviour and appearance. However, this leaves autistic (and further, neurodivergent) people at risk of being singled out for their differences to the social norms. This ability to identify 'anomalies', and the police suspicion, comes from labelling behavioural cues and cognitive schema. These schema, or mental models, are based on experience (in both policing certain areas, and different communities), training, and influences from supervisors and colleagues (Alpert & Dunham, 2004; Alpert, MacDonald & Dunham, 2005; Rubinstein, 1973; Smith & Alpert, 2007). Police officers are trained to seek out non-verbal cues of suspicious or criminal behaviour, often indicators such as avoidance of eye contact, displaying nervousness, and hand/arm movement (Loftus, 2008; Vrij & Winkel, 1992). If police officers are the agents in charge of deciding what is, or is not, suspicious behaviour and who is deemed to be 'respectable' in certain situations, then individual prejudices or lack of knowledge may play a part in that decision making process (Chan, 1997). These non-verbal cues, often viewed in conjunction with other factors about the individual such as race, gender, class, may result in autistic individuals seeming suspicious to the police due to their differences (Loftus, 2008; Tillyer, 2014). If a police officer successfully identifies criminal activity using these schema and cues, it reinforces their efficacy, and they are more likely to view future individuals displaying these cues as suspicious (Alpert, MacDonald & Dunham, 2005). While these cues may be reasonable in many situations, their links with intersecting factors such as race and class have implications that leave citizens feeling dissatisfied and untrusting of the police, as several previous studies have

found with autistic individuals (Chown, 2009; Crane et al, 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019; Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020).

This suspicion has the potential to work to protect autistic people in encounters, or to provide opportunity for discrimination against the autistic population. The outcome depends on a number of factors, including whether the officer has any knowledge of autism, whether they view their role as 'peacekeeper' or 'crime-fighter', and whether they view the public as friend or foe. In a situation where the police officer has awareness of autism, this suspicious trait might well assist the officer in detecting a 'difference' in the individual and allow them to consider their approach. Alternatively, if the officer does not have any knowledge of autism and they encounter a person who is of interest, their suspicion may be aroused by the atypical behaviours, and the officer may interpret the behaviours as 'guilty' (Salerno-Ferraro & Schuller, 2020).

SOLIDARITY

Despite being the personal face of the police, in contact with the public on a daily basis, police officers are said to be isolated from the community that they patrol (Loftus, 2008; Shernock, 2007; Skolnick, 1966; Westley, 1970). A myriad of factors work to isolate the police, such as hostility experienced from the public, the shift patterns (including long work days and night shifts), stress and experiences that they cannot share with civilian friends or family. Loftus (2008) states that this solidarity and isolation from the community are unique occupational traits, and they set the police apart from the rest of society, while also creating a power dynamic between them and certain groups. This isolation, combined with the shared daily experiences and canteen culture with peers, leads them to create a "bond of solidarity" (Goldsmith, 1990, p.93). This cultural solidarity reassures officers that their other officers will defend and help them in the face of danger or external threats, creating an 'us versus them' mentality (Bowling et al., 2019; Punch, 2003; Reiner, 1985). These threats can be physical danger, investigations or reviews of their performance and actions (Campeau, 2015). This solidarity, or 'blue line of silence', has historically been the main barrier when investigating police misconduct, such as the Hillsborough disaster (Stevens & Brown, 2016). It also renders them suspicious of management and sceptical of reform agendas (Skolnick, 2008; Villiers, 2003).

Not only is solidarity of interest with regards to internal 'threats' but also when considering their perception of different groups and power dynamics between these groups (Bowling et al., 2019). The concept of 'othering', while ordinarily discussed in terms of gender and race discrimination in the police, is relevant when thinking about policing neurodiverse individuals, or any marginalised community (hooks, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is suggested that the police demonstrate cultural conservatism, in which the police are an insular, hierarchical and isolated role and those who do not fit their perceived norms are othered (Burke, 1994; Holdaway, 1989). 'Othering' is a set of processes and structures, that perpetuate prejudices, stereotypes and inequality. If social identities are a social construct, whereby each category is a dichotomy (woman or man, friend or stranger), then 'us vs them' constructs 'them' as the others (Bauman, 1991). By 'othering' a particular group, they are reinforcing the stereotype, supporting the inequality and allowing them to be discredited or ignored for their defiance of the social norms (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). In this way, autistic individuals (and the wider neurodiverse community) are at risk of being viewed, and treated differently because they do not conform to the police perception of 'normal'. This might also be reflected in the way that they discuss about autism, and engage with training. Considering that have been several high-profile cases of police misconduct regarding autistic individuals, it is not without reason to consider the impacts that this concept of solidarity might have in cases. However, it is also possible that this solidarity could be a positive trait in terms of police training, should it be tailored to account for the bond between police officers. Should this close-knit group contain police officers who are passionate about autism, the solidarity may provide a positive closeness and ability to share knowledge from the inside.

Masculinity, Racial Prejudice and Machismo

The theme of masculinity has been discussed in context of a number of issues within policing, such as racism, sexual discrimination and the use of force (Bowling & Phillips, 2003; Foster, 2003; Dick & Cassell, 2004; Holdaway, 1996, 1999; MacPherson, 1999; O'Neill & Holdaway, 2007; Paoline, Myers & Worden, 2000). It has been claimed that policing is gendered at cultural, individual and structural levels (Dick, Silvestri & Westmarland, 2004; Silvestri, 2015). Although there has been a shift in the traditional recruitment methods which typically recruited white, heterosexual, cisgender officers, to a focus on improving

diversity, the rise in minority officers has been gradual; as of 2019, 6.9% (8,329) of police officers in the UK identified themselves as black and minority ethnic, and 29.8% identified as women (Hargreaves et al., 2018; Gov.uk, 2019; Loftus, 2009; Miles-Johnson, 2019). Despite these changes to the demographics within policing, with women being integrated into the police force in the 1970s, it is still a fundamentally white, male profession, and women still report having to cope with discrimination, harassment, and sexist attitudes (Brown & Heidenshohn, 2000; Cunningham & Ramshaw, 2020; Foster, 2003; Heidenshohn, 2009; Loftus, 2008; Silvestri, 2018).

The presence of *machismo*, and with it, sexism, within the police force has been well discussed in recent years (Brown et al., 2019; Loftus, 2008; Pérez, 2020; Silvestri, 2017). Providing the perfect recipe for hegemonic or toxic masculinity; a pride on physical fitness and strength, acceptance of aggression and 'roughing up' suspects, and the sense of mission and competition this provides (Connell, 1987; Kupers, 2001). Since Reiner included this in his cop culture characteristics, the inclusion of women within police forces has increased, but during the latest survey, still only 30.4% of police officers were female (Flatley, 2019). Although there has been a lot of progress in recent years to improve awareness and accept diversity within the police forces, it is suggested that discrimination does still exist, albeit more subtly (Brown, 2007; Brown et al., 2019; Jones, 2014, 2016; Jones & Williams, 2015).

The existence of *racial prejudice* is also a topic that has been prevalent within literature on police occupational culture (Holdaway & O'Neill, 2004, 2006). It is included within this sub-section, because of how it links with masculinity and machismo. Non-compliance with the dominant gender or ethnicity norms are suggested to illustrate difficulty, weakness or deviance in literature (Hoyle, 1998; Morant & Edwards, 2011). Reiner (1992) proposes that the racial prejudice present in policing is reflective of society, and that encounters have the ability to confirm this prejudice. There is, however, the concern that these racial prejudices may result in routine discriminatory policing (Holdaway & O'Neill, 2006). The extant research on discrimination within the police mostly focuses on sexual and racial discrimination, and the research on learning and developmental disabilities such as autism is still growing. A number of studies have investigated the racism and prejudice towards black and ethnic minorities, including the

Macpherson report (1999) following the murder of Stephen Lawrence in London and the police investigation failings. Following the Macpherson report, there became increased awareness and understanding about institutional racism, which also fed into discourse about engendered inequalities (Holdaway & O'Neill, 2006). Although the report raised awareness and brought about changes to the police force, it is the occupational culture which may allow the continuation of this racial prejudice to exist – the stereotypes that officers rely on for quick decision making on patrol are perpetuated and reinforced with every successful 'catch'.

Smith and Gray (1983) proposed the concept of a 'cult of masculinity' within the police, following on from the themes of masculinity and machismo suggested by previous authors (Manning, 1978; Reiner, 1992). It describes a police culture in which men pride themselves on physical strength and sexual prowess, and women find themselves within an occupational environment of sexual harassment and discrimination. Manning (1978) referenced this concept, defining police culture as "essentially a masculine culture with an emphasis on virility, toughness, masculinity, and masculine interests such as sexual triumphs, sports, outdoor life, and so forth" (Manning, 1978, p. 249). Given the pervasive structure of patriarchy within society, this push towards masculinity in the police is said to still be very much active within police forces (Miller, Forest & Jurik, 2003; Paoline & Gau, 2018). Research has frequently used this concept of machismo and masculinity to explain why there is still an unequal gender balance within policing, citing the emphasis on danger, physicality and sense of mission within this cult of masculinity (Brough, Chataway & Briggs, 2016; Loftus, 2008). Waddington (1999) suggests that the sexism found across police forces is likely to be influenced more by patriarchy in society, than by the macho element in police occupational culture. This has been supported by more recent literature, with Brown *et al* (2019) proposing that macho behaviours are a method to maintain a masculine image and identity of the police when facing the threats perceived by women. As discrimination towards women was experienced, being viewed as unable to carry out the role of police officers due to the demands of masculinity, now this discrimination is being experienced by LGBTQ+ officers (Silvestri, 2017).

Fielding (1994, p.47) outlines the values of masculinity as: *aggressive, physical action; competitiveness; exaggerated heterosexuality; the existence of in-out groups.*

These values are seen as positive in terms of 'crime-fighting' police officers, a means by which to maintain power within society and successfully control the public. By comparison, the perceived lack of these values within women has been used as a legitimate reason for their exclusion in frontline police officers – the notion that police work is too dangerous, too physically demanding and that women have an inability to assert control through discourse (Brown & Heidenshohn, 2007; Connell, 1987; Heidenshohn, 1994; Silverstri, 2015; Westmarland, 2001). However, research suggests that women embrace, or at least, do not contest, the masculine occupational culture; they are found to share in retelling violent stories as part of the canteen culture as a means to be accepted socially within the in-groups (Dick & Cassell, 2004). This ties in with the theme of solidarity within police culture; the desire to be included within the 'in-group', which allows for a sense of protection against the dangerous situations faced in the policing role (Reuss-Ianni, 1993). While 'crime-fighting', face-to-face policing is considered to be a masculine job role, the roles involved in intelligence analysis are perceived as administrative, feminine, and is referred to as 'women's work' (Atkinson, 2016, p.9). This is also to be said of more community-focused policing roles, which require skill sets such as mediation and empathy and are seen as feminine skills (Brown, 2007).

In the Macpherson Report, Fielding (1999) references the female/male dichotomy and suggests that the typically female attributes could improve the provision of policing services, and that this 'femininity' has the potential to reform policing. The typical characteristics that have been framed as 'deficits' within female police officers, such as a lack of a 'tough physique', masculinity and physical strength, might have very little to do with 'real' policing (Heidensohn, 1992). Fielding (1999) proposes that physical, brute strength is very rarely needed in policing, even in violent encounters. Instead, it is the ability to talk to people and resolve issues. Masculine discourse tends to be brash, assertive, and dominance-seeking, whereas women are typically powerless, more co-operative, empathetic, and rich in social warmth (Crawford, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; Meunier, 1996; Quina, Wingard and Bate, 1987; Steinhem, 1997). Indeed, when these skills (such as empathy, a less intimidating physical presence, turn-taking and co-operative discourse) are the ones most important for de-escalating a situation involving an autistic individual, this perception becomes problematic in a male-centric, macho police force. This concept of

masculinity not only perpetuates a gender imbalance within the police force but encourages women to conform to the occupational culture which maintains the institutionalised sexism (Foster, 2003). When discussed in addition to the other themes of occupational culture, such as *sense of mission* and *suspicion,* it provides an environment where autistic individuals, particularly autistic males, may be approached with an aggressive mindset and a focus on physicality and a lack of co-operative discourse.

The Macpherson Report (1999), along with subsequent reports like the Morris Report (2004) and the Lammy Report (2017) highlighted the need for the police to support the increase in diversity and difference in the modern multi-cultural society. To be able to provide a professional and 'appropriate' service to all communities in the UK and improve confidence and trust in the police, it is necessary that the police *"recognises the different experiences, perceptions and needs of a diverse society*" (Fielding, 1999, p. 364). Despite these reports identifying the need for race and ethnic equality in policing, there continues to be a disproportionate number of stop-searches for those in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. In 2019, BAME individuals were 4.3 times more likely to be stopped by the police than White individuals, and the Home Office national statistics in 2019, 2020 and 2021 show that stop-searches of BAME people increased more than White people (Home Office, 2019; 2020; 2021). The stop-search rate for White people was lower than the national average in all of these years. Although these statistics are reliant on the accuracy of the data used, and the ethnic categories recorded changed in 2019 (increased from 16 to 18 groups), it suggests that despite diversity and anti-discrimination being a priority for the police organisation and the government, there continues to be a significant suspicion from the police towards BAME groups. It is important to consider this in relation to autistic individuals, as not only it demonstrates a challenge to change police attitudes towards marginalised groups, but also that there are BAME autistic individuals, who will experience these challenges faced by their intersecting identities. BAME autistic individuals are already reported to face difficulties with accessing social support, healthcare, educational support and experience a lower quality of life (Begeer et al., 2009; Burke, Koot & Begeer, 2015; Emerson, Morrell & Neece, 2016; Slade, 2014). Although this thesis does not extensively explore the intersectionality in relation to autistic individuals

with police contact, it is an important consideration within the research topic area, and the additional barriers that BAME autistic individuals may face in terms of justice and equality.

Sense of Mission and Action

The sense of mission in policing encompasses how a police officer views their job role and the purpose of their career (Cain, 1971; Loftus, 2009; Van Maanen, 1977). People who join the police are suggested to have an exaggerated sense of their role in society, and in a society that places value on the protection of the weak (Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2010). Policing is not just a 'job' or an occupation, it is a vocation or a way of life (Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 2010). Discussing the sense of mission in occupational culture, Loader (2020) says "Policing is not just an organisation, it is also an idea" (p.10). He goes on to state that the police produce "symbolic effects", as well as substantive outcomes, and through this symbolism, policing promotes the aspirations, fears and hopes of society (p.11). Throughout the extant literature on occupational culture, police are consistently framed as crimefighters or peacekeepers (Banton, 1964; Bittner, 1974; Kleinig, 1996; Normore et al., 2016; Reiner, 2010). Officers conceptualise the job role as exciting, challenging and dangerous, while the chase and capture of a suspect is rewarding and symbolic (Holdaway, 1977; Skolnick, 1966). This sense of mission provides the police with justification for their authority and use of power against civilians, providing an ideology that is held not only by officers, but also the government and public (Loader, 2020; Manning, 1977; Waddington, 1999). Waddington (1999) claims that this ideology, despite the fact that most police work involves very little actual crimefighting, perpetuates the 'us vs them' rhetoric to maintain police legitimacy. By maintaining the concept that their job role is to protect the vulnerable in society, police officers are subscribing to a kind of medical model of disability; the police themselves are the ones who can 'fix' the problem, and it is their duty to do so. They visualise themselves as heroic; bodyguards of the weakest in society, fulfilling a unique and varied job role, using legitimate force and control to maintain the fabric of society (Fielding, 1988; Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2010; Waddington, 1999).

The way in which the police define their role, or their mission, permeates through the rest of their occupational culture. It impacts on the way they view policy changes and reform agendas, how they respond to job calls, and how they perceive the people they interact with (Crank, 1998; Loftus, 2010; McLaughlin, 2007; Reiner, 2010). Loftus (2010)

found that while police officers only spent a small amount of time on activities with criminal elements, their job role and mission still centred around crimefighting. While officers acknowledged the peacekeeping, or social worker aspects of their jobs as being the bulk of their workload, they focused on this aspect of catching criminals as their mission statement. They also discussed 'menial' tasks, such as paperwork, or attending a non-criminal incident as not being 'proper' policing duties. As the police role expands to a more customer-facing role, partly in order to increase perceptions of procedural justice, Loftus claims that police officers found this notion to be in stark contrast to their idea of what policing should be. While female police officers were more accepting of the customer-focused aspect, there remained a preoccupation with deviance and crimefighting.

This focus on crimefighting, an idealised view of the police job role despite evidence to the contrary, is often catalysed by the government, with politicians publishing rhetorics such as Priti Patel's "and to the criminals, I simply say this: we are coming after you" public statement, or Boris Johnson's "tough on crime" rhetoric (Grierson, 2019; Loader, 2020). These political statements further enhance the 'us vs them' concept in policing; viewing criminality as deterministic and 'we', the law-abiding citizens, need protecting from them. Loader (2020) claims that this discourse often portrays policing as a masculine role, focused on action and excitement (for example, the hunt and capture of criminals), and that women should only play supporting roles (p.11).

However, in seeking excitement and the sense of mission within their everyday work, the police, there is the possibility that officers may try to manipulate encounters to make them more exciting, to provide more of the 'chase and capture' that gives their sense of satisfaction in police work (Reiner, 1992; Skolnick, 1966). This raises the possibility that officers may subconsciously escalate a situation involving an autistic individual, in order to receive that excitement. This is debated by some authors, suggesting that the *talk* of action and excitement is more important than the actual *doing* of action, and it is just an act of bravado and hegemonic masculinity (Campeau, 2015; Loftus, 2010; Waddington, 1999; Westmarland, 2012). By demonstrating this show of masculinity, officers protect their occupational esteem and reinforce the desire for action and excitement in policing.

However, there are those that identify more with the peacekeeper narrative than that of the crimefighter (Bittner, 1967; Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2010). Using discretion to

minimise criminal activity by settling disputes or giving cautions to people, rather than arrests (Harcourt, 2001; Muir, 1977). Bittner (1967) suggests that 'order maintenance' policing, reflects the structural challenges that police officers are faced with. They must adapt their processes to maintain order and control in the area that they are policing, solving practical problems using creative solutions within their grasp. In this way, the policing role is one of social service. Even more so now, with the rise of community policing, police receive calls about non-criminal matters and are expected by the public to be able to help them with assistance and advice (Cooper & Fullilove, 2020; Herbert, 2001; Normore et al., 2016; Waddington, 1993). With austerity measures, cuts to budgets in health and social care, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, the police are called to deal with a large range of issues that are non-crime related (Charman, 2018). Those who resonate with the peacekeeper identity enjoy the customer-facing aspect of policing, helping people in society and approach the more 'mundane' situations with enthusiasm to make a change (Loftus, 2010).

The crimefighter and peacekeeper identities proposed in occupational culture can be seen to correspond to the crime control and due process models of criminal justice (King, 1981; Packer, 1968). King (1981) proposed six models of criminal justice, each of white sets different priorities for criminal justice and punishment, but for the purpose of this thesis, only the two will be discussed. The crime control model aims to maximise suppression of crime and relies on an ability to manage large volumes of suspects and offenders. This model is likened to a 'conveyor belt' of justice and aims to process criminals with high efficiency and speed. It relies on fast and accurate investigations by police, and preferably, admissions of guilt. Whereas the due process model places value on individual rights and dignity; innocence until guilt is proven. The crime control model is more aligned with the crimefighter role, and the due process model more so with the peacekeeper role (Stroughton, 2016).

Recent studies have examined the influence of crimefighter and peacekeeper orientations (also referred to as 'warrior' and 'guardian' orientations) in police forces across the U.S. and Australia (Clifton et al., 2021; McCathy et al., 2023; McLean et al., 2020; 2022). 'Guardian' officers were found to be more likely to value communication as an important skill, and less likely to support excessive uses of force (McLean et al., 2020).

Clifton *et al*. (2021) suggested that the 'guardian' orientation was linked with low levels of cynicism and a high motivation for community policing techniques.

McCarthy *et al.* (2023) conducted a study amongst Australian police officers and found that crimefighter (or 'warrior') mentality in police officers was associated with a higher support of the use of force in policing, and greater perception of threat in ambiguous situations. By using footage from body-worn cameras, which showed a citizen is shown to display 'passive resistance', which is defined as someone who "is not responding or complying with police commands, but does not appear to pose an imminent threat to police or others". In the footage, police officers are informed that the call out is for a citizen who appears to be 'under the influence of drugs', and shows a large male in underwear, blocking traffic in the middle of the road. This male is not responding to police questions or commands, and appears to be "cognitively impaired". Police officers with peacekeeper orientations were more likely to utilise coercive and restrained tactics to de-escalate the situation, compared to those who identified as a crimefighter (p.11). Those with crimefighter orientations were more likely to interpret a higher level of threat in the scenario. This research, while not specifically aimed at autistic and/or neurodivergent populations, uses a scenario which could be similar to interactions with autistic people in moments of crisis, as discussed earlier in this chapter (see chapter 2.1.6).

PESSIMISTIC CYNICISM

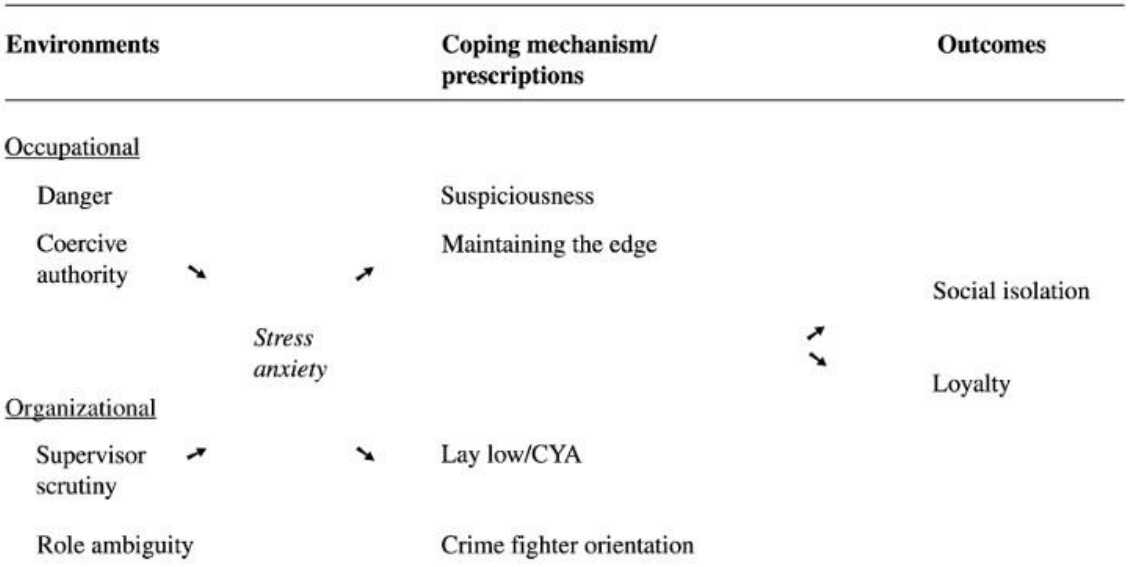
Much of the literature speaks to a police officer who holds a cynical and pessimistic outlook on their job, the public, and life in general (Caplan, 2003). Research suggests that this is not necessarily a personal characteristic of those who seek to join the police. It is a reaction to the practiced suspicion, isolation, exposure to dangerous environments and human interactions, in a line of work where there sometimes is no possible solution (Bittner, 1990; Caplan, 2003; Loftus, 2010; Skolnick, 1966). In a job which many think is their moral calling in life, which is criticised by those who do not have a 'real' understanding of police work, officers are subject to both verbal and physical assaults and have regular interactions with the 'worst of society' (Barker, 1999; Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 1978; Van Maanen, 1978). This cynicism can be both operational and organisational; a mistrust or resentment of either (or both) those that they police, and management (Bennett & Schmitt, 2002; Loftus, 2010; O'Connell et al., 1986; Punch, 1979).

Cynicism in policing is often expressed through the dark humour that police officers share, documented by much of the research. Loftus (2010) describes disturbing jokes shared by police officers following particularly tragic events, such as attempted suicides and murders. Waddington (1999) proffers that this dark humour is a tool, used by police to relieve tension and emotions linked with these experiences, and a vital part of maintaining one's state of mind. Particularly in a traditionally masculine culture, showing emotion is considered inappropriate (Crawley, 2004). This use of humour enables officers to play on those emotions, releasing them in a more socially suitable way. However, this dark humour can, from the outside, seem distasteful and uncaring. Should members of the public witness it, it would undoubtedly impact their perceptions of the police. Caplan (2003), having served as a police officer, describes his experience of cynicism as creating a barrier between the police and the public, antithetical to the very reason he joined the police force (p.311). However, cynicism is proposed to have a positive impact on policework, being utilised as a skill in collaboration with suspicion, ultimately acting as a deterrent to criminality. The skill of questioning everything, even the seemingly obvious, allows police to investigate thoroughly. However, in cases of autistic suspects, this cynicism has the potential to benefit or hinder investigations. Officers may use this cynicism to delve deeper into *why* somebody is acting differently, or they may be more inclined to simply interpret their actions as being insolent and react accordingly.

2.3.5 Occupational Culture – A Contemporary Model

Paoline (2003) proposes a model which seeks to link the individual factors of police occupational culture together in a way that demonstrates how these components interplay and contribute to the overall police occupational culture and behaviour. As Reiner (2010) suggested, these components and characteristics of occupational culture contribute to each other, in spite of them appearing to be contradictory (p.121). Occupational and organisational factors are acknowledged as contributors to the stress and anxiety of the police officer role, and coping mechanisms are suggested as a result of this stress. Critics of traditional occupational culture argued that there was a failure to acknowledge the social and situational pressure that police officers are subject to, and that these pressures shape their practice (Mastrofski 2004). This simple chart below provides a basic framework for understanding how police culture impacts on a police officer's behaviours and attitudes, in an easy-to-understand manner not often found within the literature.

Figure 2. *Traditional Police Occupational Culture Model*



While this model does not directly acknowledge themes of masculinity, this theme can be included within the environmental factor categories. As with earlier literature, occupational environment is said to be perceived as *dangerous* by police officers (Kappeler et al., 1998; Reiner, 1985; Skolnick, 1994; Van Maanen, 1974; Westley, 1970). The ability to exert *coercive control* over the public encompasses the need for respect, authority and control during encounters with the police (Manning, 1995; Muir, 1977; Skolnick, 1994).

Organisational factors address the ambiguity of the policing job; the variety of different tasks and roles that they are expected to carry out (Bittner, 1967; Walker, 1999). *Supervisor scrutiny* reflects the organisational hierarchy, and tensions between the upper levels of the hierarchy and the frontline police officers. The pressure to carry out their job role efficiently, while following legal procedures and regulations, creates a stressful work environment where police officers fear negative reports from supervisors (Brown, 1988; Fielding, 1988; Skolnick, 1994; Van Maanen, 1974).

The coping mechanisms identified in the model include *suspicion* as discussed previously in this chapter, as well as *maintaining the edge*. This entails the police officer reading situations and people, always prepared for the danger that is perceived to be inherent within policing and has been a theme of police culture since the classical literature (Rubinstein, 1973; Muir, 1977; Skolnick, 1994; Van Maanen, 1974). *Laying Low* (also known as 'covering your ass') is a result of the supervisor scrutiny that the police fear, while the *crime fighter orientation*, is maintained in order to give meaning to the job role. This *peacekeeper* or *crimefighter,* as discussed earlier in the classical literature, is the police officer's motivation, and they use it to give meaning to more menial, less exciting tasks (Banton, 1964; Bittner, 1967; Cumming, Cumming & Edell, 1965; Punch, 1979; Shapland & Vagg, 1988; Walker, 1999).

The outcomes of this model involve the *social isolation* and *loyalty* explored earlier in this chapter. These outcomes offer explanation for the well-known 'thin blue line'; the us-versus-them attitudes and fierce loyalty that police officers display (Brown, 1988; Ganapathy & Cheong, 2014; Kappeler et al., 1998; Skolnick, 1994; Van Maanen, 1974). This model provides a simple framework by which to understand the factors of police occupational culture. However, it does not acknowledge all the identified aspects of culture in contemporary culture. It may be a valuable tool to help understand the interplaying factors and links within any themes found in analysis surrounding occupational culture.

2.3.6 Conclusion

Police occupational culture not only helps us understand the motivations of police officers and the ways in which culture influences decision making and behaviours, but also the way in which the police interact with civilians. This relationship with the public, and

how they behave accordingly, has a direct impact on the public's views of procedural justice and the legitimacy of the police force. Literature suggests that police officers who have an attitude in line with the more traditional police culture are more likely to escalate encounters (such as searching somebody they have stopped) and use higher levels of force (Paoline & Terrill, 2005; Terrill et al., 2003). Terrill, Paoline and Gau (2016) suggest that if traditional police attitudes manifest themselves as discourteous, rude or using undue force, procedural justice and legitimacy will be threatened. This could result in an increased distrust in the police, a lack of willingness to co-operate, and tension between the public and the police. Particularly relevant to the autistic community, who are more likely to come into contact with the police and may have communication challenges, this trust in being treated fairly and with dignity is vital (Debbaudt, 2004).

Despite much of the literature being negatively framed, researchers have pointed to the positive impacts that occupational culture can have (Loftus, 2010; Waddington, 1999). Working in the police force is a physically and mentally demanding job. Waddington (1999) claims that police occupational culture "gives meaning to experience" and plays a role in maintaining police self-esteem (p.295). Loftus (2010) discusses how occupational culture can be viewed as taught values which help officers to learn how to manage their time and interact with the public. Police officers tend to be more psychologically healthy and suffer with anxiety less than civilians (Carpenter & Raza, 1987). Occupational culture should be appreciated for both positive and negative contributions, rather than being used as a scapegoat for the negative aspects of policing (Chan, 1996). Chan (1997) later states that theories of police occupational culture should "account for the existence of multiple cultures, recognise the interpretative and creative aspects of culture, situate cultural practice in the political context of policing and provide a theory of change" (p.67). By using this occupational culture, particularly the core characteristics discussed earlier in this chapter, as a lens through which to view the attitudes and perceptions of autism that police officers hold and their actions, we can better identify areas for improvement in future training and research.

2.4 Literature Review Conclusion

Autistic people are more likely to encounter the criminal justice system, and therefore the police, than their neurotypical peers (Debbaudt, 2004). Research has shown that during these encounters, there are challenges at every stage of the criminal justice process (Crane et al., 2016; Holloway et al., 2020; 2022; Salerno & Schuller, 2020; Young & Brewer, 2019). This literature review began with a review of modern knowledge and diagnostic criteria of autism, characteristics and traits, and developments in awareness. The framing of disability, including autism, through both the medical model and social model of disability was explored, and the impact that these models can have on perceptions of autism. Potential comorbidities that may exist alongside and interact with autism were discussed with reference to how these may add to vulnerability during police interactions. Gender differences in the presentation of autism were explored, before moving on to consider offending behaviour and culpability. Risk factors in autistic populations were explored, such as obsessive or 'special' interests in illegal areas, sex-related crimes, or cyber-crimes. Aspects of the initial criminal justice process were discussed, with consideration of autism. Police officers are reported to have inconsistent training and knowledge of autism (Crane et al., 2016, Salerno & Schuller, 2020). Despite this lack of knowledge and training, police officers over-estimate their abilities and knowledge (Love, Railey & Jones, 2022). This lack of knowledge leaves autistic people who encounter the police dissatisfied with their treatment (Crane et al., 2016), and feeling that they have been treated unfairly due to their autism (Salerno & Schuller, 2019).

Procedural justice theory proposes that in order for modern policing to function, it relies on the compliance and cooperation of the public (Jones, 2008; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2011). This compliance is gained by the public viewing the police as legitimate, trustworthy and confidence (Jones, 2008). These factors are based on the public's perception of the police, generated through interactions with the police in any capacity, either personally or witness (this can include via the media). Hence, perceived procedural justice is a fundamental of modern policing; particularly in vulnerable populations such as the autistic community (Watson et al., 2008). The autistic person's perception of the police, including their perceived trust and legitimacy, will influence how they respond during interactions. As autistic people are more likely to come into contact with the police

during their lives, it is pivotal that we understand how autistic people perceive the police, and how this relationship can be improved in order to ensure safe and minimal stress during interactions. Only two studies have been conducted exploring the perceived procedural justice in autistic people who have direct experience of the criminal justice system; one of which was in Canada, and the other in Australia. Both of these utilised survey methods to gather data, preventing the participants to have a *voice* and discuss their experiences, challenges and suggestions for improvement.

Finally, the literature review then moved on to police occupational culture, which forms the basis for understanding police attitudes and behaviours. A long-standing theoretical approach, occupational culture has identified characteristics and features that occur over time and space in policing (Loftus, 2010). The core characteristics of the police were discussed, with reference to how they may impact on interactions with autistic suspects. While literature and knowledge in this topic area is growing with the increased awareness and acceptance of autism, there has not yet been any consideration with how police occupational culture may frame the behaviours, attitudes and perceptions of autism within police officers.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Aims and Objectives of the Study

As discussed in the literature review chapter, a gap in the knowledge has been identified, particularly with regard to empirical, qualitative research studying the experiential knowledge of the police surrounding autism, and the experiences of autistic individuals with direct experience of the initial stages of the criminal justice system. Having explored the extant literature regarding autism, police occupational culture, current policy and legislation and procedural justice, no researcher has yet looked to explore police knowledge, perceptions and attitudes towards autism through the criminological lens of occupational culture and perceived procedural justice. This study aims to address the gap in current knowledge and explores how police officers perceive autistic individuals, and how their occupational culture impacts on their actions and perceptions. In addition, by including the perspectives and experiences of autistic individuals with direct experience of the police, we can explore how these integrate with the police experiences and perceptions. By exploring *a)* the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of police officers with autistic individuals (particularly as suspects or offenders), *b)* how police occupational culture may frame the actions of police officers during encounters with autistic individuals, *c)* how autistic individuals with direct experience of the criminal justice system perceive their treatment by police, and *d)* any areas not currently covered in autism training, as perceived by police officers. Hence, the research objectives of this study were:

1. Review the extant empirical research regarding autism and policing and theoretical literature on police occupational culture.
2. Conduct interviews with autistic individuals to explore their experiences and perceptions of the police, and also to guide the research
3. Conduct interviews with serving police officers to examine their knowledge, perceptions and experiences with autistic individuals
4. Analyse data using reflexive thematic analysis to generate and explore themes within the theoretical framework
5. Make suggestions for future research and training improvements

3.2 Research Strategy

3.2.1 Epistemology & Ontology

Given that my research is focussed on the knowledge, perception, and attitudes of police officers towards autism, I must define what these concepts are to be able to explore them. How do I understand knowledge to exist? I believe that individual knowledge is not a constant, tangible, quantifiable entity – that is, I believe that each individual person will possess a different 'knowledge' and truth, and that even 'facts' mean different things to different people (Denscombe, 2002). Human beings construct knowledge from experiences, and relationships between people, events and things (Wisker, 2008). This project aims to explore police officer's experiential knowledge of autism, through these constructions, and must consider the epistemology and ontology. Where positivism believes that there is a 'true' knowledge, that can be discovered using scientific experimental methods, interpretivism argues that knowledge and phenomenon have different explanations, and requires researchers to be open minded when studying these phenomena (Bryman, 2016). Interpretivism understands that phenomena are constructed and adapted by those who experience it, and that people may experience things differently.

Similarly to interpretivism, I am of the belief that there is no single, objective truth that can be known – instead, there is a diversity of interpretations that can be applied (Hugly & Sayward, 1987). As perceptions and knowledge is 'unknowable', my role as a researcher is to construct an impression of the world as I see it (Ratner, 2008). While I want to represent the voices of those participating in the study, I am aware that my interpretation the data will have heavily influenced the way in which I write my findings section, and thus, how the reader interprets the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2014). The data that I gather will only be constructed by the relationship between myself and the participants, and the shared experiences (Charmaz, 2006). I acknowledge that my viewpoint and participants viewpoints will be different, and that by joining these different viewpoints up, a shared reconstruction of our multiple realities can be constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Hence, this project has adopted a paradigmatic framework of constructivism and interpretivism. This is particularly important when considering the data gathered and the analysis of this data; reflexive thematic analysis allows the researcher to

decide which data is meaningful, and worthy of being included in the coding process. Data does not become a code or a theme simply due to repetition within the data. It is a nuanced relationship between its saliency with regards to the research questions, the manner in which the participant discusses it, and how the researcher understands this data in relation to the project (Braun & Clarke, 2014). By adopting a constructivist epistemology, I acknowledge the importance of *meaning* in the analytic process (Bryne, 2022). While I appreciate that repetition between interviews and patterns can indicate meaningfulness in the data, as Bhasker (1989) posits, people in society reproduce and alter societal norms via mechanisms, like discourse. Using these mechanisms, control and power can be asserted, and disparities between populations (such as the police and civilians) can be maintained (Harrè and Bhaskar, 2001; Lopez & Potter, 2001) For this reason, I believe it is as important to pay attention to how this discourse and language is utilised when discussing marginalised populations such as the autistic community, particularly with regards to policing. Given that previous literature has suggested a mostly negative relationship between autistic people and the police, and that the autistic population are vulnerable during encounters with the police and criminal justice system (Beardon, 2016; Crane et al, 2016; Maras, 2015; Weiss & Fardella, 2018). This negative relationship may be in part due to a power disparity, as a result of neurotypical attitudes and discourse (Siberry, 2020). Lopez and Potter (2001) suggest that by adopting an interpretivist position allows one to understand how discourse and language assist in constructing such realities, and by using reflexive thematic analysis, this discourse was analysed at both a latent and semantic level to explore the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of participants.

3.2.2 Researcher Positionality & Reflexivity

Given the importance of the researcher within reflexive thematic analysis, I felt it necessary to include a section within the thesis on my positionality and reflexivity. To not only explore my role within the research project, but within the population of which I am writing. Having been something I have been aware of throughout the entire process, I kept notes in my researcher diary and university submissions that relate to my thoughts, emotions and discoveries throughout the PhD project (see appendix K for examples from my researcher diary). I write this section retrospectively, which allows me to reflect on my journey through the PhD and research in its entirety.

Researchers have pointed to the potential issues of positionality when researching marginalised groups, as well as risks to researchers themselves. Though speaking of ethnic minority groups, I feel that Milner's research can be applied to those marginalised by way of neurodiversity too (2007). One must pay attention to their own cultural systems of knowledge and experience, as well as those of the marginalised group that they are researching. Researchers should critically reflect on themselves with regard to the community focused on in their research, including their power or positionality and how this impacts on their role as a researcher (Fenge et al., 2019). Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) speak about the challenges in honouring and representing marginalised voices in research, while acknowledging the power disparity between researcher and the researched. These authors urge researchers to consider their positionality when interpreting and publishing data, at risk of research reinforcing the systems of oppression that it aims to address (Ashby, 2011). This is argued to be even more important with studies in criminal justice, whereby the topics include such dramatic disparities in power, especially in the case of policing vulnerable populations (Blaustein & Henry, 2016).

The neurodiversity movement encourages difference. It celebrates self-awareness. It welcomes the quirks. That is why I felt an immediate pull to studying autism. It drew me to the volunteering role that allowed me to learn more about autistic behaviours. It was during this role as a volunteer that I first experienced autistic meltdowns. Some of the gentlest and sweetest young children, with such aggressive responses to environments or sensory inputs. I was fascinated, not by the behaviours displayed, but their ability to so strongly react to something they didn't like. That *quietness* that I had spent years perfecting, desperately not wanting to upset anybody else, at the cost of my comfort and peace. These children didn't possess that; instead, they reacted to their situation almost innately. They listened to their bodies and sought the comfort they knew they needed. A lesson it has taken me years to learn. While studying my Master's in Criminal Justice, I wondered how these meltdowns and behaviours appeared to those in positions of power; how would the police react to such a situation? This is where my passion began. As I researched autism and the criminal justice system, I discovered the many vulnerabilities for those who encounter the police. The lack of research representing the autistic community in the literature base. The published research that had addressed autism

within the criminal justice system leant heavily on quantitative data. There was an absence of voices; the existing literature relied on responses to surveys and questionnaires. It can be argued that these quantitative methods calculate how much the *researched* support an idea put forward by the researcher (Bowden & Green, 2010). I wanted to give participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences and perspectives without constraint. After all, I am asking them to share their stories, many of which have shaped huge moments in their lives. They should be able to do so in their own words. By using semi-structured interviews, participants are able to share as much or as little information as they choose, to reframe their points, and to elaborate on topics as they wish.

While my research seeks to give a voice to those autistic individuals who have direct experience with the police and criminal justice system, as well as police officers, I must acknowledge that my voice is also present in the project. My positionality, including my gender, education, socio-economic status and experiences will influence the way in which I view the world, and hence, this PhD. (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020, Fletcher, 2017; Griffiths, 1998; Greenbank, 2003; Warren, 1988). Being a white, British female; a postgraduate student with a background in Psychology and Criminology, who has never been arrested, nor worked in a police force. I have previously worked closely with autistic people with various challenges, which had resulted in me adopting an empathetic, perhaps sympathetic approach to the autistic people I have spoken to during this research. All of these components have an impact on how I read literature, how I view and interact with the police and how I view society (Coolican, 2014). Research findings are not 'discovered', nor do they emerge from the data collected; themes and findings are shaped by the researcher, by the choices they make throughout the process. Indeed, it is suggested that in the criminological field, reflexivity is even more important due to the levels of power exercised by the criminal justice process and how this can make researchers feel, including the police (Armstrong, Blaustein & Henry, 2016).

Upon reflecting throughout the research process, I realise that my 'outsider' status with the police, and my lack of contact with the criminal justice system provided a fear of the police, which became apparent during the first few interviews that I conducted. This fear prevented me from probing answers and clarifying points as deeply as I would have liked. Certainly, I felt very much like an outsider when speaking with police officers; the

way they spoke often felt like a different language, they had a confidence and presence during interviews that, to me, emphasised their positions of power and control. On the other hand, I have always been a little socially anxious, and have experienced imposter syndrome throughout my academic career. I recall that during these interviews, I felt well and truly like a fraud – that one of the participants would stop me and say *"What right do you have to be doing this research?"*. Indeed, several participants did ask how I'd found my PhD topic, and why I was carrying out the research. While my answer was rooted in the passion that I have, that I have developed since first volunteering with autistic children, I found myself responding with people-pleasing answers: somewhat diminishing my role as an independent researcher, and framed to ensure that the person asking would like my answer. In hindsight, if I had been more confident, less socially anxious and perhaps prepared answers to these common questions, my collected data may have been different. If I was viewed as more 'professional' researcher, would participants have told me more? Or perhaps it was my evident anxiety and nervousness that endeared me to participants, making them open up more than they would with done with a confident male, for example.

However, with each interview experience, I became more confident as a researcher; I overcame the anxiety and fear of speaking directly and candidly with police participants, and developed my interviewing skills. As much as I would like to say that carrying out successful interviews resolved my imposter syndrome, unfortunately that is not the case. This self-doubt continued through the entire PhD research process, and still remains even now, as I am writing this. With every decision, I have doubted my ability and questioned my choices. I have struggled to find my own academic voice, in both writing and conversation. While others have written eloquently about their research position and role as a researcher, such as Kelly Stockdale (2017), it is something that I have greatly struggled with, and has undoubtedly impacted on my research and thesis.

3.2.3 Research Approach

Having reviewed multiple perspectives in the existing literature in relevant topic areas (see chapter 2) and identified a gap in knowledge regarding empirical, qualitative research addressing the experiential knowledge of police officers surrounding autism, this study aims to address that lack of knowledge. As the research aims to explore the phenomena that includes the knowledge, behaviours, language and experiences of police

officers and autistic people with direct experience as suspects, we must ensure that the research methods adopted are suitable. As discussed in the previous sections, I have situated my research within interpretivist-constructivism, embracing the role that I also play in co-constructing the knowledge. Whereas quantitative research adopts a positivist paradigm, that is to say that an objective, identifiable truth exists and can be measured, I believe that reality is not fixed in and between individuals, and that it is shaped by experiences, in a state of constant change.

In order to explore knowledge and experiences with this approach, research methods that allow for the collection of rich, in-depth data: qualitative methods (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Silverman, 2010). As Creswell (2009) explains, "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p.4). Wanting to collect in-depth data and gain insight into both police officers' knowledge, and autistic peoples experiences, adopting interview methods to generate this data is appropriate. The exact methods adopted will be discussed in more detail in the following sub-chapters that follow.

3.3 Method

Ethics

Full ethical approval was granted on 31st October 2018 (reference HSR1718-107). Since the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated changes to the methodology, amendments were submitted and approved on 20th September 2021. These changes reflect the need to work from home, to protect both the researcher and the participants, and some slight changes in methodology. Hence, all contact and data collection were carried out via the telephone or online. The research followed the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009; 2017) regarding internet-mediated research, as well as those of the University and the British Society of Criminology (2015), particularly with reference to their guidelines on vulnerable participants, such as the autistic participants that were interviewed. Regarding the gaining of informed consent, the BPS states:

"Ensure that clients, particularly children and vulnerable adults, are given ample opportunity to understand the nature, purpose, and anticipated consequences of any

professional services or research participation, so that they may give informed consent to the extent that their capabilities allow"

British Psychological Society (2009, p.12)

In line with this, vulnerable participants were encouraged to take extra time to consider their involvement in the study. As they were recruited via online adverts and e-mail, there was less time-pressure on them to provide an answer than there might have been in person, so this helped to ensure that they were able to give informed consent. All language throughout communication with autistic participants was adjusted to aid clear communication. These adjustments are discussed in further detail below. The researcher was trained and experienced in working with autistic individuals from a previous job role, so was well equipped to make adaptations to the research to suit each individual's needs and communication levels. All participants were given the option to take part in the interview using varied methods, to limit levels of stress and anxiety during the research. The possible methods included: conducting the interview over typed messages on the Microsoft Teams meeting, using audio only, or carrying out the interviews in a series of shorter sessions.

Once transcribed, all data was anonymised; all participants were given pseudonyms to ensure that they are not recognisable from the data. Pseudonyms were created by searching for the most popular names for the age of the participant based on the first letter of their name. This enabled the researcher to associate the pseudonym with the participant and their data, rather than giving a random number or selection of letters.

Due to the nature of my research, sensitive information was discussed, and as such, confidentiality and anonymity became paramount. Assurance of anonymity helped to improve the trust and relationship between researcher and participant, as well as complying with ethics. By using pseudonyms for participants, and removing any identifying data within the transcripts (for example, police participants forces were redacted), the risk of participants being identified was minimised both during and following participation (Davies, 2011). The police participants were more concerned with data protection than the direct experience participants, though both groups were treated with rigorous anonymity to ensure their participation was not identifiable. Several police participants self-edited their stories as they were telling them, ensuring that they did not disclose any

protected information about previous criminal cases. In these situations, they were reminded that all their data would be anonymised and securely stored.

The exception to this anonymity and confidentiality, as per my ethical regulations of the University, was that confidentiality would be breached should any participant reveal any information that is considered a risk to themselves or others, such as self-harm. This breach of confidentiality was detailed on the information sheet and consent forms (see appendices for details). Throughout the research process, I had regular debriefing sessions with my supervisors to discuss any concerns that I had, whether that be for my data, participants, or myself.

3.4 Data Collection and Participants

A total of 20 participants took part in the study. Specifically, 15 police officers and staff, and five autistic adults who had experiences with the police. The participant sub-groups and their recruitment are discussed in further detail below.

3.4.1 Police Officers

RECRUITMENT

This project recruited 15 police officers and staff for the interviews, all of whom were currently serving, or retired within the past year, across England and Wales. There were 14 police officers, and one custody detention officer, with between 1 to 30 years' experience within the police force. Six of the participants identified as female (age range = 21 - 49) and the other nine as male (age range = 21 - 55). The age range for the whole sample was between 21 and 55 years old.

Table 1. Demographics of Police Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Rank	Department	Time served (years)	Interview Length (hours: minutes)
Jonathon	43	Male	D.C.	Youth Justice	19.5	1:49
Martin	52	Male	P.C.	CTU	21	1:53
Graham	41	Male	D.C.	Cyber Crime	14	1:27
Natalie	29	Female	P.C.	Response	1	0:39
Janet	50	Female	P.C.	Post-charge	14	1:34
Connor	35	Male	P.C.	Crime Evaluations	14	1:23
Liam	21	Male	P.C.	Response	1.5	2:03
Jessica	42	Female	Temp. D.S.	-	15	1:07
Georgia	39	Female	Temp. Sergeant	Firearms	18.5	0:44
Sarah	21	Female	P.C.	Response	1	0:49
Brian	34	Male	P.C.	Response	3	1:44
Simon	55	Male	Superintendent	Airport	30	1:47
Sam	44	Male	Inspector	-	22	2:43
Robert	40	Male	Custody Sergeant	Custody	17.5	2:49
Susan	49	Female	Detention Officer	Custody	11	1:48

Recruiting officers from various forces helped to provide a more comprehensive representation of policing across England and Wales, both urban and rural forces, rather than providing a review of just one specific police force. Negotiations with The National College of Policing, various policing organisations (e.g., National Police Autistic Association), charities (e.g., Autonomy Shropshire) and research groups (e.g., the Neurodiversity in Criminal Justice Network) allowed the sharing of project details to recruit participants. Recruitment materials were also shared on social networking websites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Participants were asked if they would be willing to share the study details with police colleagues at the end of the interview, in order to utilise a snowball recruitment strategy. Participants were not offered any renumeration for taking part. This sample size reflected previous qualitative studies within the field (for example, Helverschou et al., 2017, had a sample size of nine autistic offenders, and Calton & Hall, 2021, had a sample size of five autistic adults) and therefore deemed to be sufficient to reach saturation of data and provide the depth and saliency required for an empirical research project (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dickie et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2010; Patton, 2014; Saunders & Townsend, 2016).

CHALLENGES WITH ACCESS

Due to time delays during the PhD research, caused by both international pandemics and personal health issues, recruitment of police participants was sought by mostly external advertisements of the research project. During the planning of the project, access was to be gained by negotiating with the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) Evidence Based Practice Research department and recruiting officers only from GMP police. This was a case of applying via an electronic form, having a meeting with the Evidence Based Practice Research board, and then waiting for a decision. I had spoken with a few contacts within GMP, and submitted the form, but unfortunately had to take leave of absence before the meeting could take place. On my return, I had to start this process again, when we were then facing the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, and subsequent lock-downs. This process would have been lengthy and due to the time restraints caused by the above issues, external recruitment of police officers from any force within England and Wales was pursued. An online meeting with the National College of Policing confirmed that this was allowed within their organisation, and I was given approval to recruit individual police officers using public forums. Despite a promising start, with the support of the National College of Policing distributing information about the study, it proved difficult to recruit police officers to participate in the interviews. Over the first five months, only ten police officers were successfully recruited and interviewed. There was a poor attrition rate of interested participants to completion of the interview. Further recruitment 'drives' were carried out, both online and in person by attending GMP police training sessions and giving talks about my research. While these events resulted in over 35 officers providing contact details to take part, none responded to any emails sent following the session. I also contacted multiple policing charities and groups but found many were unwilling to share my project with their members. As Brewer (1990) had acknowledged in his police research, there are two 'gates' to accessing the police force: senior management and *regular* police officers. In my case, the National College of Policing was the first gatekeeper, and thereafter it was necessary to locate individual gatekeepers within police forces, who would be willing to share my recruitment materials and assist in gathering participants. These gatekeepers were identified through networking with key individuals within police forces. I found that once I had built a relationship with one gatekeeper, they then put me in touch with others in difference police forces; it was with these personal

recommendations to colleagues that I was able to access participants. Despite my 'outsider-outsider' status (female and non-police), as described by Jennifer Brown (1996), I was able to build a rapport with each police participant, which allowed us to discuss sensitive and personal topics, lending an aspect of 'insiderness' (Hunt, 1984).

INTERVIEWS

For the purpose of the study, one-to-one interviews were conducted as it was the most appropriate data collection method to explore the knowledge, experiences and attitudes of police officers towards autism. Qualitative analysis has the benefit of obtaining rich, in-depth data about people's perceptions, attitudes and experiences that are unlikely to be captured using quantitative methods (Rhodes & Coomber, 2010). Qualitative data is widely suggested to have the ability to make sense of phenomenon because it brings meaning to them, situates them within the natural contexts and uses interpretive, naturalistic approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ritchie et al., 2003). Literature suggests that the in-depth qualitative interview method provides rich data from individuals within valuable contexts, and allows the collection of emotions, opinions, feelings and experiences (Denscombe, 2017; Holloway, 1997; Ritchie et al., 2003). Qualitative analysis has the ability to ask specific questions about operational processes and decision making, as well as broader questions about occupational culture (Cassell & Symon, 2004; Mason, 2017). It is a well-recognised and naturalistic method, with most people being familiar with interviews and feeling positive about having the opportunity to talk about their work to an interested outsider, whether the interviewee would rather discuss positive aspects of their workplace or speak about complaints (Cassell & Symon, 2004). The semi-structured interview method balances 'normal' everyday conversation and individual narratives, with a research purpose, and allows for specific questions as well as flexibility within the conversation (Kvale, 1996).

The study used semi-structured interviews to allow the researcher to probe and clarify points of interest, refine the questions, and allow the participant freedom to give detailed answers (Horton et al., 2004). Semi-structured interviews supported the research aim, by concentrating on the relationship between knowledge and experiential learning, occupational culture and knowledge sharing and training experiences. The questions were also designed to explore the possible links between policy and procedure guidelines, and

front-line operational working. The interviewing process adopted a cyclic research approach, with the flexibility to amend or add questions based on the responses given throughout the interviewing period (Flick, 1998). Much of the extant work in the area has relied on written surveys, using Likert scales, to gather data relevant to this topic area. By choosing an interviewing method, this study contributes unique, in-depth experiential knowledge to the literature area. This use of methodology had been suggested for future research by previous studies (Crane et al., 2016; Holloway, Munro, Cossburn & Ropar, 2022). The majority of the questions drafted were open-ended, to encourage richer data and more detailed answers from the participants, with the use of probing questions where necessary to elicit more detail and rich, qualitative data (Denscombe, 2010).

The semi-structured interview method also allows exploration perspectives on past, future and hypothetical situations, experience in-depth focus, and participants have the ability to lead the discussion, while still providing rich data (Holloway, 1997). This study had originally considered using observations and focus groups in addition to these interviews. However, due to time constraints caused by mitigating factors during the project, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic affecting both time and safe access to close face-to-face interactions, it was decided that the interviews alone would provide sufficient data to explore the aims of this study. Interviews allow the researcher to provide undistracted focus on the participant, gain accounts of the individual's experiences in detail, with context and the ability to probe and clarify (Holloway, 1989; Ritchie, 2003).

An interview schedule was informed by the literature review, and the questions were developed with guidance from past studies in a way that would gain data to help explore the research aims and objectives (see appendix H for interview guide). As such, the police semi-structured interview guide was split into four sections: *Demographics and Rapport Building, Knowledge of autism, Experiences of autism* and *Transference of Knowledge.* The order of the questions was designed to: 1) explore the participants view of the role of policing and their professional identity within the force; 2) probe understanding of different types of disability; 3) discuss autism within the policing context; 4) reflect on relevant past experiences; 5) explore the transference of knowledge, occupational culture and identify training needs.

Before starting the interview, a short conversation took place to familiarise both the participant and the interviewer with each other, and to aide rapport and comfort. The purpose of the research was explained, and the participant was asked if they were still happy to have the interview recorded using Microsoft (MS) Teams before the recording began. MS Teams displays a banner at the top of the screen to notify participants that the meeting is being recorded, and so the participant was reminded of their rights as a participant of the study, and confidentiality was reminded to put them at ease. The use of synchronous online interviewing is comparable to face-to-face interviewing, having the same non-verbal and social cues as in real life (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Sullivan, 2012). Some researchers have suggested that by using online video-calls, the perception of anonymity is increased, and so too is authenticity, honesty and the presentation of oneself (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Brown, 2018; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). However, there was the potential of challenges with low perceptions of anonymity caused by recording an online meeting which could influence how much participants are willing to disclose and how honest they are willing to be about experiences and perceptions (Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie 2003). To tackle this, before the interview began, participants were reminded that their participation in the study was confidential, with the process being explained to them so that they have confidence in the research progress and their ability to speak freely and honestly, as well as building the trust and confidentiality between researcher and participant.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND RAPPORT BUILDING

The first section gathered demographic details of the participant, details of their role in the police force and their motivation for joining. The demographic details provide some background to the participant, as well as providing some data to allow for any analysis into occupational culture aspects, such as issues around gender and age. Finding out about the officer's career background provides some insight into their journey as a police officer, as well as allowing to understand how autism knowledge and training may benefit particular ranks and specialisms within the police force. Question 5d, *"Would you like to progress further? Why?"* probed the participant's job satisfaction, and attitude towards the hierarchy within the police force and management culture (Brown, 2007; Dick & Jankowicz, 2001; Farkas & Manning, 1997; Manning, 2007). Also in this section, the

question "*What made you join the police?"* taps into police occupational culture and should provide data about how they view their role in the police force, and their motivations for becoming a police officer. The prompts further probed this motivation, seeking to clarify the traits of policing that appealed to them, such as action, peacekeeping, crime control and helping people – these answers help to develop an understanding of how they perceive their role as a police officer within society (Banton, 1964; Fielding, 1994; Loftus, 2010; Punch, 1979; 2010; Reiner, 1987; 2000).

KNOWLEDGE OF AUTISM

The second section explored the participant's knowledge and any stigma of autism, and the questions followed those used by recent previous research (Burch & Rose, 2020; Chown, 2010; Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Modell & Mak, 2008). The questions were designed to be open enough so that the participant could provide as much detail on their understanding and perceptions of autism as they would like, and it was possible to prompt further during the interview. Questions such as "*What does Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism) mean to you?",* which, based on Chown's (2010) research and that of Modell and Mark (2008), probe the participant's knowledge and perceptions of autism. This question also tackles an aspect of intersectionality, on the basis that it allows the participant to discuss aspects of autism with a social constructionist perspective. The concept of autism, while having medical diagnosing factors, has different meanings to different people, and this question allowed the research to explore how each participant understands autism. The further questions in this section explore the ways in which participants identify if somebody has autism, possible intersecting factors that may impede detection of autism, and any relevant previous training and where it was obtained. These questions allow us to understand the current training provisions within the participant's police force, and where any knowledge comes from.

EXPERIENCES OF AUTISM

The third section asked participants about their experiences with autistic individuals and asks them to reflect on these situations. "*Can you recall any experiences with autistic suspects?*", had follow up questions such as "*If this happened again, would you want anything to happen differently?*". This allowed the participant to reflect on a previous experience and identify how their behaviour might change with knowledge and

experience. The second question, "*Do you think that autistic people have any other aspects of their identity that might make them more vulnerable to being stopped by the police?"*, was designed to prompt officers to think about intersectionality and any factors that might influence an encounter with an autistic individual. Intersectionality is a difficult theoretical concept to ask individuals to consider, as we do not tend to consider the different aspects and factors that make up an individual person (Quraishi & Philburn, 2015; Windsong, 2018). It is a challenge to convey the theoretical concepts of intersectionality in a non-academic way that is easy for participants to understand and relate to, in a manner that will achieve empirical data in research (McCall, 2005; Windsong, 2018). This research methodology adopts a non-additive approach to intersectionality; by not addressing any specific intersecting factors (such as race, gender or sexuality), it allowed the participants to discuss any factors together, as they exist within society and their direct experiences. As this concept is so difficult to convey, and there is potential for misunderstanding or confusion, prompts could be added at the researcher's discretion. For instance, "*For example, do you think autistic females are as likely to be stopped by the police as males?"*, and *"How about an autistic male who is also black?".* These prompts were designed to illicit responses that acknowledge known and well-discussed intersecting factors in police engagement (Bowling & Phillips, 2002; Bradford, 2017; Shiner et al., 2019; Smith & Gray, 1985). The decision to keep these additional questions as prompts to use when necessary, and not include them in the main interview schedule was to avoid leading the participants in their answers where possible because this project is not aimed at any pre-identified intersecting themes (Bowleg, 2008; Christensen & Jensen, 2012). Question 4 in this section, "*Have your colleagues ever spoken about experiences with autistic people?*" also goes on to probe learning and knowledge sharing with peers in the police force, influenced by police occupational culture theory (Glomseth, Gottschalk, & Solli-Sæther, 2007; Skolnick, 1966; Van Maanen, 1978).

TRANSFERENCE OF KNOWLEDGE

The final section explored how the officers understand the transference of skills regarding dealing with autistic individuals, as well as probing how they view their job role within the police. These questions help to identify whether participants understand and value training, and are able to apply learning to different areas of their job, as well as

probing their perception of policing in line with occupational culture theory (Bittner, 1974; Cain, 1971; Reiner, 1978; 2000). The first question asks participants *"thinking back to the identifying features of autism, can you think of any other scenarios where people may display these behaviours?"* in order to explore their understanding of autistic traits and possible misunderstandings of these behaviours. It allowed the police officers to discuss any prejudices, stigma or 'perceptual shorthand' that may surround autistic traits, and for the researcher to probe other situations where autism may be mistaken for something else (Holdaway, 1983). The second question was based on the motivation of joining the police force and the police working personality, as discussed earlier in the occupational culture section (Cain, 1983; Reiner, 2000; Skolnick, 1966). It also prompted the participant to talk about aspects of their intersectionality that may be important to them, and how these contribute to their job role. To conclude, the final question asked them to think about future training packages, and how they would prefer these to be delivered, in order to be able to make future recommendations.

To conclude the interview, the participant was thanked for their time, and asked if they have any further questions, comments or if they would like to revisit any points. This helped to ensure transparency with the research process for the participant and maintain their trust and confidence in the study. It also helped to check in with how the participant was feeling following any sensitive information shared and allow them to feel some control over their participation in the interview. They were verbally debriefed and reminded of how their data would be used within the study. An email was also sent shortly after with a debriefing sheet, and also encouraging them to get in touch with any questions or feedback. This debriefing sheet contained details about the study, as well as any relevant helplines and websites for information about the topics discussed.

On completion of the interview, the recording was saved, and the audio file was uploaded to an artificial intelligence transcription service. One the transcript had been created, it was manually reviewed and checked for accuracy and edited to include verbal features (laughter, intonation, jokes, specific context and any pauses). Once the interviews were transcribed, they were securely stored as per the ethical approval in password protected, encrypted files. The participant was issued with a pseudonym, and any

identifying information within the interview (such as names, or when relevant, places), was anonymised in the transcript to ensure anonymity.

Prior to the interviews being carried out with the participants, a test interview was carried out with a colleague to check timing, flow and comprehensibility of questions. This enabled me to make any changes to the wording of questions for ease of understanding, or restructure the interview schedule to ensure that the conversation was not jilted. The test interview, when the schedule was followed, lasted 45 minutes (with detailed example answers given). At this stage, some additional prompts were added to the schedule, and some of the questions in the third section of the police interview were rearranged. During the first few interviews with participants, notes were taken in the researcher diary about the performance of the interviews, including whether any questions required rewording, or additional prompts adding. Some of the questions provided particularly interesting responses that were unexpected, and so I made a note of these in order to probe them in further detail in future interviews. For example, in the demographic section, originally the question *"what made you want to join the police?"* had the prompts *"did you always want to join the police force?"* and *"what did you work as before you joined the police?"* added, following some interesting initial responses. These questions not only provided insight into the participants motivations for joining the police and personality style, but also acted as a great ice-breaker to build rapport, which followed through the rest of the interview.

3.4.2 Direct Experience participants

RECRUITMENT

The study interviewed five autistic individuals who have had direct experience with police interactions, in order to explore their experiences, perceived procedural justice, and to inform the research project. One participant identified as female (age = 34) and the other four as males (age range = 41 – 68). Three (male) participants had completed higher education, with the other two having completed secondary education. All participants were capable of living independently, though two were living with family following their police interaction and subsequent criminal convictions. The three males with higher education had all had successful careers prior to their interactions with the criminal justice system. All participants had self-reported a professional diagnosis of autism, received as adults. Three participants had received a diagnosis following the initial police interaction,

but had self-diagnosed their autism prior to this. All participants had interactions with the police in the past five years as suspects. Two participants had only one police interaction, and one had many interactions, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 2. *Demographics of Direct Experience Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Number of Police Interactions	Length of Interview (hours: minutes)
Amanda	34	Female	30+	0:31
Jeremy	51	Male	3	5:03*
Stewart	41	Male	2	2:04
Daniel	68	Male	1	1:08
Richard	43	Male	1	2:52

* Interview was carried out over messenger on MS Teams

It is vital that studies that research neurodiversity to be conducted with neurodivergent people (Singer, 2017). A number of contacts were made via friends, family and colleagues who were willing to be interviewed about their experiences with the police. Communication with the autistic participants was expected to be, and indeed was, modified for each participant, given the differences in communication styles and challenges that these individuals had. Based on recommendations from literature, an 'easy-read' copy of the participant information sheet and consent form were produced, with larger font and more simplistic language (Gowen et al., 2020; Walmsley, 2004; Watson et al., 2018). These were also proof-read by an autistic consultant for ease of reading and visual processing, including the wording and colours used.

By conceptualising social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, as social venues where many neurodivergent people meet and socialise, it was concluded that these platforms were the best place to advertise details of the study (Dusek et al., 2015). The research poster was shared with subject relevant hashtags in order to reach the target audience, and users were invited to share/retweet the post. This enabled the study to reach a much larger target audience than would have been achieved using traditional methods, particularly given the nature of the population. Specialist colleges and universities that offer SEND courses, were also reached out to, to discuss the possibility of

advertising the study with their students. Local autistic charities and action groups were also approached to share details of the research, but these avenues proved unsuccessful. Participants were not offered any renumeration for their involvement.

The interviews were carried out in different ways in order to make participation accessible to different individuals. Two interviews were conducted using a MS Teams call with audio and video, one using MS Teams but using only the messaging function, one using MS Teams audio only, and the last was completed other the telephone. All the audio-based interviews were recorded and uploaded to the AI transcription software, and the message-based interview was copied and pasted into a MS Word file. All interviews took varying lengths of time, as can be seen in Table 2 above, with the messenger-based interview taking much longer due to breaks requested by the participant. Breaks were offered to all participants throughout the interview.

INTERVIEWS

Each participant received an email prior to the interview, with clear instructions on how to join the MS Teams meeting, and what would happen during the interview. Upon joining the MS Teams meeting and verifying that the connection and audio is okay, I recapped the study information and what their involvement was and explained the structure of the questions. All participants were asked if there was anything that might make them more comfortable during the interview and encouraged to let me know if I could facilitate any changes. Some of the participants chose to have some kind of sensory/fidget tool with them during the interview to help self-regulate. Suggestions of adjustments were made, such as turning cameras off to avoid visual over-stimulation, or using the messaging function instead of speaking if the individual finds it more comfortable (Barratt & Maddox 2016; Debenham, 2001).

The interview schedule was developed to discuss the participant's experiences with police encounters and their resulting attitudes towards police (see appendix I for interview guide). It was split into two sections: *Demographics* and *Police Interactions.* As with the police interview schedule, this interview schedule was also tested out as a recorded interview with a colleague to check for timing and structure, as well as the questions being checked by an autistic consultant to ensure that they could be understood (with rephrasing if need be) and didn't include any ableist or offensive phrasing. Prior to the recorded

interview beginning, the participant was thanked for their interest in taking part, and their rights as a participant were explained. They were asked if they were happy with the interview being recorded, and reassured of the confidentiality, including any reasons for breaking the confidentiality. The process for anonymising the data was explained at this point before the recording began. Because many of the participants had been previously charged with crimes of a sensitive nature, this step proved to play an important role in gaining the trust and confidence of the participant. During the duration of the interview period, I ensured that the space I was using to interview was quiet and undisturbed (as is good practice with any research meeting) and I was able to control the lighting if necessary. Having previously worked with autistic children, where there were often communication barriers, I am well experienced in adapting verbal language during interactions to suit the individual's communication styles. Throughout the interview, I periodically checked that the participant was still comfortable and happy to continue, being aware that speaking about their experiences with the police may be triggering or traumatic. The ethical benefit of using online video-call interviews is that it is even easier for a participant to withdraw from the study than it is in a face-to-face interview – a simple click of a button ends the interview, and although none of the participants used this option, it is perhaps an ethical advantage to the use of technology in this study.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND RAPPORT BUILDING

The first section began with questions to ensure that the participant was comfortable and had given informed consent, and if they required any additional requirements to help them take part in the interview – further adjustments could be made at this point, such as turning video-cameras off, writing questions down or the participant getting fidget toys to help with stimming during the interview. Rapport was developed using these first few questions, particularly "*Can you tell me something about yourself?",* which allows the participant to talk about any of their interests or features in their life to help ease any anxiety about the interview (and the interviewer). This also allowed me as an interviewer to gauge their communication levels and style, to familiarise myself with how best to speak with them during the interview. Further demographic questions asked the participant to describe their ethnicity, race and gender, as well as education history and lifestyle questions. These help to give an insight into the participant's life and

background, providing context for the data analysis. Questions about the participant's autism diagnosis and any comorbid disorders concluded the first section of the interview, as well as asking the participant about their preference on discourse regarding their autism. While this thesis uses identity-first language, rather than person-first, based on literature regarding discourse and autistic preference within academic writing, it is appreciated that individuals will have varying preferences, and so these were be taken into account during the interview to respect the participant (Beardon, 2017; Bottema-Buetel et al., 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2021; Kapp et al., 2013; Kenny et al., 2016).

POLICE INTERACTIONS

The second section in the interview schedule focused on the participant's experience with the police, such as their role during the interaction (suspect, witness, or victim), details about the crime, and their understanding of why they were spoken to by the police ("*Did you understand why you had this interaction with the police?"*). Many of these questions were based on the 'Perceived Procedural Justice Scale', which is a subscale of the 'Police Contact Experience Scale' (Watson et al., 2010). This scale has been used to assess various dimensions of police interactions and has been used to explore interactions between the police and civilians experiencing mental illness (Jones & Thomas, 2019; Livingston et al., 2014), as well as between autistic individuals and the police (Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Although this scale is usually employed as a qualitative measurement using a 4-point Likert scale, the current study made the choice to adapt the questions for use in interviews in order to gather a richer level of data. These questions were adapted from items on a likert scale, and slightly rephrased to allow for probing, open-ended interview questions. For example, the original PPJ subset questionnaire in the PCES asks the participant to rate this statement:

2. The officer(s) treated me respectfully……1 2 3 4

This was altered for the interview schedule as *"Did they treat you with respect?"*, with prompts to probe why or why not. This allowed me to find out which aspects of the interaction made them feel that they were/were not treated with respect, gathering a richer level of data. Whether the individual disclosed their diagnosis to the police, and reasoning allowed the study to draw some comparisons with the Crane *et al* (2016) study, as well as better understanding the reasons for disclosure or non-disclosure. It was then

explored how disclosure, or lack of, was perceived to have affected the way that the participant was treated by the police and any adjustments that were made.

Specific questions were designed to explore themes of intersectionality, such as "*Thinking about your gender, race and autism, which do you feel is the most important to you? Or is it hard to think of them as separate identities?*". While this question tackles a difficult concept, it also was important to be in as simple format as possible to minimise confusion. The inclusion of themes of gender and race are included to encourage the participant to consider these different aspects of their identity. The participant was then prompted to explore other aspects of their identity that may be considered as intersecting factors during a police encounter. The interview concluded by asking the participant if they had anything they would like to add or discuss further. This ensures that the participant had the opportunity to clarify any points, ask any questions and that they feel confident with the outcome of the interview and that they had been heard. As with the police interviews, the interview was closed by thanking the participant for taking part in the study, and the next steps explained. A debriefing email was sent, including a MS Word document that included information about charities, helplines and websites regarding the topics discussed and support for autism. Participants were encouraged to get in touch should they have any questions about their involvement or the project, or any feedback. The option to keep in touch after their participation, or to receive updates about the project was something that I felt strongly about, given that some autistic individuals have voiced dissatisfaction about their involvement in research being restricted to the participation only, feeling 'used' (Gowen et al., 2020).

3.4.3 Obstacles Experienced in Study

Engaging with the Autistic Stakeholders

The autistic population have been considered to be a difficult population to reach for participation within research projects (Beadle-Brown et al., 2012). A significant disconnect between the academic researchers and the autistic community has been of concern, with the autistic community complaining about a lack of engagement and dissatisfied with the interpretations drawn from studies about them (Chown et al., 2017; Milton, 2014; Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014; Pellicano & Stears, 2011; Woods and Walz, 2019). However, more recently, there is an understandable demand from the

autistic community to be involved in research, represented by the slogan "*Nothing about us without us"* (Walmsley, 2004; Walmsley, Strnadová and Johnson, 2018). Hence, it is important that this project involves autistic individuals so that their voice is heard within the research, and literature can be appropriately informed by the social group of which it includes. There have been a number of factors identified that can inhibit autistic individuals from taking part in research projects, such as time and travel inconveniences and an inability (or unwillingness) to make suitable adjustments in the study methods (Haas et al., 2016). As this project was conducted remotely, utilising a variety of involvement methods, autistic individuals were able to be involved in the project.

3.5 Research Limitations

As this research explores topics which have not yet been analysed together, such as police occupational culture and autism, and how occupational culture may play a part in how the police perceive autistic suspects and their actions. As with any unique exploratory research, there are a number of limitations and challenges.

Due to the recruitment challenges of both the police participants and autistic participants with direct experience, combined with the need to redesign the methods in light of strict social distancing, the sample size for both groups in this study was restricted. A larger sample size would have allowed for more generalisability of findings. However, the police sample in this study contained a variety of police ranks, from different forces across England and Wales, which provided a varied sample. It is also acknowledged that by using a volunteer/self-selection method of recruitment, the likelihood is that those officers who participated may have done so because they had a prior interest or connection to autism or neurodiversity. As such, it is expected that the current sample of participants may have more knowledge than a randomised sample. This is indeed a limitation of the study, and hence the decision to also interview autistic individuals with direct experience allows us to seek balanced perspectives and see 'the other side' of the coin.

I must also acknowledge that there may be some social desirability bias within my findings, which could impact on the limitation of validity. Literature suggests that researcher-administered data collection may yield more social desirability biased answers than self-administered collection methods (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000).

Participants may, to an extent, have given the responses that they thought I wanted to hear. This is perhaps more pertinent with the police participants, who may have responded in a way to show their best 'side' and represent their police force well. Without observations of these participants in the situations discussed, there is no way to validate their responses. The original research proposal and ethical approval application, I had included observations as a data collection method, which would have provided some validity to the data. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, this was not possible with COVID-19 safeguarding and the time limitations as a result of the pandemic. Despite this, literature suggests that internet-based interviews, such as using Microsoft Teams, enhances participant's disclosures, a feeling of less judgement, and improves the richness of data gathered (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009; Mann & Stewart, 2000). As the participants were interviewed in a place of their choosing (e.g., their home, or office at work), rather than in an unfamiliar setting, there was less imposition and therefore they were more comfortable. Further, for participants with disabilities or social anxieties, there are fewer barriers to access, and so there is more opportunity for inclusivity (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

This research originally intended to include the theory of intersectionality, with some of the questions included within the interview schedule targeting aspects of intersectionality, as was discussed earlier in this chapter (in the 'interviews' sub-sections). In autism and policing research, there is a dearth of literature on autism, intersectionality and policing, particularly with regards to autistic suspects and intersectional factors. However, during the interviews it became apparent that intersectionality was too complex an issue to tackle with a few questions as part of a larger interview. Participants often struggled to understand the concept, and the questions yielded minimal data. As this theoretical concept helped to shape my thinking and perspective through the earlier stages of the PhD, up until the analysis phase, I felt it was important to retain these questions within the material of the thesis for transparency. I also hope that this aspect of the study might provide a basis for future research, which will be discussed in further detail in the concluding chapter (Chapter 9).

There are also, as with any data collection method, criticisms of qualitative research, with some proposing that they bypass philosophical issues and settle for 'what works',

presenting a naïve operation (Tashakkori & Teddllie, 2003). It has been argued that they do not provide 'scientific' data; instead, they are a collection of anecdotes and perceptions, subjected to heavy amounts of researcher bias (Mays & Pope, 1995). Another criticism is that the methods of qualitative enquiries lack transparency of the process and adequate detail about the sample (Coyne, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, this was addressed by providing thorough details about the methodology used and reflexivity of processes and positionality, as well as an analysis of the sample group within the thesis. By maintaining transparency throughout the research process, the study is still able to benefit from methodological rigour (Higginbottom, 2004).

3.6 – Data Analysis

This study used Braun and Clarke's (2016; 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b; 2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis method (RTA). Thematic Analysis (TA) allows the study of power relations in research that engages with oppressed populations, such as the autistic community in this study, as well as the study to understand people's experiences, behaviours, and thoughts such as the police sample (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). A commonly used analysis methodology within social sciences, Braun and Clarke have 'rebranded' TA as RTA, to emphasise the role of the researcher within the analysis as an analytic resource and their role in reflexively engaging with the data and theory (Braun & Clarke, 2019a; 2019b; Terry et al., 2017). It acknowledges that the researcher plays an interpretive role in engaging with and analysing the data, requiring them to be mindful of their own experiences, emotions, and the impact that this will have on their interpretation of the data (Hill & Dao, 2020; Sherry, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2022) state that the key to successful RTA is acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher, and that research is inescapably shaped by the researcher (p.12). Suitable for different theoretical frameworks and ontological positions, this method allows for the themes to be generated *from* the data (inductive) *and* the researcher's theoretical framework (deductive). This differs from the inductive qualitative analysis methodologies like Grounded Theory, in that the analysis can be guided by both theory and the data (Braun & Clark, 2012; Varpio et al., 2019). RTA was deemed to be the appropriate analysis method to use for this study, because it allowed the research to be informed by police occupational culture, intersectionality and procedural

justice, as well as the possibility for inductive analysis exploring the latent and semantic meanings within the data.

Braun and Clarke state that as the coding process is 'organic and unstructured', and the codes have the ability able to evolve with the researcher's understanding of the data (2020, p.39). They state that this process is subjective, and that it requires the researcher to be reflexive and willing to reflect on how assumptions and perceptions may influence their coding. Given that this research project is my first solo qualitative piece of research, RTA provides a lot of practical guidance and flexibility, and although there are other methodologies that would also be suitable to analyse the data (such as grounded theory or interpretive phenomenological analysis), the flexibility and ability to primarily generate themes *across* cases, rather than solely *within* individual cases made RTA a more appealing choice (Fassinger, 2005; Willig, 2013). It aligns with the paradigmatic underpinnings of the research and the semi-structured interview methodology, and also allows for a complex and rich understanding of the data, something that I felt was important given the lack of qualitative research in the topic area (Braun & Clarke, 2019a; Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

RTA consists of six phases; 1) familiarisation, 2) generating initial codes, 3) generating themes, 4) reviewing potential themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) writing up the findings report (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In keeping with these phases, the data transcription and editing served as the familiarisation period, in which I listened to each interview several times (Braun & Clark, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). While using the artificial intelligence (AI) transcription service was helpful, it needed editing to ensure the data included orthographic details, which the AI tool was unable to record. Long pauses, different tones of speaking (such as sarcasm), laugher and 'crutch words', like "umm" and "ahh". These aspects of conversation are crucial to understand the context of discourse. Once accurately transcribed, I then read through each transcript again, ensuring that I was fully familiar with the interviews, and made notes in my researcher diary of any initial trends, or thoughts that I had about the interviews. I also made notes about any thoughts or feelings that I had during each phase of analysis.

Once the data had been fully transcribed, it was imported into NVivo 12 for coding. A 'code' is defined as "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998,

p.63). It is important that these codes do not overlap each other and are distinct, and by using NVivo software, keeping track of these codes is much more efficient (Nowell et al., 2017). A number of transcripts were initially coded using printed copies, in the more traditional method. However, it had cost and resource implications, as well as being quite messy to maintain and reference. It was also noted that when coding the same transcript using both methods, the paper coded version yielded fewer unique codes than the version coded using NVivo. Because NVivo enables easy reference to all codes created amongst all transcripts, it can act as a prompt when recalling different codes. While NVivo software has an 'auto-coding' function, it was decided that it would be more reliable and thorough to conduct the coding manually, line-by-line, to ensure that the data was thoroughly analysed and that no data was missed. Research has suggested that solely using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo can distance the researcher from the data they are analysing (McLafferty & Farley, 2006; Zamawe, 2015). Hence, the approach chosen allowed the data to be organised electronically while maintaining the closeness to the research needed to ensure that the analysis is thorough and reliable, and no pertinent data is missed (Zamawe, 2015; Welsh, 2002). In this way, the software was used more as a supplement to traditional analysis, rather than an alternative method.

After spending time transcribing and familiarising myself with the data fully, codes were both identified both at a latent and semantic level, as well as being informed by the theoretical framework of the research project. These codes were labelled using descriptive labels, which allowed for understanding of how I interpreted the data (see tables in appendix L and M for example of themes, codes and quotes). These codes were selected pieces of data, grouped into general areas of interest or areas that reoccurred throughout the data. For example, some initial codes within the police dataset were 'Danger', 'Power' and 'Detecting Differences'. Some codes were deductive (using theoretical framework to view the data, and looking for specific things, such as facets of occupational culture), and some codes were inductive (developed from the data). As my data consisted of numerous interview transcripts, this initial coding stage resulted in over 600 codes for the police dataset, and 375 codes for the direct experience dataset. At this point, I consulted with my supervisors for guidance, given that this coding phase felt quite intimidating, and they

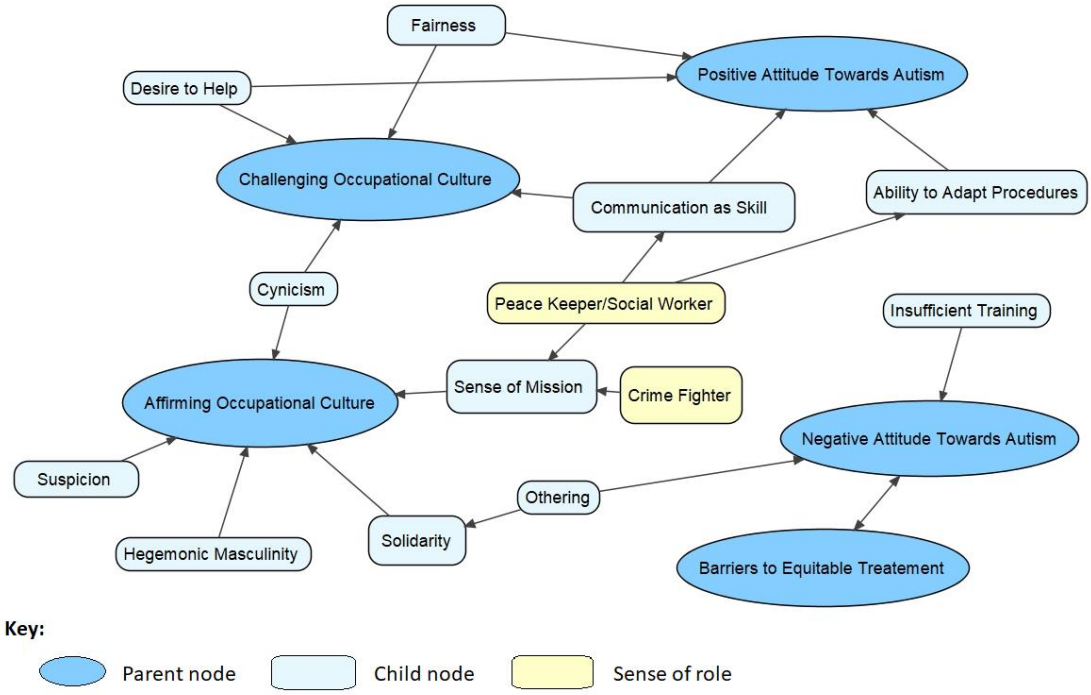
had experience in thematic analysis. With their assurance, I took time to read through all the transcripts and codes to ensure that all relevant data had been coded correctly. At this stage, some codes were refined to remove any duplicate codes, and that the code labels were accurate and informative ahead of the next stage of analysis. Some of the code labels were changed to better reflect their content, such as '*female discrimination, bias, stereotypes'* was changed to *'hegemonic masculinity'*, to better reflect the data with regards to police occupational culture.

The next stage of RTA, generating themes, is often described as 'searching' for themes. However, this is deceptive and removes the active role of the researcher in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 20221). Themes are constructed from the different codes, in a means of construing shared meaning of codes and relationships between the data in such a way that helps to answer the research questions. These themes were constructed in partnership with the theoretical framework of the study, and relate to the identified aspects of occupational culture in order to answer the research questions. Not all codes were allocated to a theme, and were later archived for the purposes of this thesis.

As part of stage four, the themes were reviewed, both to make sure that the codes contained within are appropriately suited to the theme, and that the themes themselves contribute to answering the research questions with an informed interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, some themes were found to be overlapping, and so were combined, whereas others did not serve to address the research aims and were archived. For many of the deductive themes, these ended up becoming sub-themes within larger umbrella themes; such as *'Cynicism'* and *'Suspicion'* which became grouped under the theme of 'Affirming Occupational Culture'.

I spent many days in front of a large chalkboard in my home office, grouping together codes and exploring how these themes interact with each other. This was particularly challenging because despite being aware of these interactions when reading the transcripts and codes, I found it difficult to articulate this outside of my own mind. This chalkboard 'mind map' was then created using NVivo, to demonstrate how each theme and sub-theme interacts in figure 3.

Figure 3. *Police Group Thematic Map*



As can be seen, some of themes relate to each other, while some contradict others. This analytic process is cyclic and recursive, and the transcripts were continually revisited throughout the process to ensure that the analysis has been completed to the best of my ability, and that no codes or themes had been missed (Braun & Clark, 2006; Flick, 1998; King, 2004).

The fifth phase, *Defining and Naming Themes*, naturally followed on from the previous phase. In having spent time in front of a chalkboard mapping out the themes, I had been mentally defining them in order to understand how they interact and would be placed within my thesis. I had developed an understanding of what each theme was 'about', and what story it told with relation to my participants and my research.

Finally, once all the themes were "fully worked out", stage six involves writing up the findings, and telling the story of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p.93). This includes selecting excerpts and quotes from the data to demonstrate the points of each theme; a task which felt very rewarding following the intensive stages! I found that for most of the themes, I already had particular quotes in mind from various participants. These quotes

had imprinted the story of my data and themes, and for me, were the essence of the themes. However, as Braun et al. (2018) state, this is still part of the analysis phase, and should still be flexible. As I was writing up the findings chapter, I found that some changes to the organisation of themes and sub-themes helped to make the data easier to understand. For example, rather than writing up separate sections for 'Affirming Occupational Culture' and 'Challenging Occupational Culture', it made more sense to organise them under one heading of 'Occupational Culture', with the subthemes discussed in sub-headings. My research aims were not to support or argue the existence of occupational culture, but rather to use it as a theoretical lens to view attitudes and behaviours through.

The keeping of a researcher diary serves to aid the writing up of analysis and remind me how I arrived at certain decisions and chose specific data extracts. King (2004) suggests that the writing up stage and presentation of findings is part of the analytical process, rather than a separate phase, because the researcher continues to interpret the data during this period. This was particularly helpful, given that I carried out this process separately with two sets of lengthy data (the police participants, and the direct experience participants), and the diary helped me to note down thoughts during each stage, which I could refer to when writing up the findings and conclusion chapters.

3.7 Study Reliability and Credibility

Despite being the most frequently used method of qualitative analysis, Thematic Analysis does have limitations and this study acknowledges these. It can be very easy to lack research transparency and researcher reliability without sufficient documentation of the decision-making process, and reflective thought being given to the process (Nowell et al., 2017). This has been acknowledged by the keeping of a researcher diary throughout the data collection and analysis stages. While many critiques of thematic analysis focus on the reliability of coding, and minimisation of researcher bias, Braun and Clarke (2020) claim that these criticisms are misguided. *"Demonstrating coding reliability and the avoidance of 'bias' is illogical, incoherent and ultimately meaningless in a qualitative paradigm and in reflexive TA, because meaning and knowledge are understood as situated and contextual"* (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p.7).

Chapter 4 – Police Findings

"You know, I've never had the training. But by the same token, I've never had any training in dealing with people with cancer or dealing with people with heart conditions or dealing with people with dementia, anything, anything at all. So, you know, there, there are a lot of people who, particularly on nights, a lot of cops will say that ***we only ever come across the mad, the sad and the bad****. And that's, you know, that that's, you know, quite, quite a broad, broadly helpful category that most people fit into. Particularly in the dark of the night when you know, when everyone is asleep and the people you tend to come across are always classified as either mad, sad or bad."*

(Simon, 55, Superintendent).

4.1 Introduction

The analysis of the data developed several themes: *perception of disability, understanding of autism, insufficient autism training, barriers to equitable treatment, ability to adapt* and *evidence of occupational culture.* Some of these themes have sub-themes, which are illustrated in the thematic map below, particularly the evidence of occupational culture. This chapter will analytically discuss each theme, referring to examples of the data, ahead of the discussion chapter which will connect these themes in the broader landscape of research.

This chapter begins with a topic summary of *perceptions of disability*, which I consider to be an important foundation for understanding how the police view autism and *difference*. Their perceptions of disability, and indeed, of autism, impact how they approach encounters and interactions with autistic people in all aspects of police work. The section demonstrates and discusses the mixed perceptions of disability that police participants demonstrated, including those that adopted a medical model of disability, and those who aligned with the social model. We then move on to *understanding of autism*, exploring both positive and negative attitudes. Again, these link with the perceptions of disability, and the medical and social models of disability. This section demonstrates the lack of clarity that participants had about how to discuss, and what it actually is. There was

a tendency for participants to confuse autism with mental health, which raises concerns due to their neurological differences. The reasons for this confusion are considered and discussed, and the challenges that confusion may bring to police interactions. *Autism and neurodiversity training* in the police is explored. Of the fifteen participants, only four claimed that they had received any autism training. Issues raised by the lack of training and knowledge are discussed, along with examples given by participants of why this lack of training is problematic for police officers.

The theme of *barriers to equitable treatment* included discussions around identifying autism, whether that be through the individual disclosing a diagnosis, or the police officer identifying neurodivergence. Participants discussed obstacles in identifying autism during encounters, such as misconstruing behaviours and interpreting autistic characteristics as evidence of drug use, or guilt. A theme of *ability to adapt* follows, in which both policy and personal adjustments made for autistic individuals are explored. The knowledge and usage of autism awareness schemes was evidenced in some participants, but not across all interviews. Finally, this chapter explores the deductive theme of *occupational culture*, in line with the research questions. This is split into sub-sections corresponding with some of the traditional police characteristics discussed in the literature review, and some additional themes such as *fairness, communication as a tool,* and *desire to help*.

4.2 Perceptions of Disability

This chapter begins with a topic summary of the participant's perceptions of disability, as explored by the interview participants. While this thesis is focused on autism specifically, the police attitudes towards disability provide an important view of how the police view and understand disability within their role. While autism is a neurological difference, attitudes towards disability are insightful; whether their perceptions fall within the medical or social model of disability, and how this might impact on their treatment of this population during work. Those who adopt a social model of disability, acknowledge that neurodiversity is a difference in cognition and behaviour, deemed a disability only by the social structures they exist within. Whereas, the medical model of disability frames neurodiversity, and hence autism, as deficits and disorders (Woods, 2017).

Participants were prompted to discuss their perceptions of disability with the question *"When I say the word 'disability', what does it mean to you?"*. Participants tended to frame disability as a physical or mental condition that meant the individual required some level of deficit, indicating a medical approach to disability. As can be seen from this quote from Janet, who seemed to struggle with articulating her perception of disability, while also placing a focus on the deficits of the disability.

"Anybody that would... Got a permanent... Illness. Who would find it difficult to do things as easily as everybody else. So, you know... To me, I, it's strange because I see it as like, okay, you're going to need, you might need a little help here to do certain things, or you may need things to be explained a bit different or you may need me to make other arrangements for you because you maybe can't walk somewhere so it's just adjusting for me. I don't see them as being any different." (Janet, 50, P.C.).

This thinking of disability as an illness is particularly problematic for those with autism and neurodiversity. Believing that all disabilities are illnesses, allows for the belief that they are curable and undesired, not simply a *difference*, potentially leading to a less inclusive approach to disabilities. Janet also commented that she didn't view people with a disability as being 'any different' to abled people. In this context, she was trying to convey that she didn't actively discriminate against those with disabilities. However, by failing or refusing to identify the differences between disabled and abled people, they are unable to then provide appropriate adjustments, in order to ensure equality in line with The Equality Act 2010. By insisting that everybody is treated the same, it fails to take account for structural disadvantages in society. As discourse and language has the ability to reproduce power, social structure and reinforce hegemonic perceptions of culture, this alignment with the medical model of disability reflects the participants fundamental understanding of disability and the social hierarchy (Ahearn, 2010; Lawless & Chen, 2018). This perception of disability being negative was echoed by other participants:

"Well, I suppose hampered by something. You know, they've got something that you know, ***they struggle*** *with, or it* ***holds them back****, you know, from doing something, depends on what the disability is."* (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

"An accident it could be an attack or something like that but it leaves them at a ***disadvantage*** *and this is where reasonable adjustments are made."* (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

While some participants indicated an awareness of reasonable adjustments being required to ensure equity (and compliance with The Equality Act 2010), their language remained medicalised, referring to disabilities as deficits in a negative sense, as demonstrated by Graham.

"Disability, I would think of a condition or whether it be lifelong or whether it be the result of an incident, whereby that person is at a disadvantage and less appropriate steps were put in place for, to counter to, […] reasonable adjustment. Is the word that they use, so without that reasonable adjustment they will be at a disadvantage compared to somebody who didn't have that disability." (Graham, 41, D.C.).

On the other hand, some of the responses were framed in a way such that it is clear to see the social model of disability being adopted. This participant, a police officer with 21 years-of service, who had received no autism training from the police, voiced their dislike of the term 'disability', due to the negative framing of the language.

"So, you know, if you talk about disability, the word itself makes it sound like somebody who can't perform something, you're focusing on their inability to do something rather than the whole person. […] Why are you focusing on that one negative aspect? So, I don't like the word disability personally, because it does have those negative connotations. Does that make sense?" (Martin, 52, P.C.).

By rejecting the deficit-based medical model of disability, Martin demonstrated a different outlook on disability within broader society. He touches on the idea that society constructs disability, based on an individual's impairments, and thus, ignore their abilities and contributions (Bingham et al., 2013). By viewing disabled people as 'different', rather than 'broken', we are one step closer to equality by allocating the onus of inclusivity to society, rather than the individual (Brittain, 2004; Palmer & Harley, 2012). This will be discussed later more specifically relating to autism.

4.3 Understanding of Autism

While all the police officers and staff interviewed displayed some level of autism awareness, there was a mixed level of understanding displayed during the interviews. Participants tended to focus on observable traits and behavioural cues, such as stimming, meltdowns and deficits, suggesting a mostly medicalised attitude towards neurodiversity, and more specifically autism.

Throughout the interviews with police officers, there seemed to be a near constant *awareness* of autism, alongside a hesitancy, almost fear, of being perceived as politically incorrect. This hesitancy, orally punctuated by 'thinking noises', 'uhms' and 'err's, and a tendency to give quite convoluted answers, often relying on personal experiences to support their thought processes. Given the complexity of conceptualising and defining autism in a real-world environment, this is understandable. For example, Janet and Martin's quotes below provides a good demonstration of the complexity of verbalising their perception of autism.

"You know how people behave, if they don't... If they come into custody and they don't explain that they have... Y'know, they've been diagnosed then, on, on the spectrum then it can be quite difficult if they're quite aggressive and they won't engage. It just means because, because of their difficulties they don't engage. That's part of theirs [their autism] but you don't know that so it's like to trying... Whereas before I'd probably been "oh my gosh what the hell's this one talking... Why is this one being like this now?" Now, I'll be like "right okay, is there a reason why they're like this?" Y'know instead of just thinking oh my god they're just being really obnoxious and they're just being really rude and things, I'll be like "right okay, why is this happening?" So they have some difficulties of some sort. Let's get hold of somebody and see. Because they may not tell us you need to get hold of the parents sometimes and ask them, y'know?" (Janet, 50, P.C.).

"I think it is that just a different way of thinking about things to general population, but it's you know, I mean, there's so many aspects to autism, you know, that there is no one... You know, there are common traits, but they're not present all the time. So autism is, it's a bit, it's a peculiar one. I don't think there is any… The definition of it changes all the time." (Martin, 52, P.C.).

Whereas Simon quite openly admitted that there is a fear of offending people through discourse, particularly surrounding autism, capturing the volatility of many autism and neurodiversity movements and communities, particularly on social media (Dwyer, 2022; Shakes & Cashin, 2020). Similar findings have been discussed in relation to religion (Wilkinson et al, 2023, p.221).

"I think the language is so difficult because you gotta be so careful not to offend" (Simon, 55, Superintendent).

All of the participants were able to provide an answer to the question *"What does autism mean to you?"*, although their answers significantly differed in length and clarity. This question was not aiming to elicit a definition of autism from participants, rather it was designed to allow participants to talk about how they understood autism and their perceptions of autism and neurodiversity. It probed whether participants thought about autism in line with social or medical models of disability, whether they framed it as deficits or difference. The below excerpt from Martin's interview illustrates his understanding of autism, aligned with the social model of disability.

"I mean, it is just a developmental difference. What's it mean to me? See, one of the lads on a Thursday, the group I go to, really, really, really bright, really expressive for and erm.. He talked about one of the people at school, he said, one of the things I hated at school was they used to say, you think differently to me, that's what autism is. And he said, ***doesn't everyone's brain work differently to everyone else's?*** *[...]* ***I think it is that, just a different way of thinking about things to general population****, but it's you know, I mean, there's so many aspects to autism, you know, that there is no one. You know, there are common traits, but they're not present all the time. So Autism is it's a bit, it's a peculiar one. I don't think there is any, the definition of it changes all the time."* (Martin, 52, P.C.).

Martin relies on experiential knowledge of autism to discuss his understanding of it, demonstrating the challenge of providing a definition. By understanding autism as a *difference* in development and thinking, he frames autism as neither positive or negative; it is simply different to the norm, without judgement. Martin volunteers (outside of work) at a social group for adolescent autistic and neurodivergent individuals, which might explain his approach and perception of autism. Direct experience provides an opportunity

to learn and understand, providing the chance to break down stereotypes and any stigmas one holds. Conversely, Georgia stated that she had no personal connection to autism (or further neurodiversity), such as family or friends who had been diagnosed. Although through her role, she had received more thorough training on vulnerability, which did include some training on autism, her response to the same question demonstrates a more medical approach to disability.

"Erm... I know it's a spectrum. And it's like, think the way I had it in one of my training courses. It's like, it was like a semicircle. And it's sort of like there's different varying parts to it. And there's different ***symptoms*** *[…] but yeah, different traits to it, that some people like the organisation and then the routine that there's a different... is a spectrum of different needs. Some of it's like* ***the lack of eye contact*** *or the social element of it"* (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

By referring to autistic characteristics (or traits) as *symptoms*, and a focus on the deficits presented, this suggests a more medicalised approach to autism. She does, however, acknowledge the variability of behaviour and characteristics, and individuality of the condition.

Participants conflated autism with mental health, without any mention of mental health from me during the interview, as found in previous studies (Chown, 2010; Modell & Mak, 2008). This is unsurprising, given that autism is currently covered under the Mental Health Act (1983). Research has found that autism training in the police, where provided, is currently delivered within the mental health module, which further adds to the confusion (Dickie et al., 2018; Hepworth, 2017; Holloway et al., 2020). However, as part of successful campaigning by the National Autistic Society, autism will be removed from this Act (estimated in 2023). This confusion between autism and mental health can be problematic during police encounters, simply because autism is not a mental health issue, and cannot be treated as such. They require different approaches and adjustments. It also means that, until the reformed Mental Health Act is introduced, autistic individuals can be arrested and detained, or 'sectioned' under section 136 of The Mental Health Act (1983) purely because of their autism. This confusion was apparent in some of the below responses, particularly that from Georgia who describes stereotypical obsessive-

compulsive disorder (OCD) behaviours, attributing them to autism. While OCD can exist in addition to a diagnosis of autism, it is a mental health diagnosis with significantly different behaviours, and treatment to any neurodivergent condition. This confusion may lead to incorrect or unsuitable treatment, adjustments or outcomes for individuals in police custody.

"Where we've got like, when I say mental health, I mean a bit, bits like autism, ADHD, all those kinds of things." (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

"'I think this person's got er, mental health issues'." (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

"Sometimes you do have to wipe stuff down or shut a door so many times, or the handles and stuff. So, it's sometimes it's what they do. It's like a routine for them. And it's normal for them to just do that, but it's like an indicator to me of that." (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

"I think any sort of neurodiversity training would be beneficial to be fair, because the, you know, we deal with not just, I know, I focused on autism, but you know, we do deal with psychosis, whether it's chemical induced or whatever we deal with, and a whole range of mental health issues. […] So yeah, I think a much broader range of Mental Health Training would be very beneficial." (Martin, 52, P.C.).

However, some participants did differentiate between autism and mental health, suggesting an awareness and frustration that the two are often confused. Interestingly, while Simon had personal experience with autism, and hence could be expected to have some knowledge and passion about awareness, Graham did not have any personal connection to autism. His interest and knowledge had come from several police interactions with autistic individuals, and he had initiated his own education about neurodiversity.

"The training we've got in relation to mental health throughout my service, was about section 136 Mental Health Act. It was about understanding what mental health was, not autism… They just all get labelled as having a mental health condition." (Simon, 55, Superintendent).

"I think it should be probably more in the frontline, there's lots of things that should be in the training that you know, they probably can't fit in. But yeah, I think it should be - it's different to mental health and I think people bundle it with mental health." (Graham, 41, D.C.).

These excerpts illustrate the participant's awareness of not only the lack of specific autism training, but also the problematic nature of conflating autism with mental health. Simon had 30 years of experience in policing, and pointed out that the training of police officers was tied in with detaining somebody under section 136 of The Mental Health Act. As discussed earlier, this can be problematic for autistic individuals, and it also demonstrates the adoption of the medical model of disability in policing at an organisational level. However, as police officers are not specifically trained to deal with autism (along with many other neurodevelopmental conditions, by detaining somebody who appears to be in crisis and taking them for an assessment by a suitable medical professional, does provide opportunity to find the most appropriate treatment for that individual. It removes the responsibility of decision-making from the police officer, to a better-trained and more equipped person, such as a doctor or psychiatrist. It is important that this option is only used during situations where the police believe the individual to present immediate danger to themselves or others.

Positive Attitudes Towards Autism

"And that's the other thing with neurodiversity is that I always say, Well, let's look at the positives. Not the negatives. We always judge people in the negatives, don't we? We always say," Oh, wait, he got this. You can't do that". But what about the positives?" (Sam, 44, Inspector).

While there was confusion from participants about what autism *was*, most officers demonstrated a positive attitude towards autism, neurodiversity and differences on the whole. Contrary to their tendency to use medicalised language, they often discussed difference in a positive manner and demonstrated some knowledge about the variability of characteristics, as touched on in the previous section with Georgia's quote. This is further supported by the below quotes:

"It goes back to your initial question - is it a disability? No, it's not. Is it a mental health condition? No, it's not. You know, is it a learning disability? No, it is not. […] Their normal is just different to ours." (Graham, 41, D.C.).

"I think it is that just a different way of thinking about things to general population, but it's you know, I mean, there's so many aspects to autism, you know, that there is no one. You know, there are common traits, but they're not present all the time. So, Autism is it's a bit… It's a peculiar one. I don't think there is any, the definition of it changes all the time." (Martin, 52, P.C.).

"And that I think, is something that people often misunderstand is that there can be varying degrees for the same person with the same condition over different periods of time" (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

Conceptualising neurodivergence (and autism specifically), as *difference* was a common theme in interviews. This very much follows the social model of disability, and is a positive finding in the study. By framing autism as a difference rather than deficit or impairment, it demonstrates an acceptance of individuality which extends not only to autistic people, but encompasses many types of *difference*. Autism, for decades, has been viewed as an abnormality in behaviour, which can be 'trained' out of people (using interventions such as ABA), to make them behave more 'normally' and in a way that is socially acceptable. By acknowledging this *difference*, police are a step closer to a more inclusive view of the public. For example:

"Autism, to me, it's just a difference. A different way of doing things and understanding the world and existing in the world." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

"So, from a very, very early age, I was around different differences, whether that be physically different, or, you know, mentally different, you know, emotionally different." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"Oh, God, again, it's a big, it's a big topic, isn't it? So? It, everyone's different." (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

While some of these participants had personal experience with autism (and other neurodiverse conditions, such as ADHD), others did not. It suggests that while personal connection to autism might improve one's understanding and knowledge, the adoption of a social model of disability may be influenced by other factors. As mentioned in the previous section, Graham reported that he had no direct relationships with autistic individuals, yet we can see in his dialogue above that he feels very strongly about autism not being labelled as a disability, purely due to the *difference* in thinking. This very much follows the social model, with disability being created by the social environment, rather than it being a constant. This idea of the fluidity of disability is reiterated in Martin and Jessica's quotes. By acknowledging the transient nature of an impairment, based on its environment (amongst other factors), it creates opportunity for a more inclusive approach to neurodiversity. This was echoed by other participants:

"One of the examples I use in relation to the disability, especially with autism is if someone doesn't have legs, we don't expect them to walk upstairs. We either give them a lift, or we give them artificial legs, or we find a different way of doing it. But when it comes to autism, or ADHD, or neurodiversity, we go, they can't do it. They can't do it. Rather than go, why wouldn't you try and find a different way?" (Sam, 44, Inspector).

Natalie was the only participant to discuss gender differences in autism, unprompted by myself. *"Autism is a neurodivergent condition. It's obviously, again, it's a spectrum, you can get... It presents differently in men and women."* (Natalie, 29, P.C.). This may have been due to her education prior to joining the police force, as she stated that she had received no autism (or broader neurodiversity) training from the police. It is important for police to know that there are differences in how male and female autistic people present behaviourally; females are more prone to masking their autism and this can make it particularly challenging for others to identify. In this way, it may result in autistic females being more vulnerable during police encounters if police are unaware of their diagnosis, and therefore not providing reasonable adjustments to ensure equality and due process.

Negative Perceptions of Autism

Having discussed the positive perceptions of autism in the previous section, this section looks at the negative and stereotypical perceptions. Given previous literature, these stereotypical attitudes were not unexpected, but what was interesting was that

some of the participants seemed to hold both positive and negative attitudes. Natalie, who, as discussed in the previous section, was the only participant to demonstrate knowledge of the gender differences in autism, made this comment: *"Oh, they're a little bit odd. And oh, they're... they've got autism."* (Natalie, 29, P.C.). While illustrating an ability to identify *difference*, her wording suggests a negative attitude towards difference. Although this may not be a conscious negativity in her dialogue, nevertheless it is representative of her perception. These negative attitudes and perceptions were further demonstrated by other participants:

"It just, it feels a bit awkward, like not the situation but they're just, I feel like they feel a bit awkward." (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

"And I know it sounds terrible, but autism does come a lot of the time with a certain 'look' […] Because some of the autistic kids we work with, just look like, I hate to use the work, a normal person, you know, what I mean? There's not physically anything distinguishing about them." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

This quote from Brian really struck me, every time I heard (and read) it. It touches on the stigma faced by autistic people; the judgement that comes from them 'looking normal', and acting differently to neurotypicals. He implies that autistic people are *not* normal people, which might suggest that, whether consciously or not, they are treated differently to neurotypical people, further contributing to exclusion and discrimination by *othering* autistic people. This resonates with the *us/them* theme that will be discussed further in the section below. There was further evidence of police officers adopting the medical model through the language they use to speak about autism (this language has been bolded for emphasis):

*"But it's a spectrum condition so, there will be those who really do **suffer**."* (Graham, 41, D.C.).

*"Because I can't, in my head I can't **brand** someone with it. I can identify characteristics that I'm... sort of identify someone as vulnerable, but I can't say I think they have autism."* (Liam, 21, P.C.).

Describing individuals 'suffering' with autism implies that autism is something unpleasant that people must tolerate. This points to an assumption that the participant views autism as a deficit, in line with the medical model of disability. In the quote from Liam, when discussing his capabilities as a police officer to identify traits of autism, the use of the word 'brand' rather than diagnose, seemed salient. The verb *brand* is ordinarily utilised when discussing livestock, though it is often used in discourse about criminals (or historically, slaves). It has fundamentally negative connotations. This suggests a negative attitude towards autism, framing it as a shameful or unpleasant diagnosis to receive.

There was a tendency for participants to rely on stereotypical ideas of autism and behaviour. When discussing their knowledge of autism, and how they might identify neurodivergence, officers often relied on the generalised stereotypes associated with autism. *"People with autism don't like loud noises. They don't like to be doing... They like set routine […] Erm, they're not very good at like talking to you. They'll like, they don't play with other children kind of thing."* (Sarah, 21, P.C.). These stereotypes likely come from media representations of autism, such as films or television.

"You see […] children on the television who can't, they can't speak, and they can't communicate particularly well and stuff like that." (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

"A lot of challenging behaviour, just probably mainly for the fact that they can't communicate very well, so they get frustrated. That would probably be my image of an autistic kid […] an image of someone with autism would be someone struggling to communicate, using symbols and pictures and that kind of thing to get their point across." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

Gaining knowledge of autism from the media, rather than from training, perpetuates the stigmatisation of autism and deficit-based perceptions. This focus on deficits and negative perception of autism may influence police attitudes and approach to encounters. This stereotyping and medicalised approach was also evident in other participant interviews, through demonstrated beliefs that autism can be 'mild' or 'severe': *"you don't know if they're high functioning, low functioning, what sort of what's the part of the spectrum they're on."* (Janet, 50, P.C.). As discussed earlier, autistic traits differ from

individual to individual, and while some may present communication challenges, not all do. Brian illustrates this perception of the mild/severe dichotomy in the below quote:

"If you would talk to me perfectly normal and then claiming to have severe autism, I'm going to say, "no, you haven't". [laughter] You're full of rubbish. And now you're lying to me as well, which is going to annoy me." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"It is so low down on the spectrum, I would say that he's more than, he is perfectly capable of functioning, around people in most situations." (Martin, 52, P.C. (Speaking about a relative who was diagnosed with autism)).

In believing that autistic people cannot both be socially adept at communicating, and be impacted by other traits simultaneously, there is opportunity for officers to disregard and invalidate somebody's diagnosis, therefore failing to provide adequate support during interactions. This could lead to infringements on their human rights, trauma, and a lack of due process during the criminal justice process. With sufficient autism and neurodiversity training providing accurate knowledge about neurodiverse conditions, police officers would not have to rely on stereotypes of autism received from the media, hence improving the relationship between police and autistic people during encounters.

Insufficient Autism/Neurodiversity Training

"So the other answer is I don't know anything about autism and I've never had any training. That's a summary of it all."

(Simon, 55, Superintendent).

Of the fifteen police participants, eleven of them had not received any autism training from the police. While the police interviewed were from various forces across England and Wales, none of them were able to say if their force provided autism training as standard to all officers. Officers spoke about how the lack of training and knowledge across the police force contributes to problems during encounters with autistic individuals. These include a lack of knowledge of the autism awareness card scheme used in one force. While this is a beneficial scheme to allow autistic people to efficiently communicate their

needs to police officers they encounter, it requires the officer to have knowledge of the scheme. Brian's interview suggests that this is not the case:

"But yeah, people have been... I've seen people go to incidents and the person's been shouting "look at my passport, look at my passport" and the cop's thought that they meant, y'know, the travel passport. And what they meant is a basically a buttload of papers which says, like, I am autistic, this is the issues I have, this is how you should deal with me sort of thing." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"I think sort of what the training you get from sort of the police is probably very limited in terms of... Sort of, situations of dealing with, how to deal with somebody with autism, if they're, if it's sort of in the midst of a meltdown, or sort of, if they're in sensory overload. Or even just sort of trying to get out of themselves." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

"I just can't remember what inputs I've had on autism from [Northern force] or from the College of Policing. Now, if I can't remember it, it was either not very good or I've not had anything in a long time." (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

Of the four officers that had received training, two of those were responsible for instigating the training, having seen a need for it in their job roles. *"Yeah, but it was self-initiated. Yeah, so I went to, when I first started identifying how many autistic people in this field, I was like, I need to know more about this." (Graham, 41, D.C.).* This was one officer who worked in a cybercrime unit, who claimed that their department has a large proportion of interactions with autistic people. The other is an inspector in a southern force, who has neurodivergent children. The other two had received training that was implemented in their force prior to them joining, which on further discussion, had been introduced by individuals within the force with connections to autism. This suggests that autism is not being trained at a national level across all forces, in a standardised manner. While the College of Policing does provide curriculums for the training of police officers, autism is not currently a part of this training programme. It is left to the police forces to decide whether to include training on autism or neurodiversity.

"Yes, I would say they would because we see it more than most, we see it probably more in cybercrime - it's not to say people with Autism commit cybercrime or things like

that but they have an affinity with computer systems generally speaking and that, I see that in my prevent work, as I said, six or of seven of them are autistic, or suspected or have been diagnosed, or going through that process because they're youngsters and so forth. And erm, it's everywhere and I think every police officer needs to know a lot more about it you know." (Graham, 41, D.C.).

"Yep. So, we had, we had various different types of training. And it started off with basically you'd go along, "this is autism, this is a trait, this is what you can do." […] And that was it. Then I, I kind of worked with [local autism charity] […] And we delivered to all line managers a training package, which was more, look, this is what neurodiversity is, this what autism is, this is how it affects people. Here's you know, here's a few celebrities with it. And this is, this is what to look out for. But it's not an exhaustive list. This is some of the things you can do. But basically, just be prepared to try different stuff. And we tried a few ways of doing that." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

All fifteen participants said that they would welcome additional training on autism and neurodiversity, even those who had received some prior training. Although one participant did respond, claiming that while their personal knowledge gained from having an autistic child was proficient: *"Personally, I wouldn't need any more. But if it was offered, then I would take it up just to either refresh what I know"* (Jonathon, 43, D.C.). All police participants were able to appreciate that further training would be beneficial to their job roles, indicating that they are aware of the current gap in knowledge.

"In terms of sort of like, specific training for […] autism, I certainly think there's a lack of it. And from my own experience now, you sort of see that where the gaps are. They could be, certainly could be a lot more around like the training side of things." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

"And there's too many people I think, that don't come across it, or have a lack of understanding and knowledge about it. So, I definitely would support training." (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

"It'd just educate us on what to look for, like I had no idea about what you said about it being different characteristics in males and females and that that would be like

good to know. Feel like that would be really beneficial. Yeah. And then like the different characteristics in different, like in children and adults as well." (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

As evidenced by the above quotes, participants acknowledge the need for autism training within their job roles, and had a positive attitude towards receiving training. They were aware of the benefits that additional training would provide, having identified challenges during experiences with autistic people themselves. With just four of the fifteen participants having received autism training from the police, it is apparent that training across forces is sketchy.

4.4 Barriers to Equitable Treatment for Autistic Individuals

Aside from a lack of knowledge about autism, there was a theme of various barriers to equitable and fair treatment for autistic individuals during police encounters. These included suspects not disclosing their autism diagnosis, a structural focus on results-based policing, inability to adapt procedures, and a lack of partnership working. Participants spoke of the difficulty in identifying autism without self-disclosure from the individual, and discussed potential reasons for their non-disclosure of diagnoses. *"But outwardly you can't just tell that somebody has autism, unless they self-disclose it, or they present the card or something."* (Natalie, 29, P.C.). This ability to identify autism was impacted by factors such as age, attitude and possibly use of alcohol or drugs. Autistic behaviours can often be misconstrued by others, and the police being aware of other factors that may interfere with the identification of neurodivergent behaviour is positive.

"Sometimes, I'd dealt with autism, with learning difficulties, and again, mental health, and it's hard to identify, because other factors are involved. So it could be drugs, drink, anything like that, just anything that makes it harder to get information out of someone, basically. Because you can ask him until you're blue in the face "Are you autistic?" And if they're drunk, or they can't, they can't communicate that, up to the level that they can communicate, because they're in drink, or because they've taken drugs. And you can't, you know, then you're never going to find out." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"So, masking, lack of training, drugs, alcohol, can mask a lot of things." (Graham, 41, D.C.).

Autistic people may not disclose their diagnosis to the police, for a number of reasons. There was a sense of frustration from the police as this, as can be seen in Brian's quote above, as well as Graham's here: *"but of course it's like everything else, if they refuse to speak there's not much we can do."* (Graham, 41, D.C.). This lack of diagnosis disclosure can be due to a fear of negative judgement from the police: *"And you'll say, well, I've asked you five times, and they'll say, "Oh, I didn't want to say anything. I thought it was going to make things worse"."* (Brian, 34, P.C.). However, by not disclosing their autism diagnosis, there is a risk that the police may interpret their behaviour and actions as 'guilty' or challenging. Participants demonstrated awareness of the ways in which autistic behaviours could appear as challenges to authority, signs of guilt or anti-social behaviour.

"The communication, I think, sometimes I think about some of the kids I've worked with, and if I'd have come across them on the streets so to speak or at an incident, you'd have just thought 'oh he's just being belligerent, he's just being rude, he's just being obstructive'." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"Because if people don't look, don't tend to give eye contact... You could think […] they're not taking any notice of what you're saying." (Janet, 50, P.C.).

"I'd maybe think it were like arrogance of the adult, maybe if they didn't want to speak to me. If they weren't looking at me and they weren't very good at making conversation with me that had made me think it was down to them not wanting to talk to me because I'm in the police or something." (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

"And I think probably, I'd say probably just the, the general sort of nonverbal communications that someone with autism might not necessarily be aware that they're doing, probably trigger like false-false alarms with an officer that's sort of passing, or in the area dealing with something. And that might then draw attention to that person for, for sort of the, well for the wrong reasons really." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

This misinterpretation of behaviours could lead to the situation being escalated by the police, whether that be due to suspicion of criminal behaviour, or seeing the individual as obstructing police. By having a better understanding of autism and neurodivergency, officers would be better equipped to identify differences in behaviour of the public. This

was discussed by several participants who had identified the vulnerability of autistic people being misunderstood by police officers.

"…it leads to leads to issues, I think, through people not, through no fault of their own, not realizing that someone's autistic and that they're not being rude or they're not being obstructive." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"For me, it's about the behaviour of someone. So, if their behaviour is the reason for the stop, ie. their autism is presenting in a way that requires a stop because it looks suspicious." (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

"If they're sort of failing to make eye contact and shuffling? And, you know, sort of hands moving in a strange way? I think, yeah, that could potentially make them seem more suspicious. So that could expose them to a higher risk of being stopped searched, definitely." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

"But if someone with autism was displaying aggressive or violent tendencies, then then the officer may exacerbate the situation by using force because they're trying to control the situation." (Simon, 55, Superintendent).

"So if people had a slightly higher understanding of how an autistic person thinks. I personally think the amount of autistic people who were arrested would be reduced." (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

While most of the police participants recognised potential risks of misconstruing autistic behaviour during the initial interaction, and how it may escalate situations, only three participants discussed potential vulnerabilities during custody. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the interview stage can be confusing for autistic people with communication challenges, and may provide opportunities for false confessions, and self-incriminating evidence. These three participants were two sergeants and an inspector, so will have received a higher level of training than police constables. This training includes additional modules on interviewing vulnerable individuals, and I believe this is why this group of participants were more aware of these issues.

"So with people with autism, certainly from the interviews, it would be unfair when the officers are firing questions at them. For them not to fully understand the question, and then be trying to answer it. And then they might answer it incorrectly, which then might incriminate them or..." (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

"Because often with vulnerable adults and vulnerable children, they'll acquiesce and just agree. And, and this, this young lady was very much like that. So I had to make sure every question was an open question. Because if I asked her a closed question, she'd just answer yes, just to please me." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

"You could, that could become a trait where someone could take advantage of that. Either a solicitor or police officer or someone? And you could then have someone admitting something they haven't done or, or, or the other thing is, is they have done something. But there is a reason for it. But they won't necessarily give you that reason. They might just say, "yes, I've done it"." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

Having a knowledge of autism is central to being able to adapt their behaviour and procedures, as will be discussed in more detail in the following section. One participant explained the importance of autism understanding in police responses without my prompting during the interview. He highlights the predisposition for police officers to enter situations with a crimefighter approach and a focus on the difference between results-based policing and needs-based policing:

"You might be going in there with sort of just a lack of understanding of sort of the best way of dealing with someone with autism […] And I think sort of that in those moments. You kind of, you'd might then struggle to... Not think logically, but think of the sort of the best way for the person to, to help them as opposed to defusing the situation as quickly as possible." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

Some participants demonstrated an assumption that they were unlikely to encounter an autistic suspect, because they had only had experiences with autistic victims. *"No, not at all. All I can think of is, other the police members, staff, or victims, lots and lots of victims, but I've never come across a suspect with autism."* (Georgia, 39, Temp.

Sergeant). This assumption may lead the police officer to not suspecting autism when interacting with a suspect.

"And a lot of the times, unfortunately, they seem to be the victims or witnesses of crimes, and not necessarily the perpetrators a lot of the time. Erm, probably because, you know, of the vulnerabilities and whatnot." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

And,

"You might be going in there with sort of just a lack of understanding of sort of the best way of dealing with someone with autism […] And I think sort of that in those moments. You kind of, you'd might then struggle to... Not think logically, but think of the sort of the best way for the person to, to help them as opposed to defusing the situation as quickly as possible." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

This assumption was suggested to be reinforced by the police institution, with an organisational focus on vulnerable witnesses and victims, and very little policy regarding suspects:

"The victim side of it is you know it's covered by ABE, every detective trains on achieving best evidence in court. Erm, but there's very, very little done on suspects" (Graham, 41, D.C.).

The barriers to equitable treatment discussed by participants had a tendency to be rooted in personal factors, rather than institutional barriers. Mostly, they centred around a lack of autism knowledge and understanding. A lack of knowledge and understanding presents the risk of autistic behaviours being misconstrued as guilty or evasive. Being able to identify autism, and individuals disclosing their diagnosis are two sides of the same coin; if the police rely on a disclosure from the individual and do not possess the knowledge to suspect autism, there is a serious chance that no adaptations will be made, hence leaving the individual in a vulnerable position. There are reasons why an individual may or may not choose to disclose their diagnosis to the police, which will be discussed in the next chapter. But it is this identification that allows the police to utilise their discretion and understanding to ensure equity for individuals.

4.5 Ability to Adapt Police Procedures

Police officers must make reasonable adjustments where possible, to ensure that autistic suspects are not discriminated due to their condition. This research found that participants discussed adjustments that were either police policy, or personal adaptations. The policy adjustments were things made available by the policing institution, such as use of an appropriate adult, use of softer custody areas, use of fidget tools and alternative evidence gathering techniques (such as video-interviews rather than just verbal), whereas personal adjustments were things such as amending communication styles and approaches, and discretionary relaxing of regulations. These personal adjustments are reliant on the individual police officer identifying needs and deciding what is feasible to accommodate the suspect to allow them to experience the criminal justice process as a neurotypical would.

While the questions on the interview schedule didn't specifically ask about appropriate adults, almost all participants raised the use of them during interviews. Twelve of the total fifteen police participants spoke about the benefits (and limitations) of using appropriate adults with autistic suspects. As the use of appropriate adults is embedded in PACE (1984), it is reassuring that it was often brought up with relation to autistic suspects. However, some participants showed an awareness that the scheme does not always benefit autistic suspects, particularly in cases where family members are used as the appropriate adult. *"I don't think that parents are always the best appropriate adults. I think they've got a different agenda and a different motivation and they are not necessarily the best person to advocate the rights of the child, and I think the same would apply to mentally disordered offenders as well."* (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant). On the other hand, there was also a sense that some officers relied on this scheme as the only adaptation they made as a tick-box exercise within policing. The appropriate adult scheme is employed to fulfil human rights considerations while vulnerable people are held in custody, as well as to comply with the PACE guidelines. All police officers will be aware that a breach of these guidelines might jeopardise a criminal charge or conviction, and so they may view the provision of an appropriate adult as a task, rather than for the benefit of the vulnerable individual. The differences can be seen in the below quotes; Robert and Janet demonstrate

a more *compliance*-based approach when discussing appropriate adults, compared to Jonathon and Susan, who focus on the communication assistance provided.

"I mean, my work head on, is do they need an appropriate adult?" (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

"I would make sure you got an appropriate adult. And I'd speak... And that's the main thing really, is getting an appropriate adult." (Janet, 50, P.C.).

"And anyone who's over 18, who's got a specific vulnerable need, for example, autism, then they would need to have an appropriate adult with them obviously to facilitate conversation between the police, the solicitor and the offender themselves." (Jonathon, 43, D.C.).

"Even from taking a fingerprint to, because an appropriate adult would be there for that, to an interview, to them being released and understanding what happens when they're released as well." (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

Autism awareness cards were not mentioned by many participants, but those who did discuss them seemed to refer to them with a sense of pride for their force having rolled them out. This sense of pride will be discussed in relation to cultural solidarity within the force later in this chapter, but it also suggests that the participants were not aware of similar schemes being rolled out in other forces.

"And I think one of the things that [Midlands force] is doing is they've partnered with the National Autistic Society around giving young autistic people cards, an Autism Awareness cards that they can hand to officers, if they are struggling and they are... They are finding it difficult to engage, then at least gives officers an idea - actually, I may need to adjust my expectations and my approach in order to manage this situation better." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

"We have our Pegasus scheme at work, which is another thing that we train on. […] Which is a really useful thing as well, because the control room will say "I've got someone with Pegasus scheme that needs need some assistance", and then, you know, they can sort of..." (Liam, 21, P.C.).

"We had a real close association with [autism charity], and we were having, right before the COVID, we were having regular meetings with our CJU, with [force] police and with [autism charity] to talk about things and how best we can help people and sort of get the alert cards out to people." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

As noted earlier in this chapter, those participants who were at ranks higher than constable (i.e., detectives, sergeants etc.) displayed a greater knowledge of accommodating vulnerable individuals, as they will have received further training on achieving best evidence and interviewing skills. However, these participants also showed awareness of personal adjustments, suggesting that as well as their enhanced training, they had a greater understanding of how to think outside of the neurotypical box to support autistic people. The ability to approach situations with an open mind, and a focus on making the individual feel as comfortable as possible, aids to minimise stress and trauma from the interaction. This is illustrated in the below quotes:

"And I've had two colleagues in another force that did that with a suspect who has Autism, they all sat on the floor because they said I'd rather we all sat on the floor. It's an audio recorded interview so, doesn't matter about, nobody's video recording, well normally we wouldn't do but, you know most of the time you don't, it doesn't matter where you're sitting, we can stand up in the four corners if you want. As long as you can, as long as the microphone can pick everything up it doesn't matter. It's about just making those little bit of adjustments because you understand the condition" (Graham, 41, D.C.).

"But if someone's got additional needs, I probably want to be sort of stopping after about 45 minutes. In some cases, it could be I'll be stopping after 20 minutes to say, actually, let's have a break. Let's take a break. And then let's come back again. And so it's about recognizing and planning what length of time you think that person's attention span is going to be able to helpful and how you're going to manage challenges. How are you going to manage any challenging behaviour in the interview." (Jessica, 39, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

"People say I'm autistic. it's like okay. How might we need to adapt a couple of things to help you?" (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

"So then when they do see someone and they display in a trait and they go "Ah, they can't do anything different. So what can I do differently? To change it", and that rather than right where you if you behave, then I'll treat you differently. But if I treat, if I treat you differently, you'll behave." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

The above quotes demonstrate an adoption of the social model of disability and the neurodiversity movement; the onus has been shifted from the neurodivergent to the neurotypical person. By focusing on what (small) changes they can make to accommodate the individual to remove any obstacles that occur due to their impairment. Sam explicitly refers to this change in approach from the medical to the social model, and the way in which that can affect the outcome of a situation. Although the adjustments used as examples seen relatively minor, they have the ability to make a difference to the autistic person's experience. Not only do they alter the environment to suit the autistic person better, but they allow that person to feel *seen* and *heard.* This is a vital facet of perceived procedural justice, which will be discussed in the next chapter with reference to the direct experience participants.

"So, to keep for her to keep her hat, made her calmer, which helped us to get her process through the through the custody. To get her interviewed and everything else. Yes, it sounds really It sounds such a trivial thing, doesn't it? But to her this hat was like the world and you couldn't take the hat." (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

"You know, my personal view is we should take everyone into account. And then if someone says this is a problem for me, those things. I'm autistic. I need the lights turned down. Okay. We'll turn the lights down. I struggle, I struggle with lights and need the lights turned down. No, policy says we can't turn the lights down. Why?! Turn the lights down." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

There was a theme of tailored, individual-based approaches to police interactions throughout the interviews; rather than having blanket policies for certain groups, it was thought that every individual person should be approached on a more holistic level. By appreciating that all people are individual and different, this mindset means police can approach every encounter with a respect for their individuality and needs. As Jessica

proposes below, a needs-based approach to policing allows each person to receive the help that they need, without requiring a formal diagnosis.

"To be honest, I think, actually, if someone's got, if someone's demonstrating a behaviour or a need, then does it need a label for us to be able to put in place the special measures? Because ultimately, there's 1000s and 1000s, or probably millions of people that are undiagnosed. That just because they haven't got a label on their diagnosis, that doesn't mean their needs are any less or any greater. So for me, it's about treating people according to how they present rather than what label they've got." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

Interestingly, one participant spoke about failures by the police to support autistic victims of crime in achieving justice, due to a lack of willingness to accommodate reasonable adjustments. While this research was more focused on autistic individuals as suspects in police interactions, this excerpt touched on a cultural laziness in policing; officers were reluctant to amend their working practices to accommodate alternative methods of statement gathering simply because it was more work. This reluctance to make adjustments on low priority crimes may be linked to their sense of mission and desire for excitement in policing; low priority crimes do not yield any excitement, and therefore they have less motivation to go out of their way to resolve them. However, this will have a detrimental impact on the perceived procedural justice of the victim who feels they are being let down by the police.

"I think we do on occasion, let autistic people down. Especially sometimes when they're maybe victims of crimes, just because, just because I don't think you know, that, you know... It's, sometimes crime, minor crimes... How can I put this... With people who struggle, if you want to get a good statement from him, we send them for what they call a video interview. So it's like a statement, but it's video to make it easier for someone to communicate. And then on video, you can get like the face cues and things. But sometimes when the victims of so called 'lesser crimes', people won't do that. Because it's time and effort to fill the form in to request it and things like that. And they'll just file the job saying that the victim's being, you know, non-co-operative, or whatever phrase you want to put on it. Not, not wanting to give a statement and things like that. And that's wrong. That

upsets me. And that annoys me. Because these, these are the people that I'd like to think people join the police - to protect the most vulnerable people in society. Just for this, just because it's a minor crime. And I get it, it's a lot of effort and time, then they shouldn't be doing that. It should be... You should be doing it. But have a grumble about it, by all means, but just do it. That's what, that's what you signed up for." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

There were suggestions for improvements to policy and potential adaptations for autistic suspects. Acknowledging the limits of appropriate adults, Sam suggested that autism advocates can be particularly helpful during the custody process. This was echoed by Jessica stating that the use of registered intermediaries should be extended to vulnerable suspects. This is currently a scheme that is only usually provided to vulnerable witnesses and victims during court cases. Whereas an appropriate adult receives no specialist training to fulfil the role, and is often a parent or guardian, registered intermediaries are recruited and trained by the Ministry of Justice, and often have backgrounds in social work, teaching, or speech and language therapy. In cases where there are significant communication challenges between the autistic suspect and the interviewing officer, a registered intermediary or specialist autism advocate might be better equipped to facilitate clear communication and ensure that the suspect accurately understands what is being asked of them.

"So we'll get appropriate adults. There is a scheme not often used. And I found that, I need to look into again, because there's a of custody sergeants that didn't know about it, where you can get a - can't think of the word - but someone to come in to assist someone with autism in the process. So not appropriate adult, but, like an advocate or something like an autism advocate." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

"This is actually something that I think we don't do well, is that we don't have intermediaries for suspects. And I think it's wrong." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

Another participant suggested that their police force was 'paying lip service' to neurodiversity, without fully considering policy and training issues:

"Erm, but there's very, very little done on suspects. In [Midlands] police, the only thing I ever found was a sign on the wall of the custody suite saying "if you've a neurodiverse individual

please do not bring them, or consider before you bring them into custody". Well that's great but if you're reading it on the wall in the custody suite, it's a bit late, we're already here." (Graham, 41, D.C.).

Inequality cannot be resolved by only raising awareness. While awareness is an important first step, there must be fully considered changes to policy and procedure to ensure that autistic individuals are supported and afforded the same experience as neurotypical peers. Participants have evidenced the ability to make personal adaptations to accommodate autistic individuals, but there were further suggestions made with regards to procedural adjustments.

4.6 Occupational Culture

As anticipated in line with the research questions, a deductive theme of occupational culture was developed within the interview data. Within this umbrella theme, several of the characteristics identified within the literature became sub-themes, such as *sense of mission, solidarity* and *cynisism*. Some of these affirmed the traditional theoretical basis of occupational culture, while others challenged the traditional notion of occupational culture, particularly with regards to autistic interactions. The presence of these characteristics were found to have both positive and negative potential effects for encounters with autistic individuals, which will be discussed in detail below.

Sense of Mission

As explored in the literature review chapter, *sense of mission* in police occupational culture relates to how a police officer views their job and their role in wider society. Their motivation for joining the police force is built on this idea of policing; whether the role of a police officer is to be a crime fighter or a peacekeeper, and how society *should* function. All participants, when asked about their motivation to join the police force, spoke of a desire for variety within a job and excitement. Some had moved from previous careers in offices, described as being *"a bit boring just sat at a desk every day just churning out all the usual stuff"* (Susan, 49, Detention Officer). For others, policing was an ambition since school, following a stereotypical idea of what being in the police would be, such as Sarah: *"I just I never fancied a nine to five desk job because I'm not really good at like sitting still and listening for long, I suppose. So, I just wanted a job that wasn't like desk based if you*

know what I mean. […] Something new every day. I just thought it was dealing with criminals". Participants regularly spoke of their motivations as a desire to *"to protect the most vulnerable people in society"* (Brian, 34, P.C.). *"Again, it was that sort of helping people that, it. really was that about helping people. Y'know, I think I had a bit of an idealised vision of policing... I think quite a few people that do. It is like all... Ooh yeah, they go out they do this they help people they go you know, and a bit of adventure and excitement and stuff like that."* (Martin, 52, P.C.). This 'idealised' vision of policing relates to the excitement and action that they expected to find within the job role and was echoed by other participants. *"I joined to obviously, chase after the bad guys, or do all that kind of stuff."* (Jonathon, 43, D.C.). Participants regularly spoke of adrenaline-filled experiences with a fondness and pride, similar to previous literature on 'canteen-culture' (Waddington, 1999). For example: *"There's nothing better, than, you know, your blue lights are going, you're going to like thieves, or you've got a stolen vehicle in front of you with people on board. And it's just there, and the adrenaline's going."* (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant). However, this spike of adrenaline and excitement may lead officers to react to the situation that they *perceive* to be happening, rather than assessing the circumstances before acting, as can be seen in the below quotes:

"I think when you're up front and centre dealing with somebody, it's probably not on the front of someone's mind about is this, is this person maybe autistic I'm not sure that comes to it because adrenaline's running, rushing, you know" (Martin, 52, P.C.).

"Sometimes it's like, you get given a bit of information, and you have to react to it. And sort of all that kind of thinking might go out the window in the situation and the circumstances. And you just go in and you're thinking... thinking about, they're not doing this, they're doing this right, they're gonna come in and have to restrain this person. You know, they're not putting hands up, you know, we think that that have a weapon. You know, you've just got to take the action, you might have to say, taser them or, you know, put handcuffs on them." (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

"Because even the excitement of, the excitement of catching the bad guys, is that you're stopping someone, from hurting someone or take yourself off the street catching

someone that has hurt someone. That's, that's why it's exciting. It's exciting, because that's what we do. And it's frustrating when you don't." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

As suggested by previous research, if officers get excited by the adrenaline and action of response calls as suggested, then they may perceive situations as more potentially dangerous, which would impact their actions (McCarthy et al., 2023; McLean et al., 2020). This prohibits their ability to objectively assess someone's behaviour, and there is a risk of misconstruing autistic behaviours as dangerous and responding inappropriately. Although the needs-based approach to policing discussed in the previous section was often referred to by participants, I would argue that it is contradictory to an action-focused mindset. This suggests that if police are called out to a job involving an autistic person that does not, at first glance, appear calm and easily controlled, they may approach with an action-focused approach, which has the possibility of escalating situations.

One of the questions in the interview schedule explicitly asked participants whether they felt their job role was that of *crimefighter* or *peacekeeper*, or something else. This question elicited some interesting conversations about their expectations of being in the police, compared to their reality. While the conceptualisation of crimefighter/peacekeeper orientations is well documented in previous research, it has not yet been discussed in relation to contexts involving autistic suspects. These orientations, and their implications will be discussed in the following sub-sections for clarity of reading.

Crimefighter

While there was a tendency for participants to regularly refer to the crimefighting aspect of policing, there was an overall sense that they had expected the police role to be one of crimefighter, but reality was different. Contrary to much of the literature, this crimefighting role was not exaggerated in response to the question prompt. There seemed to be a reluctant admittance that their daily reality was not as exciting or adrenaline filled.

"Yeah, I just thought it was dealing with criminals. Like just use your like, […] Your stereotypical like, police officer just like, arresting people for like, being drunk or like assaulting somebody." (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

"You saw by these, you saw all the cop shows, and that was always fun to... I think it was sort of the, the sort the frontline policing was what kind of drew me into wanting to, to join." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

"You know, when I joined, that's what I joined to be, as a crime fighter, you know, and get things. Get the bad guys and look after the good guy, you see?" (Janet, 50, P.C.).

The idea of being a crimefighter was often closely connected to physical contact, action and violence. Hence, participants perceived a peacekeeping role to contradict what they signed up for: a career of excitement and action. As previous literature suggests, police officers who identify with the crimefighter orientation can perceive higher levels of threat in ambiguous situations compared to those who view themselves as peacekeepers (McCarthy et al., 2023). For example, in a scenario where an autistic suspect acknowledges the police officer but does not immediately comply with their orders, they may be more likely to be perceived as a threat by a crimefighter police officer, and the situation may escalate to include the use of force. If the participants in this study had joined the police force with the belief that they would embody this crimefighter role, as illustrated in television shows and the media, and a preconceived notion of what police work would be, then they may be more likely to interpret interactions as dangerous and respond accordingly.

There was often the suggestion that dangerous and action-packed jobs were the 'best' ones to attend, and that others were the 'rubbish' or 'bad' jobs. One participant, who had not long since finished his probationary period and NVQ gave an example of how some jobs are categorised as 'rubbish': *"Because you need the jobs, you need the stuff for your NVQ. So, you go to the, you know, the rubbish jobs. It'll be "oh, someone needs arresting. Do you want to go and arrest them?" And then you go there. And it's like, someone who's really, really nice."* (Liam, 21, P.C.). This sense of 'good' and 'rubbish' jobs was echoed by other participants:

"Because, if I was out on the cars, splitting up fights, you could probably argue I was more of a crimefighter. In cybercrime we don't, you know, we don't go to domestics, we don't get involved with violence. […] Erm, so we're not out in the cars, deploying to fights, deploying to violent partners, deploying to violent offences." (Graham, 43, D.C.).

"Used to be a crime fighter, okay. Absolutely, but then it's because of a decision to go into...off the streets, uniform into a different role, you do feel more like you don't feel like a crime fighter anymore, because I'm not going out and not arresting people. I'm not going to these Gucci jobs and whatnot." (Jonathon, 43, D.C.).

"I'd say probably in my current role, it is more peacekeeper, because I don't deal with the public face to face on a daily basis. And the only time I deal with people now is... [laughter] I only really leave the police station when someone's dead." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

Participants who had served in the police force for longer periods of time also shared this view of their job role not being a crimefighter, but had a romanticised memory of their role in the past. This disillusionment can have impacts on the perceived meaning of their work, as well as psychological impacts (Deschênes et al., 2018). Previous literature proposes that the longer a police officer serves, the less positively they view their workplace, and are more likely to adopt a peacekeeper role (Paoline, 2000). However, it seems that while this is supported in this research sample, the participants *missed* their early years of policing. Such as Janet:

"I loved my job when I first joined, I absolutely loved it. Because, you know, you were out and about speaking to people, doing things, making, making sure that Billy burglar didn't go and rob Aunty May down the road, you know. Whereas now, that isn't there anymore. So, you've got to deal with it now with what you're given." (Janet, 50, P.C.).

Although there was regular reference to the ambition to fulfil a crimefighter within the police, the overall theme was that police officers felt that their day-to-day role was that of a peacekeeper, or as they described it, a 'social worker'. However, they were often still adopting traditional views of the public that they police, and criminal stereotypes, as can be seen below.

"Every other time, it's been keeping the peace between smackheads and skegheads and drug dealers. And, you know, keeping the peace between them is generally what we do, and going to mental health jobs where EMAS should go and won't go for whatever reason, we're there picking up the pieces." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

PEACEKEEPER / SOCIAL WORKER – A SHIFT IN JOBS AND CULTURE?

A resounding theme when discussing their role within the police force, was that police officers felt more like social workers than they did police officers. This was often joked about, but given that these officers had discussed their motivation to join the police force was an aspiration of attaining the crimefighter ideal that they had envisaged, there were hints of frustration in both the dialogue and the tones used during the interviews. Police officers are known for their use of humour as an emotional release, particularly in a masculine environment where displaying emotions is avoided. Although the response varied from social worker, mental health worker and social services, the underlying message was that they did not feel like the police officer they *wanted* to be.

"I feel like I'm a mental health worker on the daily [laughter]" (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

"I'm almost like a social worker in this role, [laughter]" (Martin, 52, P.C.).

"There is a lot less dealing with crimes than what there used to be. You feel like you're almost a social worker. That's what it's become more like now." (Janet, 50, P.C.).

Participants often expressed a frustration at the jobs they were having to carry out. This was for a number of factors, such as a lack of action, time constraints (and budget cuts), and a lack of training. Officers felt that they were 'picking up the slack' for other emergency and social services, therefore being forced to fulfil the role of peacekeeper/social worker. The following quotes are good examples of this sense of frustration and lack of agency:

"I've been in for 3 years, and I think I've barely helped, probably two or three people who are actually genuine victims of crime, and the other genuine victims of crime, just get fobbed off. Like we don't attend a burglary. We don't we don't even go and do reassurance visits. We don't do any of that, you know, they get binned off to one side." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"You know what you do because you go out and It'll be someone who wants to jump from a bridge, someone's got... They're having a domestic, they've got money issues, they've got kid issues. And it's just, you're not necessarily dealing with a criminal matter, you're dealing with stuff that people can't cope with." (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

"You realize it's part of the job that's like that, but, you know, you figured it'd be potentially at worst, a 50-50 split? Well, it's nowhere near that. It's more like 95-5, if not 99-1, you know?" (Brian, 34, P.C.).

Jonathon's below excerpt demonstrates the conflict between the ideals of believing his role as a police officer is to fight crime, compared to his daily reality. Highlighting the issues with multi-agency working, a lack of social care, increased workloads and comparing present day policing to when he first joined. It is evident that he still views his job role as that of a crime fighter, and yet is being tasked with jobs that do not fulfil that ideal. Despite speaking about wanting to protect people, there is a sense of frustration at having to *look after* people. From his dialogue, it seems that he views his job as protector against criminals only; not those who may be in vulnerable positions through other means. However, the police are expected to help any member of public that requests their help. This reliance on the police to pick up the pieces following cuts to social care services was often mentioned.

"It used to be a case of the job is to go out there, obviously, protect people, arrest people that break the law basically and then deal with them, send them to court and then it's the court's decision was not ours. But now it's that, and there's also the mental health side of things, which is, which is a massive minefield for the police. And it does feel that we get, as the police we do get dumped with stuff, but it used to happen all the time, it probably does now, you get the Friday afternoon emails from social services, "ooh, can you go and check this person check person because they've not seen them" or something's happened and then you will end up with so much stuff to do so much work to do. You know, it used to be a case of some...somebody that was presenting probably a bit vulnerable, but come to a police station said I've got nowhere to sleep and you'd be like, well, of course, this is when I joined it would be a case of well, that's not our problem is it? Get out to the homeless shelter or whatever. When that's the case, if they do that and they say they've got issues. We can't just send them on their way we have to get them assessed, and have to get them looked at because if they are, if they do have these issues and they go off and go and get...become a victim of trauma or get run over or something, then we are partly to blame, because we didn't identify that." (Jonathon, 43, D.C.).

This was further identified in another participant, who was very social model based in most of his discourse and attitudes, yet still demonstrates some elements of the more traditional crimefighter:

"Yeah, and control them. And, and, and, yeah, you've got you've got to be professional, but to be professional you've gotta take control. You've got, you know, how can we help people if we're not taking charge?" (Sam, 44, Inspector).

This need to control situations and people raises potential issues when considering interactions with autistic individuals, particularly in unplanned situations such as street encounters. As discussed in chapter 2, some autistic people may present with behaviours that could be interpreted as suspicious or deliberately defiant. For example, displaying echolalia and escapism when being stopped by the police could be interpreted as antagonistic, and if police officers feel that they have to take control of a situation, these behaviours could result in the escalation of an encounter (Salerno & Schuller, 2020). This means that a police officer wanting to speak to somebody as a potential witness might escalate to a chase and physically forceful arrest, in order to control the situation. This is particularly more plausible if we consider the double empathy problem, whereby there is an empathy divide between the police officer and the autistic individual; neither can interpret and understand the other's actions and perceptions (Milton, 2012; Reveley & Dickie, 2023).

This culture and role shift was suggested by other participants also. There was a sense that the policing role, and culture had experienced a dramatic change in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, participants spoke of being unable to deal with 'proper' police work and their time being taken up by social care tasks. These tasks, while they serve the public, do not fulfil their desire for excitement and action, and were discussed with a sense of disappointment.

"Because the roles changed that much, even since I've been in the police force. Now we're peacekeepers and mental health crisis workers and I very, very rarely get to a deal with an actual genuine victim of crime and actually help solve their crime" (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"COVID's had a massive effect. And then yeah, now we're picking up the pieces. Seeing a lot more mental health and people saying, "Oh, I didn't want to go to a doctor's appointment because I was worried about getting on the bus" [...] And now they're really, really struggling with their mental health" (Brian, 34, P.C.).

Whereas other participants demonstrated that they had adopted the more traditional peacekeeper role in policing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was more females than males, which corresponds with previous literature on gendered policing. There was more of a focus on a preference to resolve conflict using communication skills, rather than aggressive policing methods, and acknowledging their role in protecting the public and maintaining public order.

"I just like, it sounds nice. But I like having it easy. Not easy, but like, like, if I go to a job, I'd rather keep the peace with someone then start arguing and scrapping them with them and locking them up. Like, if I can avoid locking them up, I will do." (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

And,

"We're not only there to respond to crime, but we also have an increasingly sort of diverse role in terms of safeguarding concerns and stuff. I will say the majority of our calls are definitely more to do with safeguarding than with crime" (Natalie, 29, P.C.).

Also,

"Because it's the peacekeepers just so much easier isn't it. It's just, you know, it's just crimefighter, it's happened you know. Prevention's much better than cure, and if you can keep the peace before, and if you can negotiate settlements, if you can influence outcomes, so much better than fighting fires afterwards." (Simon, 55, Superintendent).

Overall, participants suggested that modern day policing requires officers to balance both the traditional crimefighter and peacekeeper roles. It is proposed that their role is not a dichotomous option of crimefighter or peacekeeper, but a sliding scale that shifts, depending on a number of factors. Because the police are called to so many different types of jobs, they must have the ability to adapt their response in line with what is required. However, they do not feel that they are being supported or given the training

required for this role, and indeed, it is not the job that they signed up for. As police are being called out more frequently to safeguarding incidents, there is additional chance that they may be called to situations involving autistic people in times of distress (Fleetwood & Lea, 2022). In these situations, it is important that they are able to empathise and understand autistic behaviours and traits, to ensure that their responses and actions are best suited to support autistic people.

Often with a romanticised view of the past, when times were 'simpler', participants were acutely aware of the shifting landscape of policing in the modern era.

"I probably say peacekeeper. I've always been sort of the kind to find like a diplomatic approach to everything that I do in the police. Sometimes your only option is to to have a fight. I'll always consider every other option beforehand. And I think that the police is more than just sort of crimefighter. [laughter]" (Connor, 35, P.C.).

"As a police officer, you are, you are a peacekeeper. You are a lifesaver. You are a social worker, you are a crime fighter. All those things. And the first thing, the first thing in sort of the principle, the Peelian principles as it is, is saving life." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

"Sometimes fighting crime does keep the peace because... […] You know, it's always an argument of a balancing scale." (Liam, 21, P.C.).

SOLIDARITY

"When I first joined the police, the shift was everything, for want of a better word."
(Martin, 52, P.C.).

Throughout the interviews, there was a strong theme of solidary between colleagues, both inside and outside of the workplace. While there was a mix of police officers who had been in the same teams for many years, new recruits, and those who had been promoted to higher ranks and moved departments, they all acknowledged the cultural solidarity of the police force. Their colleagues were more than simply colleagues, they were *friends, family,* and *therapists.* This bond was integral to their security in the job, as well as their sanity following incidents. For example:

"When I was on response, that team, you know, you're backing each other up to jobs, you're backin' each other in difficult, violent, threatening situations. You know, throwing yourself in front of people to protect your colleagues. You know, this isn't, this inherently... This isn't fairy stuff. This is, this is out there. So you forge those bonds with your colleagues that intrinsically can become closer bonds, than say some of your own friends and family out of work. Because you are literally putting yourself on the line to help them" (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

And,

"There's a lot of things I've been to that give me chills to think about now that I won't talk too much about... Well, I will mention to my [work] partner, but I won't go into detail with my friends. […] But no, I can talk to colleagues about anything. And that that that's a really, really good thing with this job." (Liam, 21, P.C.).

Different shifts and forces had varying numbers of social gatherings outside of work, and these often involved going out for drinks and walks. Officers will use these relationships and bonds within work, in the more traditional ways suggested by previous literature, but also often spoke of how their colleagues were the only people they could confide in about work-related stresses and traumatic events. Contradicting the notion that police officers do not emotionally expose themselves while in work; participants claimed that they were able to talk through traumatic experiences with colleagues, without judgement that they may receive from friends and family. This might suggest that the hegemonic masculinity characteristic within police culture is shifting in line with the changing landscape of their job role. This was expressed by both female and male participants, such as:

*"Y'know having a partner in the job helps because you can, you can talk it through with them" (*Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

"I probably tell someone at, probably at work more, as sort of a bit of an offloading and sort of, everyone's kind of been through similar things. And yeah, experiences similar issues, and you can kind of vent without having to worry about sort of upsetting the other person." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

The close bonds that officers spoke about are a fundamental characteristic in occupational culture, and these participants relied on them in all aspects of their lives. While some of the newer recruits had found it harder to integrate themselves into the groups, and form these bonds, they have found their place eventually and claimed that being 'in the group' was beneficial to them*: "And I sort of used to avoid going out on nights out, because I don't really drink alcohol […] I think the socializing did help me definitely, erm, helped me have a good understanding of the dynamics on the team, which I knew. There's a lot of people that can come across quite arrogant at work. But then outside of work, they're completely different."* (Liam, 21, P.C.). It was suggested that the divide between police and civilians was so stark, that officers sought relationships with other emergency service workers, because only they understood each other's stress: *"I know generally speaking, ambulance and police, because they get the stresses and the shifts in the environment. Quite often, they're all having affairs with each other. Because their partners who aren't in that environment, don't get the environment that they're working in."* (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

Both the higher ranking, and longer serving officers spoke about the relationships and solidarity being more robust in the past. Higher ranking officers socialised with peers, but not the ranks below them; it was seen as 'crashing your son's party'. This was due to the responsibility of the higher-ranking officer, even outside of work, for the behaviours and actions of those below. *"I don't so much as inspector because you've got to… There's that professional divide"* (Sam, 44, Inspector). This was echoed by a temporary sergeant: *"I'd say it's once you leave uniform policing it tends to be less focused on that. It's a different bit and especially sort of changing rank as well. It makes it a different dynamic. So you lose that socialization side of the office, it becomes lonelier."* (Jessica, 42, Temp. Sergeant). Longer servicing police constables felt that the socialisation aspect of the culture had changed during their years of service. Contrary to other participants who claimed to go out regularly with their colleagues, some felt that there was not the same social bonds with colleagues.

"It's not like it used to be. We used to be very close when I first joined it was, it's a different, different, you know, we all used to socialise. We'd all go out on a pay-day, we'd all go to the pub after afternoons, uhm, and we were working then seven days on, two days

off. Right. You know, so it was continental shifts. You spend more time with your work colleagues than you did with anybody else. But yeah, I absolutely loved my job, loved it. Up until, probably the last 10 years really started to go downhill, as in, you know you're not... You haven't got the support." (Janet, 50, P.C.).

However, it is likely that this lack of socialisation may be due to an age gap between the longer serving officers and the newer P.C. officers. As many colleagues will promote up the ranks throughout their careers, leaving some of the 'original cast' behind. For example, *"When I went into the hub, the pre-charge hub, that was there was all people who were in the job when I joined. It was back to the old way of working, you know everybody helping each other, everybody being supportive, you know, everybody trusting each other."* (Janet, 50, P.C.). This demonstrates the ever-evolving nature of the police, and the hesitance of some longer-serving officers to adapt to new ways of working. Solidarity as an occupational culture characteristic has been linked with 'othering' outsider groups, such as civilians, particularly those who do not share the normative beliefs and behaviours as they do (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

"They won't look at you" – Othering Autistic People

> *"It just, it feels a bit awkward, like not the situation but they're just, I feel like they feel a bit awkward."* (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

There was a strong theme identified in the interviews of the police participants 'othering' autistic and neurodivergent groups in discourse. This we/them language was regularly identified during analysis and was not limited to those with more medicalised approaches to autism and disability, but those with more social approaches too. This phrasing was used to differentiate between police and civilian, police and supervisors, but most frequently, neurotypical and neurodivergent groups. For example:

*"Those sort of things would flag at me. Like **they** won't talk to you, **they** won't look at you, **they** don't want to engage, **they** don't want to... Y'know, **they've** got no interest in staying around you, **they** just want to be on their own, **they** don't like change." (Janet, 50, P.C.).*

*"Sometimes it's like when you're talking to **them**, lack of eye contact. Sometimes **they** just don't want to engage in conversation. […] I know **they** like the routine and stuff"* (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

*"Like, if I was to attend a job and somebody, somebody's had autism. **They** don't like the uniform. So sometimes we get asked to take the uniform off. Or **they** don't like strangers. So we've got the parents who've got to explain like who we are and stuff. Then **they** don't really talk to you either. **They** just, **they** don't really look at you, **they** can't really make eye contact."* (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

This othering, us/them view of autistic people tends to firmly place the normality on the neurotypical behaviours, with autistic characteristics being portrayed as 'weird' or abnormal. This mentality has a foundation of ableism, heteronormativity and institutional racism (Ramlow, 2006). By thinking of autistic people as a different social category, it is likely that they will be treated as such. This us/them divide was also evident in discourse relating to offenders:

"You know, and once they're arrested and put in a cell… […] I would always make sure that I slammed the cell door hard. […] But it was the idea was to frighten them and think, well, you know, this is a cell door shutting and this is what it's like. Not closing "night night, sweetie", you know, "do you want a cocoa". This was a slamming door. Slam bang, and then the metal hatch, bang back up." (Simon, 55, Inspector).

This quote from Simon is a powerful example of the power dynamic and punitive view of his job role, as well as a firm demarcation between the police and the offender. While participants demonstrated positive attitude towards autism, and a willingness to adjust their policing approach when dealing with autistic suspects, many evidenced a fundamental desire to use their positions of power to maintain their ideas of law and order. By *othering* autistic people and maintaining an us/them attitude, police officers are perpetuating the notion that autistic people are 'abnormal', and neurotypical people are the social norm.

Hegemonic Masculinity

While hegemonic masculinity is a core characteristic of the traditional police occupational culture, there were some interesting sexist and gendered assumptions about autism. One of the interview questions was specifically designed to probe attitudes towards gender discrimination in autism, with *"Do you think autistic females are as likely to be stopped as males?"*. This prompted some conversation around gendered behaviour, and found that participants without any personal connection to autism were unaware of gender differences in autism, and were more likely to adopt sexist attitudes towards *differences* in behaviour during encounters. For example:

"So if we have a female with autism, who's having an 'issue', people might be more inclined to be like, "Oh, she's got a EUPD" [emotionally unstable personality disorder] or she's got bipolar, or she's just a little... She's just crazy. […] I actually think it's a little bit more tricky for autistic females because they would, they might have the stereotype of just being hysterical, which is the stereotype of being angry, or drama queen or something like that, you know." (Natalie, 29, P.C.).

This sexism was echoed by other participants, who suggested that they would be less likely to treat autistic females (exhibiting similar behaviours to autistic males) as suspicious, and less likely to stop and speak to them. While Jessica acknowledged the gender differences in autism and suggested that they might be more vulnerable to criminality, she argued that autistic women are less likely to be stop searched, because women are less likely to be stop searched overall. However, this doesn't account for misconstrued behaviour during encounters.

"I might not, no. I'm actually probably less likely to stop them. I don't know, I think, I think sort of, you associate those specific behaviours to sort of, I'd say probably like males are the ones that tend to be the ones that I've dealt with for those offenses […] And I think some of, it might appear as less suspicious in a female than it would be in the male, which probably sounds... wrong doesn't it? [laughter] You tend to associate sort of suspiciousness more with sort of your male offenders." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

"It tends to be social settings that females would then be exposed to that, if you're female on the spectrum that struggling with social settings, the only sort of risk I'd say that

could possibly escalate it is the desire for social acceptance. And so therefore, being vulnerable to being asked to carry things and failing to recognize their own vulnerability might increase the risk to a female in that way. But otherwise, I don't think they I think they probably be at lower risk of being searched, because they're less likely to be in situations which would encounter a stop search." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Sergeant).

There was also the more traditional expectation of hegemonic masculinity and sexism experienced by women in the police evident in some participants interviews, suggesting that institutional hegemonic masculinity persists within forces.

"I mean, for me, actually, you know, being a female has hindered my career somewhat. Sort of in the earliest stages, so I was a single mum for a good few years. And so that did prevent me from progressing, really." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

"Certainly, when I joined and you know, it was a bit of a you know, man up a bit up a bit." (Martin, 52, P.C.).

"I don't understand binary, non-binary, and... I don't understand it. And I have discussions with my 15-year-old daughter about it who does. I'm just male straightforward." (Simon, 55, Superintendent).

Suspicion - Detecting Difference

"But that's the first trigger to go "Okay, something's different". A difference. And it's by identifying those differences." (Sam, 44, Inspector).

Despite being a key characteristic in traditional police culture, suspicion was found in this research to be utilised in a different manner to past literature. Rather than suspicion being focused on illegal behaviour, or danger, the participants spoke about suspicion in a more inquisitive, information gathering way. Contrary to previous literature, such as Bowling et al. (2019), who proposed that suspicion is a tool used to predict behaviours they might encounter, the participants in this study suggested that they were using that suspicion to look for explanations of behaviour, to better understand the person they were dealing with. This way of *detecting difference* allowed officers to probe any 'abnormalities' they encountered, in order to be able to understand the person they were dealing with. *"I*

was thinking something might not sound quite right here" (Natalie, 29, P.C.). This was discussed in reference to autism, but also other conditions and socio-economic status. While they admitted that their aim is not to diagnose behaviours and give labels to individuals, it was simply to assess the situation and decide whether they need to enlist additional help or referrals. For example:

"This person's… There's… Something's not right. Or there's a vulnerability here and they're doing this. It's not right, either. So, we need to, you know, we need to look at what's going on with them. They'll come back and they'll look at doing that. Maybe not identifying specifically what's wrong." (Martin, 52, P.C.).

"When I first started out, just thought they were awkward. Maybe? I don't know. I don't know. But, you know, now you, now you question someone's behaviour because of the fact that people, and the world just talks about it more, and it's more socially accepted, I believe." (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

This suspicion was not based on training or knowledge about specific conditions or medical diagnoses, but rather on their social 'police skills', which they spoke about developing on the job, similar to the 'craft' that Crank (2004) proposed. This is an optimistic finding in the study; the participants were able to detect *differences*, and use that suspicion to seek further help for the individual. While this suspicion was framed by participants as positive, and a tool used to increase inclusivity and adaptations, it tended to be based on an adoption of the medical model of disability, and relied on neurotypical norms to assess 'difference'. For this suspicion to work in a way that protects due process, it is vital that the officer has the resources to refer the individual to, or to receive guidance on best practice. Participants often spoke of how they would approach the custody nurse or mental health team for assistance. Hence, this is reliant on these resources being available, and knowledgeable about autism and neurodivergence.

"If I get that gut feeling. When I'm booking somebody, I'm talking to somebody. And I'm thinking "summat's not.. something's not right". So I will then go through to the nurse, who will then check medical records, and run assessments. So I'll speak to the nurse and say, "I think this individual has got some underlying... Whether it be a mental health issue,

learning difficulties... Something's underlying, I'm getting a feel for something but I don't…"." (Robert, 40, Custody Officer).

Overall, despite there being a theme of participants *aspiring* to fulfil the crime fighter role, in how they viewed their job and the public, they often spoke of wanting to help the individuals that they encounter. By approaching people with an inquisitive frame of mind and a desire to understand *why*, rather than just responding to the observable behaviours, it suggests that police officers want to ensure that they understand the behaviours. For example, throughout Janet's interview, she presented a very stereotypical crimefighter approach, and fits many of the traditional facets of the police characteristics discussed in occupational culture. However, she demonstrates a flexibility in her professional identity and a contradictory, complex belief and value system.

"How they behave is how you start to think "hmm right okay..." Instead of thinking like, "Oh my God, what's this one being like this for?", it's like "Oh right okay. Is there something... is there an issue here?" Is there a problem? Is this one struggling with something? Has this one got difficulties?" (Janet, 50, P.C.).

Cynicism

"We're a reactive service that sticks a plaster over a gaping wound."

(Brian, 34, P.C.).

Cynicism is a well-documented trait of police officers, and one of the core characteristics often utilised in the literature. This study found that participants expressed cynicism towards both public and the police institution. It was present in both newer recruits and longer serving officers, and both males and females. Participants spoke of a lack of trust in the public, often using stereotypes to describe the 'types' of people they encounter, such as *"smackheads, skegheads and drug dealers"* (Brian, 34, P.C.) and *"as the police […] we see the lowest of the low and the worst of the worst."* (Liam, 21, P.C.). This may be based on their regular encounters with criminals, as Simon explains:

"So, you know, there, there are a lot of people who, particularly on nights, a lot of cops will say that we only ever come across the ***mad, the sad and the bad****. And that's, you*

know, that that's, you know, quite quite a broad, broadly helpful category that most people fit into. Particularly in the dark of the night when you know, when everyone is asleep and the people you tend to come across are always classified as either ***mad, sad or bad****."* (Simon, 55, Superintendent).

This distrust of the public, perhaps based on regular dealings with certain offenders, meant that their cynicism leaked into dealings with neurodivergent individuals. Often, participants spoke of doubting the legitimacy or validity of diagnoses, and a diagnosis being 'used as an excuse' for bad behaviour. *"I was experiencing a number of people coming and going "Oh I've autism", and they were using that as excuse for their criminal behaviour."* (Sam, 44, Inspector). There was some contradiction around whether the police required a formal diagnosis in order to provide reasonable adjustments for autistic people, with some participants claiming that they treat people at an individual level and are happy to provide additional help without any diagnoses, whereas others would only make adjustments with a formal diagnosis. *"I was told, "Oh yeah, he's got autism, ADHD", and I was like oh okay well let's see if he has, so to speak... He's getting diagnosed for it. Well, have they or not?"* (Jonathon, 43, D.C.).

As well as this cynical view of the public that they police, participants displayed a pessimistic and cynical attitude towards the policing institution, their supervisors and the government. Police interviewees discussed structural issues within policing, shifting focus for current short fallings onto institutional challenges, that were out of their control. These issues were discussed as having significant impact on their ability to carry out their duties and to be able to use their own agency to deal with situations. For example, officers often mentioned the lack of police officers, and hence the lack of time to deal with citizens; less police officers means that they are rushed from one job to another, without adequate time do effectively deal with each.

"…it's a limited number of cops and unfortunately it's things like risks like your sexual offences, domestic violence, child abuse, erm you know, that takes a lot of, a lot of manpower, and of course keeping enough officers on the streets to go to jobs." (Graham, 41, D.C.).

"Because we've got a shortage of staff, there's a shortage of experience, so my tutor to put it kindly, wasn't very experienced and wasn't very good at... His job. So he wasn't very good at showing me how to do mine to be fair. It wasn't it wasn't the best experience at the start, but I'm alright now." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"It's one of the many parts of the job that a frustrating job this job thinking that the most frustrating part and the hardest part was going to be dealing with idiot members of the public. Well, it turns out not to be the case. It's more things like what we're discussing about training and things like that, that irritate me, erm and y'know corporate malarkey should we say?" (Brian, 34, P.C.).

These constraints also means that officers do not have the time to discuss cases with each other, sharing knowledge and resources, and ensuring that vulnerable individuals are dealt with fairly. While police participants spoke about a desire to help people, and to ensure that appropriate adaptations are made, in line with due process, they often were not given the time to put this into practice. This lack of time is particularly important when considering interactions with autistic people, which participants discussed as being a barrier to fair treatment, as well a personal frustration.

"The problem, I think, sometimes in policing is you have so much to deal with. You come across people who have personality disorders and other issues that almost seem like autism, but they're not. You know, it's just, you know, I do this like this, I want to do this, and I've got unfortunately, I've got one that has a personality disorder and autism, which really doesn't help. But I think police tend to be very, you'll go to a job, you'll see what you've got in front of you, you've got somebody being belligerent, or somebody doing this or being very anti, and you almost don't have time, I think on a lot of situations to think, is there something more to this?" (Martin, 52, P.C.).

The below excerpt is a great example of the frustration of the time constraints that officers face, and the pressure from supervisors to provide a kind of 'conveyor belt' style of crime control and justice, whereas participants spoke about helping and supporting victims to be one of the most important facets of policing, more in line with the due process model of criminal justice.

"You know I think the final thing for me was on response, I went to a lady. An old lady that had been burgled, she was very distraught. And, you know, I'd been there about half an hour with her, and they were calling me. "Err, right we've had more calls". I said I'm not going, as I've told you, I'm code 8, which means we're staying, Yeah, but we've got these calls back and I said well it'll have to go to other units. I said I'm not going. And they kept on and on and on so I said are you point to point me, so I got them to call me via the radio. I said if you continue to contact me, I will turn my radio off. I said I'm staying here with this lady, I said she's absolutely distraught until either she's okay or her family gets here. I said, I'm not going. I said so, all those other callers can wait unless there's somebody else to go to them. So, and after that I thought you know what, we can't even do our job anymore because it's constant because "we've got this call, and this call"" (Janet, 50, P.C.).

"So yeah, lots of issues there that I think that actually, we don't address very well. But I think that's a whole system issue, rather than one that police are able to resolve immediately." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

Participants also demonstrated cynicism towards the training (or lack of), provided by the police, for example: "so my tutor to put it kindly, wasn't very experienced and wasn't very good at... His job. So he wasn't very good at showing me how to do mine to be fair." (Brian, 34, P.C.) and *"Nobody invested in you as a constable or a sergeant really. Not really."* (Simon, 55, Superintendent). The newer recruits discussed being easily replaceable and being treated 'like a number' as a police officer, rather than as an individual human: *"[laughter] I think they give you a collar number. Because, you know, they don't want to give you a name. And you know, they just replace if you go, they just replace you with another one. That's their mindset with it."* (Brian, 34, P.C.). Whereas the longer serving officers were dismissive of the newer recruits: *"But I find lot of the youngsters coming through now. They just have no way of dealing with people they just, it's quite frustrating, you know, when you see they just don't do the basics, they got no interest in doing the basics. I find it quite frustrating, you know"* (Janet, 50, P.C.).

Those officers that had tried to suggest improvements to policies and training found that their input was not valued at lower ranks, and so had become disillusioned. For some,

this was motivation to promote further up the ranks, whereas others had stayed at P.C. level and simply stopped trying to make a positive change in their force. For example:

"Because then I know it's gonna fall on deaf ears. And you're just gonna be moaned about when you've left the room. So it depends on the amount of mental fortitude and you, whatever you want to call it, that I've got left at that time. I try to because it annoys me, but I don't always. It shouldn't be up to me. If I can see it happening, after three years of being in, the sergeant's and stuff, who've been there much, much longer are in the responsible position of line managing these cops." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

"I spoke with somebody from the National Crime agency in relation to Munchausen there was a specialist and he said "well you got... there are some serious issues here. We need to look at this" and he was going to come down and I was told by my than Inspector, "you do not get him down here. You cancel him" (Janet, 50, P.C.).

Tension Between Emergency Services

There was a tension apparent between the police force and other emergency forces; participants often spoke of the demands being places on them, whereas they believed that the other emergency services (particularly the ambulance service) did not reciprocate the assistance. As the police role seems to be shifting towards a more social work focused role, rather than that of a crimefighter, police officers are expecting to be helped.

"So, say ambulance can't get a call, we go to that. Social services can't get to a call, we'll go to that. So we're, we're not just the police service we don't just, you know, we deal with everything, and I think that then obviously has a knock on effect for us being able to deal with what we should be dealing with." (Janet, 50, P.C.).

And,

"So we would try to say to the, to the to the health professionals. Look, when we detain somebody under Section 136. And we take them to a place of safety, the hospital, we can't stay with them. So please don't expect us to unless they're going to be really violent. Because if you want us to stay with them, well get your act together and don't keep the cops waiting there eight hours." (Simon, 55, Superintendent).

Also,

"Other agencies don't have the funding and money to deal with it. A lot of it ends up sitting up the police's door […] And then we're trying to do stuff. We're trying to do stuff that they should be doing. But we don't have the powers or the abilities because, to make any difference, because all we can do is arrest people" (Sam, 44, Inspector).

This links with the frustrations discussed in the earlier *sense of mission* section. The police participants expressed an awareness of their changing job roles, despite their ambition to fulfil a crimefighter role.

"Even though the ambulance can't send anyone they have to do something about it. So they send us, which is just crazy when you think about it. You just wouldn't. Before I joined the police, I didn't think at all that I would ever be sat for 12 hours on a full shift by the side of a bed of somebody that's been sectioned." (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

This tension and frustration was suggested to be present between neighbouring police forces also. One participant discussed that budget cuts had resulted in a local custody suite being closed, and so they had to take detainees to a neighbouring custody suite in another force.

"And they don't help us. They pull their face, they don't like it. We've got so much abuse from the custody sergeants and things like that. Because they don't understand why [his force] is bringing [force] prisoners to [neighbouring force], and then that kind of thing. So you think we'd work together, but it doesn't really work like that unfortunately." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

Alongside the suggested changing police role, from crime control towards one focused on welfare and social work, this tension speaks of a police force who are being expected to function as a 'jack of all trades', without being given the tools, time and service partnerships that they require to be able to fulfil the new role.

Desire to Help

"I probably say that as the helping people, like sort of wanting to, probably cliche line but, wanting to make a difference." (Connor, 35, P.C.).

Contrary to the overarching theme of participants adopting the crimefighter approach to policing, a major theme in the data was the desire to help people. Throughout the interviews, police participants expressed this desire in various ways. This reflects the due process model of criminal justice, with an emphasis on rights (particularly victim's rights). *"I might not be able to solve a crime but at least I can sit down with her for 10 minutes and reassure her that I've took the time to..."* (Brian, 34, P.C.). They demonstrated a passion for protecting vulnerable individuals and ensuring that they felt 'heard' and looked after following incidents. For many participants, this was discussed as if *helping people* and *catching criminals* go hand in hand. A fusion between the traditional crimefighter and peacekeeper typology. For example:

"No, I want to help people do the right thing. You know, get justice for people. That's why I did the child protection. We want just this for people that are so vulnerable in their own right that they can't protect themselves, you know, I'd help everybody if I could." (Georgia, 39, Temp Sergeant).

And,

"I got asked to go and see an elderly lady out in the sticks right out in the state. And they said, "Oh, um, she just needs a bit of reassurance because basically..." It sounds really basic to me and you. But someone's called her and asked her for her bank details, and she's almost given them over. So they will ask you to go and see her, and do a reassurance and she's got a son who's about 50 and who's got special needs. So it's, a lot of people may find that, from an outside perspective really boring. Just going to sit and speak to people. But that gave me a lot more than what most other jobs would because you're actually helping someone" (Liam, 21, P.C.).

Also,

"Y'know, and then you get a job, and it's for an old person who's had, say a distraction burglary. And it's like, and I don't mean "oh great" that's happened. But what I mean is oh good, I can actually fulfil what I joined for, and you know, spend time with off, you know, let's get your locks sorted let's try and do this" (Martin, 52, P.C.).

This desire to help and compassion for others was identified across different ages, service lengths and ranks, but it was fundamentally present in police constables – those that had the most regular contact with the public. They expressed an importance in being recognised by the public for being *good*. Such as *"And I've always tried to break down those barriers and kind of show that I'm human by talking about sort of my experiences and things in the police and how I would have, might have dealt with something and that then makes them sort of see us and think "oh yeah you are human after all""* (Connor, 35, P.C.). Given that the police face a lot of scrutiny from the public now, and police 'scandals' are a regular occurrence in the media, this need to prove themselves is vital to maintain control over the public. *"We gotta be seen to be cleaner than clean, haven't we?"* (Martin, 52, P.C.). However, for others, this ability to help people came as something of a surprise after joining the police force, suggesting that while people join the police with the desire to control crime, they find job satisfaction from other areas.

"I think it's better in the respect that when you're joining the police, you sort of just think about catching criminals, you sort of don't realize that when you can help people, you know, the lives that you can save and the times that I have, whether it be talk someone down from a rooftop or taking someone to hospital when they've overdosed, and they've survived. You know, stopping people commit suicide." (Liam, 21, P.C.).

Communication as a Vital Tool in Policing

Another theme that was a contrast to the traditional occupational culture literature was the use of communication as a tool. Participants claimed that effective and calm communication was a better tool for dealing with challenging behaviour than restraint, particularly for autistic individuals experiencing meltdowns. One participant, when discussing a regular autistic person that they have interactions with, said *"He'll come down real quick from that, because then he'll, he'll have that conversation. And so we've gone from times where I've had to restrain him in a way to prevent harm to himself. To then he's telling me all about what his favourite Pokémon is."* (Connor, 35, P.C.). This was supported by others:

"It may, it could be a different approach from the use of force angle, whether it be, you don't go in and rugby tackle someone straight away, or you consider talking to, you're

obviously trying to talk to someone, but you'll sort of be talking to as you're moving them away. But instead of saying, like, "what the fuck you doing?", you could be saying, like, "calm down, take a minute".” (Liam, 21, P.C.).

And,

“However, when someone's got red mist, they're not gonna calm down, whereas the people I've come across with autism, and I've taken the time to talk to them, that behaviour has completely changed.” (Sarah, 21, P.C.).

This belief that communication is a vital skill tended to be expressed by younger participants and women. This could perhaps suggest a difference in control and compliance methods compared to the traditional police typology in certain demographics of police. Communication was referred to as an alternative for physical resolution of conflicts; speaking (and perhaps most importantly, listening) was proposed to be an effective solution to violent situations. It was discussed as a skill that some people either possessed or didn’t, rather than a skill that could be taught or developed. For example:

“And I thought I had skills that would be, even though it's not necessarily... I'm not physical. I don't want to like wrestle to the floor. And it's not that I thought I had all the good skills that would be good for police officers” (Georgia, 39, Temp. Sergeant).

And,

“Communication is absolutely key in custody, it really, really is. And some people are good at it, and some people not so good at it. And you find that people… I've found that people don't talk to people very well.” (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

Fairness

There was a strong sense of participants viewing themselves as bastions of the law and defenders of order. Justice and fairness were strong themes when speaking about the treatment of both suspects and victims. There was a strong emotional connection to the sense of morality; participants regularly spoke of ‘doing the right thing’, such as *“Helping, and doing the right thing. Doing the right thing by everybody, whether they be the person in custody, whether they be the person, the victim, it's my thing is do the right by them. So,*

you know, that's, that's, I like to think of it like that, I will do the best I can for whoever it needs to be." (Janet, 50, P.C.). Rather than police viewing themselves as traditional enforcers of the law, they used their discretion and humanity to (within their power) address the root problems that resulted in the crime committed. Some participants spoke of a preference to use liaison and diversion services, rather than criminalising the individual where possible. For example:

"It's my decision to arrest so I generally would try and deal with it outside of custody" (Liam, 21, P.C.).

"We were looking at diverting him down that the youth offending route to address his behaviours, as opposed to just sort of look at like a charge or a caution or something like that, but they also want to kind of, intervene in these behaviours and try and deal with that" (Connor, 35, P.C.).

And,

"They might just want you to have a chat with them some words of advice, see if there are any support services that they can be referred to, to kind of help them out. But then it means that we prevent somebody from going down the criminal justice system when there are alternative sort of ways of dealing with it. Because why wouldn't we? Sending people into court unnecessarily?" (Natalie, 29, P.C.).

Further,

"And it's about working with them. It's not about just, you know, even if they've done wrong, it's about being fair to them, even though it's hard sometimes [..] it's not for me to decide what happens with them. That's why we have a court system" (Brian, 34, P.C.).

These quotes present an argument against the traditional literature of occupational culture, which will be discussed further in the discussion chapter of this thesis. However, while the police spoke of this notion of crimefighting, a disdain for offenders and cynicism of the public, when it came to the arrest and criminal charging of an individual, they claimed to use this as a last resort. *"If they do get charged, it's because they needed to be charged and not just for the sake of getting charged, you know?"* (Janet, 50, P.C.).

Should the officer have arrested an individual, that sense of fairness persisted when dealing with the arrest, interview, and custody process. *"And that individual, whether they have done it or haven't done it, you know, still is entitled to fairness*" (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant). The participants had a firm belief in due process, and the fair treatment of everybody under their care – whether they were witness, victim or suspects. Although I am aware that there is a possibility that participants were framing their responses in a way that presented the best version of themselves, they conveyed a proclivity to impartial and just treatment of suspects. For example:

"It's there to be a fair process, believe it or not, it's not there to just get someone to admit that they've done it. Yeah, you know, it's about being fair and about doing things non oppressive. And if they're struggling to articulate what they're thinking, and that's not fair on them, you know, that's going to leave potentially them getting prosecuted for something that they, they maybe shouldn't be." (Brian, 34, P.C.).

And,

"The best way I can ensure that a conviction is safe and robust, and we're getting the best out of victims is by making sure that we're treating our suspects really fairly, so that there's nothing that can fall down in that process and that the right outcome is happening, for the right reasons, not because we're taking advantage of people that are vulnerable. And I think if we addressed vulnerability at an earlier stage anyway, we'd have far less people in our cells, which means we'd have less work and means that people would be happier, and the world would be a better place." (Jessica, 42, Temp. Detective Sergeant).

Participants discussed the importance of being able to compartmentalise their personal feelings and their professional identity during encounters with suspects, which they stated was particularly difficult and important to do when dealing with those suspected of controversial or heinous crimes. This was not necessarily out of compassion for the individual, or the premise that they may be innocent, but to ensure that their actions and behaviours complied with PACE guidelines in order to maintain a robust conviction.

"I think you just put the business face on, do you know, like that professional head on, and then you just you just learn to do it. I think it is just a learned thing that you do. Like, you say, in might in my head, I might think it or come home and think, "Oh, they didn't deserve any of that". But it's not for me… I'm not making that decision." (Susan, 49, Detention Officer).

"And that individual, whether they have done it or haven't done it, you know, still is entitled to fairness. And the most heinous things that I've booked in, I've gotta put my personal things to one side, forget what I'm thinking." (Robert, 40, Custody Sergeant).

The comments above demonstrates that there was a fundamental belief that to be a police officer was as part of a larger legal and just system; they viewed themselves as a layer of protection between the public and the criminal justice system. Arrest and detainment was not a decision taken lightly, and throughout, participants recognised the importance of treating people fairly, regardless of the crimes involved.

Chapter 5 - Direct Experience Findings

5.1 Introduction

The direct experience participants all had a varied background of education and employment. All had completed secondary education, with three having achieved undergraduate degrees (two of these had Masters degrees and one held a doctorate). The three participants that had attended higher education had received an autism diagnosis later in life, prompted by their encounters with the criminal justice system. Their communication styles and levels varied, and as has been noted earlier, one requested to take part in the interview using the messenger function on Microsoft Teams. His quotes and excerpts are copied verbatim from the chat transcript, hence they differ in presentation to the others. The findings present themes which are categorised under two umbrella themes: *Procedural Justice* and *Vulnerabilities During Police Encounters.*

5.2 Vulnerabilities During Police Encounter

Communication

> *"I'd always felt my entire life that people didn't really understand quite what I was saying."* (Richard).

There was a common theme of communication challenges during police encounters, including during interviews and custody. While the police officers dealing with participants did explain the procedures to them, participants often did not fully understand.

> Diana*: Did they? So they didn't explain that to you?*
>
> Amanda*: They did. But... [long pause]*
>
> Diana*: But you didn't understand?*
>
> Amanda*: No. The autism obviously affects communication and stuff*.

This was further demonstrated by another participant:

"But he didn't seem to get that. I was like, "What can I do? I don't quite understand", and he was saying it as if, like, listen to the words I'm saying they're obvious. And I was like, No, I don't.... I think I could answer you but I think I'm gonna miss the point. And that's

something I always do. A week after I've had an interview something, I think back and go "ah that's what they meant!"." (Richard).

There was a sense of cynicism from participants about the trustworthiness and intentions of police officers during their arrest. This lack of trust in the police will be discussed further in the *Procedural Justice* section of this chapter below. They expressed feeling vulnerable during interviews, due to the challenges that they experience with communication, alongside the perception that police officers manipulate interviews in order to achieve confessions or incriminating interviews. Participants viewed themselves as very honest and socially naïve, which they felt was a particular risk during police encounters. For example:

"Well they're experts at it, and they do trick questions, and they do things in a way they can use it to make you look guilty. […] And then, well they're obviously experts at doing the questioning, they asked me questions I can see now, I should have just shut up and not said anything to them. Not having spoken to them at all. […] Well, I look back on it now, and I thought I felt, you know, my view all along, you know, I'm an honest chap. I've always thought that truth was the was the right answer." (Daniel).

And,

"And this guy's telling me not to say anything. You're demanding an answer. I'm outraged by what you're asking me. Maybe that's not quite the right way of putting it. I know why you're asking me. But I'm still outraged by it. So that was really difficult, and I kept stopping the interview to speak to the solicitor to say, I really want to sort of answer that. And he was like, "No, do not answer". So that was difficult. And I think I stopped it four times and the police officer got a bit irritated by that. […] And, and you kind of in a position of being confused." (Richard).

There was particular confusion and vulnerability during the interview stages, such as:

"I found that the interview was, well, it was left very much up to me how much I wanted to say a lot of the time, they'd sort of lead a question in, and then leave you to sort of expand wherever your head seem to go. And as you can probably tell, I think I tend to go off rattling through different avenues." (Stewart).

And,

"So, I agreed to answer his questions like usual I said loads of stuff. I didn't know what to say or not to say" (Jeremy).

Also,

"And that's a communication issue, which... I call a spade a spade. I'm not very good at being tactful. And it's been okay through my life, but I see most people are not like that. I've said what I'd done when I was interviewed by the police" (Daniel).

It was evident that this interview stage was particularly traumatic for some participants, due to either miscommunication or a lack of clear communication from the police. All participants stated that the lack of clarity during the custody stage was stressful for them, due to disruption of routines and uncertainty about the situation. For example,

"Not knowing is terrible for me. Yeah. Yeah. I like to know what's going on. And it's, you know, even if they if someone said we'll be back in 20 minutes, or something. But it was a case of I had no idea of the passage of time anyway, in there. There's no clocks. And you're just left with your own thoughts and things. You know, you don't really know how long anyone's been gone or anything." (Stewart).

And,

"I mean, I struggle with uncertainty. And so that was really difficult." (Richard).

The stress was so overwhelming for one participant that they declined legal assistance in order to get out of custody as soon as possible:

"And I've, you know, I'm clearly distressed at this point, I'm worried about things. And I just wanted to get out of there at that point, and I was trying to look for the quickest route to sort of get to a resolution. So, I refused legal advice at that point, because it was it was about, if you have legal advice, it's gonna take a while for someone to... And I just wanted to get things moving and get on and I was only going to tell them the truth anyway, so I didn't see what was involved in that." (Stewart).

A lack of communication can make the situation much more stressful for an autistic individual than it would to a neurotypical suspect, and may result in an autistic suspect forsaking their rights in order to escape the situation.

The evidence in the above quotes from participants demonstrates the importance of clear communication between the police and an autistic suspect. While communication with the police may pose vulnerabilities or challenges for a neurotypical person encountering the criminal justice system, they can pose heightened vulnerabilities for autistic suspects (Hepworth, 2017). This can be due to a police officer using complex language which the individual does not comprehend, literal understanding of questions, or challenges with memory (Holloway et al., 2020; Salseda et al., 2011). Autistic people may find open-ended questions or police interview tactics more challenging than neurotypical people, and may incriminate themselves unknowingly (Young & Brewer, 2020). As Stewart said:

"Yeah, the, the way it was structured that the questions were very open and sort of lead, leaving it to you to sort of expand on everything. And that was very difficult for me to know where the lines where a lot of the time between a question and the how much answer you have to give."

Additionally, communication challenges, or a lack of clear communication can cause additional stress and anxiety for autistic suspects. These challenges can be exacerbated if there is a greater empathy divide between the two parties involved, in accordance with the double empathy theory (Milton, 2012). That is, a police officer who has little or no experience or knowledge in autism may struggle to communication effectively with an autistic suspect, whereas an autistic police officer may be able to interact appropriately, and in a way that reduces any unnecessary anxiety and distress for the suspect.

Physical environment

One participant spoke at length about the impact that the physical environment had on them during the encounter. It was interesting that the police participants often mentioned sensory factors such as bright lighting and noises being potential issues for autistic people in custody; indeed the newly built neurodiverse custody cells in Nottingham

have been designed with a focus on sound, lighting and matt painting. However, these were not issues brought up by the participants in this study. For example:

"Well, I found the environment challenging, as I said before, I mean, it's, it's a hard meeting, you know, it was a little room, very sort of hard surfaces, and what should have been regular patterns that weren't and things in there? So I found the room itself very difficult as an environment, generally." (Stewart).

And,

"And I was talking about the physical environment and how there were things that were distracting in the environment. Like I had a row of plug sockets down the wall that had gaps between the plug sockets and the thing and they weren't lined up properly. And it's driving me a little bit wild looking at it and me not being able to straighten that out." (Stewart).

And,

"You know, and it's like, they've got they had the intercom system, which called someone. But it's like that button is a barrier to actually using it almost. So unless someone came to the door and said, "are you alright?" You're not going to ask for something necessarily." (Stewart).

Use of Appropriate Adults

Only two of the five participants stated that they were provided with an appropriate adult (AA) during police interview and custody process. All but one commented that an appropriate adult would have been beneficial for them during this process. Where an appropriate adult was allocated, participants were unsure of their purpose, and this was not explained to them by the police. Amanda, who had had a number of experiences with the police, often found the AA to be helpful during interviews to assist with communication, whereas Jeremy claimed that the AA was not. Also in being refused to select his choice of AA contributed to a sense of suspicion and distrust in the police.

Amanda*: I've had an appropriate adult with me at all times.*
Diana*: Yeah. Did you find that helpful?*
Amanda*: Yeah.*

Diana*: In what way?*
Amanda*: They were able to simplify things down for me.*

On the other hand,

Diana*: Did they make sure that you understood everything that happened?*

Jeremy*: No, I don't think and I was never told why / what a AA did*

Diana*: Did you know why they were there?*

Jeremy: Only because I was vulnerable. That's it. She never said anything.

And,

"They would not allow Sara to be a appropriate adult and the mental health worker who reported me to the Police acted as the AA on all times and she knew highly negative info in my MH / police file" (Jeremy).

The participants who were not provided with an AA reported that they did not feel supported through the interview process, even if they had a solicitor present. The failure to provide an AA was due to either decisions by the police or, in one case, following an assessment from the custody mental health nurse. Both of the below participants had disclosed their autism diagnosis by this point. This demonstrates a lack of knowledge from the police about autism and a failure to follow PACE guidelines.

Diana*: And did you have an appropriate adult in the interview with you?*

Daniel*: Well, I had the solicitor there, but he wasn't useful.*

And,

"They decided that I didn't need one. They asked a mental health professional to assess me, and they said that I didn't need an appropriate adult or any support whatsoever. Therefore, the custody sergeant took that as not needing one […] So I was like, if I'd have had the support there to just say, "Hang on. That's not really the way that you should answer it or the way it's meant". So yeah, it's, it's would it have made a difference? Yes. I think quite honestly, a huge difference just having well, and just having support of any thought would have helped, quite honestly at that point. […] when you look at the

guidelines that feels like there should have been someone there with me explaining the process and things." (Stewart).

According to the updated PACE guidelines, police must supply an AA for any suspect that they suspect to be vulnerable during police custody. If these autistic participants have not been provided with an AA during their police encounters, then it suggests that there is either a lack of autism knowledge at a custody level, or confusion surrounding the AA scheme; either of these place the suspect in a precarious position during their custody and interview stages, particularly those who have good communication skills and present as 'high functioning'.

5.3 Culpability of Criminal Behaviour

There was a theme of culpability throughout the interview data, with regards to the participants felt that they were less culpable of the crimes they were charged with than a neurotypical peer. Participants felt that the police they spoke with did not understand this, and had made judgements about them based on their criminal behaviour, without listening to their account of what happened and their reasoning. Richard's excerpt below highlights this:

"I mean, that is the crux of basically, how it has felt throughout. I feel like there's a lot of times where there have been like, assumptions made about motivation and things that don't apply to me in the same way. So there are assumptions that there was a sexual sort of attraction and things. And that's not true, it was a pattern forming thing that happened to me. So I'd got into a situation where I was in a social sort of interaction with people. And it was like, it became almost compulsive to check these emails, to forward emails on to other people, because that's what I was doing being useful to other people. And it had become a way of filling a void in my life at that point." (Richard).

This was echoed by other participants, who suggested that the police manipulate evidence and interviews to prove criminal intent in autistic behaviour that isn't present:

"And, and that's totally different in neurodiverse people, that they're very vulnerable. Because people can make it look as though they had a criminal intent in whatever they did. And they're defenceless, because they usually, overall, the ones that I've

seen, I think are very, extremely honest, and extremely straightforward in what they say." (Daniel).

Participants also suggested that some autistic people should not be criminally responsible for their behaviours if they have impairments that impact them on a cognitive level. Such as:

"Until professionals truly understand if autistic people are viewed as "vulnerable" and given the support, guidance, and protection then most would never be prosecuted - not at all! If an ASD person acts childish treat them as a child" (Jeremy).

Another participant claimed that his criminal behaviour was part of an obsessive pattern of behaviour that was a result of his autism, and that he had sought professional help for this behaviour before it became criminal in nature, but was turned away several times. Because he had sought help and been refused, he claimed that this should have been taken into consideration as a mitigating factor in his case.

"But I asked for specific help related to the conviction 20 years ago, and I checked my GP and it's in my medical notes, I raised it, and I was dismissed. So, the autism and that together, were both the left to run and run and run. And then this happened. And, and everyone just says, "well, it's not our fault". But I did ask for help. 20 years ago, and you ignored me. More than, I asked more than once. And you just kept telling me to go on. […] I was very specific as well as to what I actually, specifically said I need help for this. And it's basically the same thing or relate very, very related to what I got charged for." (Richard).

He went on to say:

"Cause my solicitor, before I'd gone for the second interview had said "how much is there?" I said, "I don't know". And I don't think he believed me. And he said, "you're allowed to tell me". I can't tell anybody. Because the police hadn't done the investigation by then. But I said, I don't know. I have no idea. It could be... It's probably more than 50, less than 1000. But if you told me it was 2000... [unsurprised noise] And but people seem to not get that. I was like, I have no idea. If you told me it was 10,000 I wouldn't be staggered. So when they told me how much it was, it's kind of like, and I still feel it. Is that a lot? In terms of what I remember? Because I don't remember much." (Richard).

This is quite typical of an obsessive behaviour, or 'special interest' in autistic people, and Richard suggests that the quantity of images found should not impact on the severity of the crime as it does with neurotypical suspects.

"Because I was like, this is an addiction. I don't care what anyone tells me. I'm addicted to nicotine. It's exactly the same. I shouldn't have done it. But it is a contributing factor." (Richard).

Others also suggested that the understanding of criminal behaviour should take autism into account:

"I'll give an example, there was a question about, what, what drew you to that? And I said, there was it was, like, innocent imagery, you know. And what came out in the court paperwork was, he likes innocent children. And it's like, that's a very different statement." (Stewart).

And,

"It is about getting criminals. But you know, what I don't think you should do is, they shouldn't be arresting people who are not criminals. And because they just do funny things which autistic people do." (Daniel).

The autistic participants overall, despite having been charged with different types of crimes, felt that their autism hadn't been taken into account when considering the motivation for the crime they were charged with.

5.4 Procedural Justice

Procedural justice was a deductive theme developed in the data, split into the sub-themes: *feeling heard and respected, lack of trust,* and *fairness,* in line with the four factors of perceived procedural justice theory. There were questions in the interview schedule the targeted these themes, however, some participants spoke about them organically and without prompting. These findings will be discussed in each corresponding section below.

Feeling Heard and Respected

There was a mix of responses to the questions that probed these factors; some participants felt that they felt that they had played an active part in their police experience, and had been treated with respect. However, other participants felt very strongly that they had not. Only one participant felt that they had been *heard* when speaking with the police:

"And she asked a few other things. I said "you're the first person who has asked me those things". Out of anyone. And she seemed to believe it. And we talked about some other things." (Richard).

This idea of being *heard* is an important concept within perceived procedural justice. As explored in the previous section discussing culpability, participants felt that their accounts were not listened to, and their autism was not *understood* by the police. This was supported throughout the interviews:

"And they won't speak to me to explain it." (Daniel).

"And I've encountered several people who say I've done some training on this, police officers or whatever. We've done a bit of this and you think you have not got a clue. It's like, what can you do on a couple of two-hour training courses? Nothing. It's like, you can't." (Richard).

"They had already decided to charge me no matter what I said" (Jeremy)

And,

"They've already made, they won't listen to what I got to say. Nobody give a monkey's what I got to say, because this whole process, nobody's really listened to me at all. Certainly no one in authority. No one's want to even engage with you. Social Services basically haven't spoken to me." (Richard).

These quotes tell a different story to those from the police participants, particularly those in the *fairness* section. Potential reasons for this disparity between the two groups will be explored in the following discussion chapter. When asked *"Do you feel like the police treated you with respect?"*, only one participant provided an answer:

"I think they treated me with as much respect as they would treat anyone else in custody. Whether or not that's the same thing. I don't know. I don't feel that I was treated any better than anybody else in real terms. I suppose. Respect it's a difficult one for me the best of times. I suppose, to a certain extent, yeah, they, they, they respected that I was an individual and things and, but I still felt very lost and confused, I think is the word at the time. (Stewart).

This quote captures how subjective *respect* is, and suggests that Stewart believed that while he was treated in a similar manner to a neurotypical suspect, there was still a difference between the level of respect that he was treated with, and how he would have liked to be treated. A lack of clear communication resulted in him feeling uneasy; this lack of communication could be perceived as a lack of respect.

"I think in this case, it was it was judged negatively. At least by the chief investigator, because it was kind of his tone of his voice or something. And it was just just his general overall attitude was "oh it's an excuse. We're going for that excuse today are we? Okay"." (Richard).

Lack of Trust in Police

"I just don't trust the police." (Richard).

A common theme across all five participant interviews was that of a *lack of trust* towards the police, both at an individual and an institutional level. Participants saw themselves as vulnerable, and often referred to the power imbalance between the police and themselves. *"That felt a little bit like they were using the power of, we know what we can do sort of point."* (Stewart). Participants had a tendency to frame police behaviours as manipulative and scheming; they believed that there was always an ulterior motive.

"Well, I knew what I was being charged with. But I thought this is impossible. And it's not true. And I thought, it's this black and white thinking I suppose I have. Which I thought, well, it just isn't true. And, you know, surely that'll come out. But I didn't realize they were going to play tricks to try and do was make it look as though it was true." (Daniel).

And,

"Because there are things that are in the social care records that are clearly not true, as far as I'm aware. So I want to know where they've come from. And they go, "Oh, well, it was in the police notes that we were given", or "we had a phone call where a police officer said this to us". And it's like, what did they say?" (Stewart).

Also,

"They tried to dissuade me from seeing a lawyer. But I gather I had a right to see a lawyer. And I did see a lawyer. But I think they only gave me about five minutes with a lawyer. I'd been there for about three or four hours. And then they gave me five minutes with a lawyer." (Daniel).

All participants stated that autistic people are viewed as an 'easy win' for the police, and hence, that the police do not have a legitimate interest in their welfare:

"We are seen as easy convictions." (Jeremy).

"I don't trust them no. Just cause of everything I think" (Amanda).

"They just, they see us as easy, easy targets basically." (Daniel).

Equity or Equality? Fairness of Treatment

All participants were asked the question *"Do you feel that you were treated fairly by the police?"*. Similarly to the previous section about *respect*, there were mixed responses but again, participants raised the subjective nature of the question, and the difference between autistic suspects, 'normal' suspects, and the rest of the public:

"I think I was treated fairly as a normal person. But not necessarily as an autistic person. I was treated by normal people standards. It was 'you are normal. So we will treat you normally'. So, have I been treated fairly? I mean, I think I probably was, but then by the standards of what most people would say was fair. What is what's fair for normal person? Is that fair for an autistic person? That, I'd say maybe not but that's for somebody else to say really. I don't know." (Richard).

And,

"Would they treat me fairly? What is fairly? [laughter] Would they understand it? No. So if you need to understand it to deal with someone, fairly, appropriately, understand it, then they couldn't do that anyway." (Richard).

Richard also discussed the interviewing police officer having a confrontational style, which would fit with the crimefighter, machismo mentality that he experienced during his encounter.

"So they questioned me. And the tone was very aggressive. And that really upset me. It kind of alarmed me. It was very confrontational, very aggressive. And even though I had a solicitor with me, I felt like I was very much on my own." (Richard).

This sense of the criminal justice system being built upon a medicalised understanding of disability and difference was evident. Participants felt that even if they were treated equally with neurotypical offenders, it would still not be *fair*, because neurodiversity requires different treatment. *"It's just the whole legal system, I think, is, it doesn't understand neurodiversity at all."* (Daniel). Following their experience, others thought that autism was not taken seriously by the police at an institutional level:

"I think like it was given sort of almost lip service to say that they'd looked at it, but it it didn't feel like anything had actually been done that was sort of like a tangible thing, that would help. [sighing]" (Stewart).

Along with,

"But yeah, I really did feel like it was just a note that someone wrote somewhere that didn't actually have any sort of impact on the way I was treated on the day." (Stewart).

5.4 Impact on Future Behaviour and Perceptions of Police

"I think it's very dangerous to speak to a police person now." (Daniel).

Following their experiences with the police, all participants demonstrated a negative perception of the police with a lack of trust in their motivations. This illustrates the strong impact that a negative experience can have on an autistic individual. However, consideration must be given to the fact that participants volunteered to take part in this study and may have done so because they had negative experiences with the police. It is

also possible that their negative experiences are linked to their charging and (in some cases) conviction of criminal offences, which they disagreed with to differing extents. Issues were raised regarding their perceptions of police priorities, honesty, legitimacy and culture. This negative perception was further reinforced by media stories about police misconduct, such as those with the Metropolitan Police Force and Gwent Police Force recently.

"So I'm very suspicious of police. I think they do things for their own... They like to get all their targets or they like to get money. They like to minimize the work that they do. And I think they're just, the experience that I've had, is that they're horrible people. They titillate things and they can be very dishonest. It doesn't surprise me the trouble with all the Metropolitan police have had." (Daniel).

> Amanda*: I don't like talking to them.*
> Diana*: Okay, but would you... Do you think you will trust them to do the right thing?*
> Amanda*: No.*

Also,

"But yeah, certainly, I don't I wouldn't trust the police with having to deal with something again. I mean, I was always quite cynical with police anyway, when you look at IPC and their reaction to yet another police officer shooting a black person when you actually get charged who they run by, I suppose I've always always, always a bit cynical about things like that anyway." (Richard).

Further demonstrating the trauma that a negative experience can have:

"I have a bit of a PTSD thing about the police at the moment. And it's like, so if there's a knock on the door, that's not expected, it is. It's like, my whole body sort of just tenses up." (Stewart).

Jeremy's negative experience with the police resulted with him stating that he no longer trusted any professional. For someone who is likely to have future contact with health professionals and social care services, this will undoubtedly have an impact on their life.

Diana: *If you witnessed, or were a victim of a crime, would you report it to the police?*
Jeremy: *Not my problem!!!!!!*
Jeremy: *Lol* 😂
Jeremy: *I don't trust professionals they are all scum!*
Diana: *Do you feel the same way about health professionals?*
Jeremy: *Yes all professionals.*

When asked if they would contact the police in the future, should they witness or be victim to a crime, participants demonstrated some hesitancy:

"Oh, yeah, I'd rather not. For anything. I wouldn't probably go to the police for anything. Unless it was really serious like I'd been attacked [..] But in general, going to the police no, it would have to be somebody pretty major. I wouldn't bother that much. But yeah, I, I would be hesitant. It's like when I had to pick up some equipment. I just got my dad to go down the station, which is going twice going down. I didn't want to see..." (Richard).

And,

"Yeah, whether I would... I don't know. I mean, I, I hoped that it would be sort of a fair and I'd be able to sort of be open with them, but it's really sort of, I think I'd be more guarded about things generally, just because of the nature of the interactions I've had with them. Which is a really horrible thing to say because I don't want to say I don't trust the police. But I find it difficult at the moment." (Stewart).

Stewart went on to say that he would seek help from the police if necessary in the future, because he had learned from his negative experience. He would feel more confident to be able to self-advocate for his rights, but would not trust the police to offer any adjustments or support that he needs.

"[laughter] I think because I understand things like my, the appropriate adult and things. I think as long as I'm willing to make those sorts of questions known, I feel that I'd be treated fairly. But I don't know if I would trust them to make those calls for me." (Stewart).

The above evidences that lasting negative perceptions of the police can occur. The experiences that these participants were discussing had all happened within the previous five years. While some were more recent, some had happened three and four years ago, suggesting that this perceived injustice becomes deep rooted.

5.5 Positive Experiences During Encounter

Having explored the negative aspects of interactions, participants did refer to some positive factors during police interactions, including adjustments that were made for them. Some of these seem like small gestures, but they meant enough to the participants that they brought them up during the interviews. Some of these quotes make reference to previous themes, such as *feeling heard:*

Jeremy: *Prior to the interview [advocate] got the young police officer to get on my level (floor) to gently talk to me - so I agreed to answer his questions*

And,

"And she asked a few other things. I said "you're the first person who has asked me those things". Out of anyone. And she seemed to believe it. And we talked about some other things." (Richard).

Similarly, feeling *understood* and *respected*:

"I think the lady I have to deal with is quite young. I think she's willing to believe and maybe it was a bit about the fact that there's addiction aspect to it. She's quite interested in the autism. I don't think she really gets it. But I think she's interested." (Richard).

[When discussing a previous interaction with the police] *"But these police that dealt with me then were very understanding. It was all done in soft interview rooms and discussions and how can we do this without going through legal process things."* (Stewart).

Participants spoke of police officers making changes to the environment to ensure their safety, after learning about their tendency to self-harm during stressful situations. Although one participant suggested that this was to cover their backs, rather than compassion.

"Hmm... Took staples out of the way because obviously I knew that, cause I was trying to get to the staples. Took the staples away." (Amanda).

"I remember a police officer having to sit outside the cell watching me to ensure I didn't self harm" (Jeremy)

Other adjustments were suggestive of police officers using their discretion to make the experience less stressful for the participants, such as:

> Diana: Going back to the arrest by the police. Did they put handcuffs on you?
> Jeremy: No he said I won't do that to allow me to keep my dignity or something

And evidence of clear communication from one police officer regarding their bail application, which eased the stress of uncertainty for the participant:

"Because they, because it went on for so long, they had to apply for the bail to be extended through a formal process rather than just being extended. So, they had to. So, I was told that, they rang me and said, "Look, you're going to get a letter from a court. It's nothing to do with it. It's just literally we're extending the bail and I have to put an application through and.."" (Stewart).

5.6 Suggestions for Improvement

While participants were somewhat despondent when asked of any suggestions for improvement, there were proposals regarding *communication* and *police training*. Four participants claimed that changes to the physical environment, along with the changes that are being implemented in police stations and custody suites, are 'gestures' towards equity. For example,

"I think these are all trivial things as far as I was concerned, all fidget toys and dim lights. What was more important was actually trying to understand my thinking. And honesty, that's the most important thing. So that's all about trivial things, it was all about repetitive movements and sounds, and all sorts of rubbish like that. Stimming and things. They just looked at, you know, stimming and these trivial things really." (Daniel).

Training and Attitudes Towards Autism

Participants, without explicitly mentioning the occupational culture of police, seemed to be aware that that there was a culture, fundamentally developed by neurotypical people that was punitive in nature, touching on themes of the crimefighter approach within traditional occupational culture.

"Until they realise we are truly vulnerable in a NT community we will continue to be screwed and our lives destroyed" (Jeremy).

Jeremy went on to say,

"Police training is basic and doesn't change their discriminatory attitude. Which ultimately puts vulnerable people in danger of prosecution." (Jeremy).

Whereas while Amanda simply suggested that communication could be improved when dealing with autistic people, this also touches on the notion that the culture is fundamentally neurotypical-based, and is not accessible for neurodivergent people with communication deficits:

"A different way. It would have been easier. Smaller words and just explaining things." (Amanda). [Talking about communication with police being improved]

I found the below quote from Stewart to be quite powerful:

"I mean, you, you get the feeling from the way I talk about it, quite honestly, there was a lot of things that I think could have been done better, just generally, from consideration of my state of mind, point of view. But it felt almost cruel at times the way that you sort of left by yourself with no sort of indication of anything. You don't even know what they're thinking from the point of view of bail and things or if they were going to hold you in remand and things. And I know that there's obviously, they don't know the, necessarily know the timeframes involved for things up front if they've got to do paperwork and things. But I just felt like I was sort of left in limbo for a lot of time, and not knowing anything." (Stewart).

This really demonstrates how traumatic the custody experience can be for someone with autism; the lack of clarity, routine and communication all contributed to him feeling that the police had treated him with malice. Whereas a neurotypical person may be able to adapt to changes, and understand the situation, an autistic people can already have a sense of reality being "a confusing, interacting mess of events, people, sounds and sights", and routines and order is a method of self-soothing and minimising this chaos (Joliffe et al., 1992, p.15). By not only disrupting a routine, but to also have no clear understanding of what happens next and when, can cause increased levels of anxiety and stress. As Stewart mentions, the police officers in this situation are perceived by the suspect to have control of the information, routine and timeline. Although he was pragmatic throughout the interview, and recognised that his criminal behaviour was both lawfully and morally wrong, he felt that his treatment by the police was unfair and institutionally unkind.

Participants felt that the police they encountered had not received any autism training, and would benefit from neurodiversity training, based on how they were treated during the encounters. There was some cynicism towards their willingness to learn, and their motivations to understand autism.

Diana: So do you think that there's anything that the police, that you would like the police to do? Say if they came around to speak to you or to arrest you?
Amanda: *Have training in autism*
Diana: *Do you think that they don't at the minute?*
Amanda: *I don't think they do, no. […] All the police officers and stuff like that, are they willing to take, understand training and undergo training... So...*

And,

"Well I know the police just ignore the training quite frankly. But I gather the... I read somewhere that the police and the autism training thing is completely, don't bother with paying any attention with it. They think it's a load of rubbish. And that's my experience of it." (Daniel).

And,

"So I don't know what you could do with the police. That's the thing. You need to train them a lot more." (Richard).

Environmental

Only one participant made suggestions about potential environmental changes that could make the experience less stressful for autistic people. Again, these were not physical changes, such as those being made at the new autism-friendly custody suites being built, but rather, they were to do with the length of time being detained in isolated cells, and the option to be flexible with accommodations for autistic people. For example:

"They didn't really need to hold me in that environment for as long as they did and things and it just felt like, you know, even the interview process could have been done at another point in a lot of ways." (Stewart).

He went on to suggest:

"If I'd have known, you know, if there was a checklist, do you need someone to be with me? Do you need to where possible be kept sort of, you know, in a soft room more, you know." (Stewart).

The idea of a checklist with potential adjustments is a novel and good suggestion; often people are unsure what possible options there are, particularly in stressful situations. The production of a checklist may function well to prompt individuals to think about what they feel would help them in that instance, and could only contain options that the police can accommodate.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

Fifteen police participants, and five autistic participants with direct experience of police encounters took part in semi-structured interviews. Police participants shared their knowledge of autism, experiences with autistic individuals, and perceptions of culture within the police force. The autistic participants discussed their experiences being arrested and detained by the police, and their perceptions of the police following these experiences. This study aimed to explore: *a)* the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of police officers with autistic individuals (particularly as suspects or offenders), *b)* how police occupational culture may frame the actions of police officers during encounters with autistic individuals, *c)* how autistic individuals with direct experience of the criminal justice system perceive their treatment by police, and *d)* any areas not currently covered in autism training, as perceived by police officers. This was carried out with the following research objectives:

1. Review the extant empirical research regarding autism and policing, and theoretical literature on police occupational culture.
2. Conducting interviews with autistic individuals to explore their experiences and perceptions of the police, and also to guide the research
3. Conducting interviews with serving police officers to critically examine their knowledge, perceptions and experiences with autistic individuals
4. Analysing data using reflexive thematic analysis to generate and explore themes within the theoretical framework
5. Make suggestions for future research and training improvements

This discussion chapter draws on the findings presented in the two previous chapters and evaluates their positioning within the wider literature. This chapter is organised into two headings: police findings and direct experience findings. Each of these headings has subheadings which correspond with those in the findings chapters.

Overall, there were contradictory findings between the police and direct experience participants. The police participants believed themselves to have an acceptable level of awareness and knowledge of autism, although they demonstrated contradictory attitudes towards autism. They evidenced a mixture of positive attitudes towards autism, and difference more generally, but often used medicalised language and stereotypes in conversation. Those in more senior ranking positions demonstrated more awareness for

reasonable adjustments for autistic suspects. In terms of the occupational culture, there was evidence of classic occupational culture, particularly with regard to several of the core characteristics (cynicism, solidarity, suspicion, masculinity and sense of mission). Some of these characteristics had negative implications for autistic encounters, while others had the potential to have a positive impact on the encounter. The participants idealised a crimefighter role, but admitted that their reality was more of a peacekeeper/social worker.

Autistic participants demonstrated a sense of suspicion and a lack of trust towards the police following their experiences. They discussed vulnerabilities that they experienced during their encounter, mainly relating to communication and the support (or lack of) provided during custody. Themes were generated with reference to perceived procedural justice, namely feeling heard and respected, lack of trust, and fairness of treatment. Suggestions for improvements centred around provision of sufficient autism training to police officers, and a more inclusive understanding of neurodiversity. This chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the research aims of this study, and extant literature in the topic area.

6.1 Police Findings

6.1.1 Understanding and Framing of Autism

Previous research has consistently found a lack of autism knowledge within police officers, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis (such as Chown, 2010; Crane et al., 2016; Mak & Modell, 2008). Despite the years that have passed since these studies were conducted, the police participants in this study were found to have mixed understanding of autism. Those with personal connections to autism demonstrated an advanced knowledge, whereas those without had a tendency to rely on stereotypical ideas of autistic behaviours, and had a belief that autistic people shared common behaviours. Given the previous literature, these comments from officers were not unexpected (Chown, 2010; Crane et al., 2016; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). A common misconception in participants was that all autistic people have challenges with eye contact and communication. While these traits are relatively common in autistic people, there are many who do not present with these, but their autism presents differently. For example, women are much more likely to 'mask' socially, presenting as neurotypical, with no detectable impairments to

communication or eye contact (Cridland et al., 2014; Haney, 2016; Wood-Downie et al., 2021). This does not lessen or invalidate their autism. Additionally, autistic behaviours can present differently in various environments, yet few participants acknowledged this.

However, all participants used medicalised language throughout interviews, despite some having articulated an adoption of the social model of disability. This illustrates the complexity of framing neurodiversity and understanding autism, particularly in a society which is still very rooted in the medical model and neurotypicality. These findings support previous literature (Chown, 2010; Holloway et al., 2020; Love, Railey & Jones, 2022; Siberry, 2020).

Social and Medical Models of Disability

Autism was defined as a *difference* by some participants, which suggests a social model approach to neurodiversity and autism. Neurodiversity is broadly defined within literature as a '*difference* in behaviour and thinking', particularly by the neurodiversity movement, in support of the social model of disability (Silberman, 2010). However, other participants defined autism using language that reflected the medical model, such as "symptoms" and people "suffering" with autism. This demonstrates a perception of autism being a negative condition. Further evidence of this medicalised approach to autism was present in discourse where participants referred to people 'suffering' with autism, and a focus on the challenges that they can experience due to deficits, such as with communication. Participants acknowledged that autistic differences and behaviours can present as 'guilty' or suspicious, and could prompt them to investigate the individual further, similarly to the findings of Howlin (2004). This adoption of the medical model of disability is unsurprising when viewed through the lens of police occupational culture, which suggests that police officers view themselves as protectors of the vulnerable (Fielding, 1988; Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2010). In this way, the police place themselves at the top of a societal hierarchy, and act as gatekeepers who decide what options should be available to the individual (Humpage, 2007; Barton, 2009). This was evident in the adjustments that participants discussed when dealing with autistic suspects; participants who were suggested to have adopted the social model of disability also spoke of the ability to make discretionary and personal adjustments for autistic suspects (such as allowing

them to retain a hat in custody, or dimming the lights). Whereas those who framed difference within the medical model of disability spoke more often of practical adjustments made in line with procedures, such as using video interviewing techniques rather than traditional audio recordings. Knowledge of autism was found to be fundamental in being able to make informed adaptations to police procedures.

Adaptations for Autistic Suspects

The study found that while all police participants were aware of appropriate adults, and referred to using the scheme with autistic suspects, there was some confusion around the necessity of providing an AA, particularly in cases with autistic suspects who participants referred to as 'high functioning'. As discussed earlier, despite presenting as socially confident, autistic people can still experience impairments that may make them vulnerable during police encounters. In line with the amended PACE guidelines, an appropriate adult *must* be provided for any individual that the police suspect to be vulnerable (Dehaghani & Bath, 2019). However, participants in this study claimed that some autistic suspects were not provided with one, because they didn't believe that they needed one to facilitate communication. As will be discussed later in this chapter with relation to the direct experience participants, the provision of an AA is indeed not being made for all autistic suspects, and this can result in miscommunication and potentially self-incrimination by the autistic suspect. Previous literature has presented similar findings across the past decade, and yet this issue seems to persist (Bath & Dehaghani, 2020; Dehaghani, 2017; Dent & O'Beirne, 2021; National Appropriate Adult Network, 2015). Some participants also referred to the role of solicitors within interviews with autistic suspects. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the role of solicitors and paralegals, and their roles with autistic suspects. This is an avenue that should be researched in the future, as legal representation is an important safeguard for autistic suspects.

Additionally, all police participants demonstrated knowledge of potential communication challenges and stated that they would adapt their communication styles to facilitate clear communication with autistic suspects. There was a theme of individual and needs-based policing, with participants suggesting that they approach each interaction

with a more holistic mindset and were willing to tailor their approach. This suggests that participants were more attuned to the due process model of criminal justice, and contradicts the bureaucratic model which proposes a 'conveyor belt' style of policing in order to save time and resources.

6.1.2 Autism Training

All police participants acknowledged the lack of autism training in police forces, and would welcome the inclusion of neurodiversity training. While some participants claimed they had received some training, this was due to either having implemented the training themselves after identifying the need for it, or by others who had personal connections to autism. The findings suggest any current autism training is insufficient, and does not reach all police officers within forces, a similar finding to the extant literature base (Archer & Hurley, 2013; Chown, 2010; Crane et al., 2016; Holloway et al., 2020). Police officers had a tendency to conflate autism with mental health, regularly discussing them as if they were interchangeable terminology, and confusing other symptoms (such as OCD symptomology) with autistic characteristics. This was consistent with previous studies (such as Dickie et al., 2018; Hepworth, 2017; Holloway et al., 2020). Where police training is provided, it is often included within mental health modules. Indeed, half of the participants in this study that had received any autism training had received it as part of a wider mental health training session. This perpetuates the confusion surrounding treatment for autistic people, framing the condition as medical and thus, officers will be misguided in their best practices. This was demonstrated by participants suggesting that police custody nursing teams are the most helpful to go to for advice with autistic suspects.

Barriers to Equitable Treatment

Barriers to equitable treatment encompassed a failure to identify autism in suspects, including the individual choosing not to disclose their diagnosis, factors that impede the identification of autism (such as alcohol or drug misuse), misinterpretation of behaviours, and fundamentally, a lack of knowledge. Police participants felt that it was the duty of the autistic suspect to disclose their diagnosis to facilitate their treatment, however, few recognised that there may be a hesitancy to disclose diagnoses during encounters. While all of the autistic participants in this study did disclose their autism to

the police during encounters, previous literature suggests that autistic people may choose not to disclose their diagnosis due to fear of negative stereotypes and prejudices (Crane et al., 2016; Huws & Jones, 2011). Police participants recognised that a failure to recognise or identify autism presents the risk of police officers misconstruing autistic behaviours, and therefore escalating the encounter, supporting previous research (Howlin, 2004).

As suggested in the literature review section, autism awareness schemes were not in place across all the forces in this study. As this scheme is voluntary, and varies in title across each force, it was not anticipated that all forces would have implemented it. However, some participants were from forces that had announced the launch and use of autism awareness cards, and yet participants had not mentioned them, even when prompted. It was noted in Chapter 2.1.6 that implementation of these schemes does not necessarily mean that the force has provided any training on their use, which prevents the efficacy of them within the force as suggested in previous literature (Hepworth, 2017).

Contrary to research that proposes an increased likelihood of autistic people encountering the police, participants often suggested that they do not encounter many autistic people as suspects; rather, they are more frequently victims in the criminal justice system (Debbaudt, 2004; Hare et al., 1999; Myers, 2004). These participants may well have encountered autistic suspects without realising it, particularly if the suspect has not disclosed their autism. As the police learn from their experiences, this perceived lack of experience may reinforce their belief that they are unlikely to encounter autistic suspects in future interactions, leading to them not identifying it in future interactions. This was reinforced by the focus of The National College of Policing, and institutional policies and training on vulnerable witnesses and victims, rather than suspects.

6.1.3 Occupational Culture

The occupational culture findings of this study present opportunities to frame the actions and attitudes of police participants during encounters with autistic suspects. In line with the research, there were deductive themes generated based on the core characteristics of police (Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 1978; 2010). Some characteristics, such as solidarity, hegemonic masculinity and cynicism are proposed to have negative impacts on interactions with autistic suspects. Suspicion was found to have a positive impact on

attitudes and behaviours with autistic suspects, while the sense of mission had potential for both positive or negative impacts.

Sense of Mission

Participants had joined the police force with predetermined ideas of what the job would entail, most often based on stereotypes they had developed from the media. This meant that they had often had an idealised view of policing as a crimefighter, and expressed a desire for an exciting job, filled with action, adrenaline and satisfaction. This has been discussed at length in previous literature throughout the development of occupational culture theory (Cain, 1971; Loader, 2020; Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 1978; Van Maanen, 1977). Similar to the findings by Waddington (1999), while participants had joined the police with this ideal, they had found the reality was more of a peacekeeper, or 'social worker' approach to policing, with expectations placed on them of social work and community policing. Participants took opportunities to tell stories during interviews that demonstrated this crimefighter role, filled with danger, adrenaline and machismo. This suggests that as in Waddington's work, police officers cling to the crimefighter notion by employing 'canteen culture' and story-telling to fulfil the missing action from their day-to-day life. Regularly, they expressed a frustration with not being able to fulfil the job role that they had anticipated, and maintained a focus on the 'real' aspects of policing that they rarely got chance to undertake.

Participants felt unsupported in this shifted job role that they were experiencing, from crimefighter to social worker, contributing to a sense of isolation often discussed in occupational culture (Loftus, 2008; Goldsmith, 1990; Paoline, 2003). This isolation strengthened a sense of solidarity with colleagues, strongly present in the data. Participants relied on this solidarity with colleagues. Both inside and outside of the workplace, they were good friends, turning to each other for support and counselling for shared traumatic experiences, as well as having each other's backs on the job. This solidarity contributed to a sense of *us versus them* attitudes in various ways: police/criminals, P.C./supervisors, and neurotypical/neurodivergent. Participants often *othered* autistic people, which, coupled with their stereotypical beliefs of autistic behaviours, presented autistic people as a very different group of people with whom they

shared very little in common. This has been touched on in previous research with regards to autistic people and warrants further research (Siberry, 2020).

Suspicion

Suspicion was found to be a positive characteristic of the police with regards to autistic suspects, contrary to previous literature (Sklansky, 2007). Police officers framed their craft of suspicion as an ability to detect difference, which allowed them to identify behavioural 'abnormalities', and probe for further information and causes for this behaviour. In much the same way as Crank (2004) suggests that suspicion is developed as a police skill on the job, participants claimed that they had learned to use it as a tool to identify vulnerabilities in the people they encountered, from past experiences. As Alpert, MacDonald and Dunham (2005) proposed that police officers develop their cues and schema with each successful arrest using their suspicion, participants in this study developed the tool of suspicion to identify difference, and it was reinforced each time they successfully identified vulnerabilities or differences. While they stated that it was not within their remit to 'diagnose' people themselves, it allowed the opportunity to further explore uncommon behaviours, and seek further support. This finding is contrary to the previous criminological literature by Stroshine, Alpert and Dunham (2008). However, it is worth noting that the police participants in this study may have been presenting the 'best version' of themselves in my interviews in line with social desirability bias, either in order to make themselves or the police force that they represent better. This inversion of the traditional trait is unexplored in literature, and may explain how police officers acquire new and necessary skills on the job. The use of this trait could be studied further, perhaps with observations or ethnographies of police officers to reduce any potential response bias. However, as extant literature suggests, suspicion may be misplaced by police officers and may lead to discriminatory policing, such as with BAME suspects (Bowling & Phillips, 2007; Loftus, 2008; Tillyer, 2014). Indeed, the way that they described their suspicion was rooted in ableism, with neurotypical norms being the standard by which they judged differences (Siberry, 2020). They still had a tendency to view differences as 'abnormal', or 'not quite right'.

CYNICISM

On the other hand, the cynicism found in this study aligned with the classic characteristics discussed in occupational culture; police participants demonstrated cynicism towards both the policing institution, and towards the public (Barker, 1999; Caplan, 2003; Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 1978). They spoke of stereotypical criminal typologies (such as 'skegheads'), and expressed a disdain for the criminals that they encountered, particularly having to provide help to them. This was similar to the concept that Van Maanen (1978) wrote about; participants had a tendency to categorise the people that they regularly encountered, such as "*the mad, the sad and the bad".* As Loftus (2010) has found, police officers that demonstrated a desire to help (as was discussed with relation to the peacekeeper role), coexisted alongside a cynicism of the very public that they wanted to protect. This cynical attitude coincided with a classic presentation of pessimism. This pessimism was evidenced in discourse of autistic suspects; a belief that autism is often used as an 'excuse' for poor and offending behaviour, a similar finding to previous research (Siberry, 2020). Some participants suggested that they would require proof of a formal diagnosis from an autistic individual before they would consider making reasonable adjustments for them. Cynicism towards the policing institution was fuelled by increased workloads, budget cuts and a shortage of police officers. This increased pressure on participants resulted in them not being able to allocate the appropriate amount of time and resources to jobs. These findings support previous literature addressing the impact on changing job roles in police officers (Charman, 2018; Cooper & Fullilove, 2020; Herbert, 2001; Normore et al., 2016).

This study found the trait of cynicism to exist in varying degrees across all participants and was largely negative. Police officers who had attempted to improve their service, by organising additional training or making suggestions for improvements, had been reprimanded for acting above their station, and resulted in them feeling that attempts to improve the service were futile. Therefore, police participants had become disillusioned and cynical towards their ability to make a change in the policing landscape. However, as demonstrated earlier, the rare instances of autism training within the police had been implemented by police officers, rather than the police force at an institutional level. In the absence of national training, and autism being placed on the College of Policing

curriculum, this motivation to implement training is beneficial to both police officers, and autistic people who encounter the police in the future.

In addition to these traditional policing characteristics, additional facets were found to exist that fit within the peacekeeper job role*; a desire to help, the use of communication as a tool,* and *fairnes*s. While participants had expressed their motivations to join the police force as ambition to be a crimefighter, there was a strong theme that they also wanted the opportunity to help people. This was not limited to victims, as in the more traditional occupational culture, but also to help suspects and offenders. There was a sense of compassion and teachable moments, rather than punitive treatment of criminals, which is perhaps more suited to dealing with autistic suspects who have inadvertently committed crimes.

Communication as a Tool

The use of communication as a tool in policing was also an unexpected finding. Participants proposed that effective communication as an alternative to physical control with detainees. This suggestion was made by various participants, some of whom had personal experience with autism, and others who did not. Previous literature (such as Beune et al., 2009) has suggested that women in policing adopt communication (including active listening) as a tool, however, this study found that men also acknowledged the benefits of communication. This is particularly beneficial when dealing with autistic suspects who may experience sensory challenges, escapism or pathological demand avoidance, and was related to whether they view their role as a crimefighters or a peacekeeper.

Fairness

The final theme within the police participant data was that of *fairness.* Fairness, and justice was a strong underlying theme in the interviews; police participants placed value on doing 'the right thing' and morality, most frequently in terms of wanting to make sure the right outcome is achieved for each individual person that they encounter. This suggests that the participants felt more closely aligned with the welfare model of policing than the crime control model (King, 1981). This trait of fairness seems to contradict the traditional literature on occupational culture, publicised reports of racism, sexism and

misogyny within policing, and even the crimefighting desires of participants themselves. However, there was a disparity between the fairness perceived by the autistic participants, and the police officer's perception of their own fairness. Fairness is a vital facet of procedural justice and in building the legitimacy of the police. While it is possible that participants were framing their attitudes and behaviours in a way that enhanced their alignment with the due process model, and therefore avoiding any notions of unlawful behaviour that may infringe on the suspects rights.

6.2 Direct Experience Discussion

6.2.1 Vulnerabilities

COMMUNICATION

Participants experienced various communication challenges throughout each stage of their police encounter, but particularly during the custody and interview stages. As discussed in the Barriers to Justice section of the literature review chapter, police are trained in the PEACE interviewing framework, which recommends that interviewers use open-ended questioning styles to elicit as much information as possible (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992). The Account, Clarification and Challenge section of the PEACE framework is an opportunity for the interviewing officer to gather information, probe topics further and verify statements. The training suggests that officers work in a loop in order to disrupt the order of memory recall, but this is suggested to be problematic for autistic suspects due to their neurodevelopmental differences (Hepworth, 2017). When considering autistic suspects and their communication challenges, this framework poses opportunity for confusion, irrelevant information and the potential for self-incrimination. Participants seemed to be fully aware that their tendency to lose focus in conversation makes them vulnerable during these situations.

While things were explained to them by the police, it was often not in a way that ensured they understood what was being told. This is contrary to the findings in the police participant group, who claimed that they adapted their language to enable clear communication with autistic suspects. This suggests that any autism training should include sections on effective communication between neurotypical and autistic people, with prompts to ensure that information has been understood fully, in order to reduce the

empathy divide. This training should include training exercises with autistic individuals, such as the recent studies Holloway *et al* (2020; 2022) has carried out. As the information relayed to suspects in custody has such an impact on any criminal charges, court cases and the ability to comply with bail conditions, this is a vital aspect of an encounter that must be supported.

Reasonable Adjustments and Appropriate Adults

There were mixed findings about reasonable adjustments being made for the autistic participants during their police encounter. There were few instances discussed of police making personal adjustments (that were not stipulated by police policy): one participant had their interview conducted while sat on the floor, in order to make him more comfortable, another had their interview carried out in a 'soft' room (that is, one that was not a designated interview room) and received clear communication during his detention about timescales, and in another case, the custody sergeant removed any items (such as staples in the wall) that could have been used to self-harm after finding out about the individual's mental health. While the participants recalled these adjustments as acts carried out for their comfort and wellbeing during custody, all actions also benefited the police. The two adapted interviews enabled police officers to gather the statements they required for prosecution, and the removal of self-harming opportunities ensured that they did not breach their duty of care to detainees. While police participants claimed that they were willing to make reasonable adjustments for the benefit of the autistic suspect, to reduce levels of stress and negative impact on them, none of these were evidenced in the experiences of autistic participants with direct experience.

Another finding from the direct experience participants that contradicted findings in the police participants was the provision of appropriate adults (AA). Whereas police participants claimed that provision of an AA for autistic suspects would be a priority adjustment that they would make, most of the autistic participants had not been allocated an AA while in custody. This is a potential breach of PACE guidelines, and a failure to provide reasonable adjustments for vulnerable suspects, and supports previous findings in research (Bath & Dehaghani, 2020; Dehaghani, 2017; Dent & O'Beirne, 2021; National Appropriate Adult Network, 2015). These contradictions between the police participants

and the autistic participants suggest that there is some disparity between perceptions and expectations of reasonable adjustments, but also that there is a disparity between what police officers *say* they will do, and what they *actually* do.

6.2.2 Perceived Procedural Justice

The theme of perceived procedural justice explored the three factors discussed in the literature: feeling heard & respected, fairness, and trustworthiness (Lind & Tyler, 1988). In all three aspects, participants responded negatively. With findings similar to the research by Salerno and Schuller (2019; 2020), almost all (n=4) of the participants felt that they were not *heard* by the police during their encounter. Some had not been given the opportunity to tell their side of the story, and others had felt that they were ignored by the police during and following the experience. Autistic suspects suggested that their culpability in the offending behaviour was not taken into account by the police (or the courts thereafter), and provided explanations of how their autism had contributed to their offending behaviours. This theme ties in with that of perceived procedural justice and feeling heard. For autistic people, it is likely that they often feel ignored, or misunderstood, and so it is vital that police officers, in stressful situations such as police custody, ensure that they utilise active listening skills to hear and understand autistic suspects.

It was unclear whether the participants had been treated in the same manner as neurotypical peers would have been in similar situations, and hence if the feelings of procedural justice would have been comparable, though this was not within the remit of this study. Therefore, we cannot explore whether these participants perceived their treatment to be discriminatory due to their autism, the offences they were charged with, or any other factors. However, perceived procedural justice plays a role in future perceptions of the police, and is suggested to impact on future interactions (Lind & Tyler, 1988). This finding was similar in the theme of fairness; participants were unsure whether they were treated any differently to a neurotypical peer. However, they did not feel that their autism had been understood, or taken into account during the encounter. Therefore, they felt that as neurodivergent individuals, they had not been treated fairly due to their needs not being accommodated.

Overall, participants felt that their experiences with the police were largely negative, and as a result, they were left with negative perceptions of the police, as previous research has found (Crane et al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). There was a hesitancy of approaching the police in the future, including if they were victims or witnesses of crimes, with one participant having been so traumatised that they had transferred that distrust towards all emergency professionals. This supports previous findings in the two previous studies of perceived procedural justice in autistic suspects (Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Perceived procedural justice in autistic populations plays a major role in how likely they are to approach police in times of need, comply with their requests and how they will respond to future interactions. As a population who will likely encounter the police more frequently than neurotypical individuals, a positive perception and relationship is vital to ensure they are not subject to excessive stress and trauma during future encounters. Particularly with media coverage of vulnerable people's interactions with the police, this perceived procedural justice expands wider than just the autistic community.

6.2.3 Suggestions for Improvements

Finally, suggestions for future improvements to the interactions between autistic people and the police centred around improved communication and knowledge. Participants felt that the police currently acknowledged autism, and made 'gestures' towards equality. The building of new custody suites with physical adaptations for neurodiverse people, such as dimmable lighting, was said to be 'trivial' when compared to issues of a lack of understanding, knowledge, and attitudes towards the treatment of autistic people. Participants emphasised the need for effective training which included interactions with autistic people, in order to increase knowledge and awareness. Participants felt that the police that they encountered had a discriminatory attitude towards autism, and for training to effectively improve the treatment of autistic suspects, it must address this attitude towards autism and neurodiversity. This is a finding that marries well with the existing literature on autism, policing and occupational culture; training schemes alone will not resolve discrimination, it requires an occupational and organisational change to how neurodiversity is perceived and understood.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

Autistic people are more likely than neurotypical peers to have encounters with the police, and during these encounters, past research has found that while police officers have a tendency to overestimate their abilities and knowledge of autism, autistic people are often dissatisfied with their experience (Crane et al., 2016; Debbaudt, 2004; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). As explored in the literature review chapter, theories of police occupational culture have been applied to understand police attitudes and actions, but has not yet been applied to explore behaviour and attitudes towards autistic suspects.

The purpose of this study was to explore the knowledge and experiences of police officers about autism, and to understand how police occupational culture may frame their attitudes and behaviour towards autistic suspects. Further, it aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of autistic people who had direct experience of police encounters as suspects. In an emerging area of academic literature, research and policy has mainly focused on the latter stages of the criminal justice system. The existing academic literature addressing police knowledge of autism utilises quantitative methods, such as surveys and questionnaires, and so, has not been able to gather in-depth data which can explore the occupational culture of police. By using deductive themes of core police characteristics informed by literature, alongside inductive themes developed within the data, the attitudes and perceptions of police officers were critically explored. The purpose of this study was to explore: *a)* the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of police officers with autistic individuals (particularly as suspects or offenders), *b)* how police occupational culture may frame the actions of police officers during encounters with autistic individuals, *c)* how autistic individuals with direct experience of the criminal justice system perceive their treatment by police, and *d)* any areas not currently covered in autism training, as perceived by police officers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 police officers, and five autistic individuals who had direct experience of police encounters to gather rich qualitative data. This data collection method, although altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, allowed me to collect rich and in-depth data. Participants were able to talk about their personal and professional understanding of autism, perceptions and experiences in their own words, rather than a selection of answers scripted by a researcher.

This allowed for participants to answer the questions, and also to talk about any other related topics they chose, which yielded some interesting points that helped to shape my understanding of both perspectives during analysis and writing up the thesis.

Reflexive thematic analysis was carried out on the interview transcripts, themes generated and then refined. As discussed in Chapter 5, the police data generated themes of: *understanding of autism, barriers to equitable treatment, ability to adapt* and *occupational culture* were discussed with consideration of how they may impact on interactions with autistic suspects, and perceptions of autism. Chapter 6 explored the findings of the direct experience participants. The themes identified in the direct experience data utilised a deductive theme of *perceived procedural justice*, and additional themes of *vulnerability*, and *suggestions for improvement* were generated.

Overall, the police participants were found to have a good, but superficial awareness of autism, which often relied on stereotypes such as those seen portrayed in the media. Autism was often conflated with mental health disorders, such as OCD, which has been a finding in previous literature. Those with personal connections to autism had a deeper understanding of autism, and had adopted the social model of disability with regard to autism. All participants had a tendency to adopt medicalised language when speaking about autism, which could perhaps be a reflection of wider society rather than their personal attitudes towards autism.

Police participants were willing to make both personal and procedural adaptations for autistic suspects, including altering their communication styles, increased breaks during interviews and using liaison and diversion rather than criminalising where possible. Procedural adjustments were suggested as provision of appropriate adults, in compliance with PACE guidelines, and altering the interview environment. However, the autistic participants had not all been provided with an appropriate adult during their detention in custody. This supports past research which has found that the scheme is not appropriately used for autistic suspects, particularly those who present as 'high functioning' (Bath & Dehaghani, 2020; Dehaghani, 2017; Dent & O'Beirne, 2021). As explored with the autistic participants, the priority for improving their experience was improved communication. Their preference was more clarity and ensuring that they understood what was happening, over adaptations to the environment. As great investment is being put towards building

specialist autism-friendly custody suites with a focus on dimmable lighting and soft furnishings, this is an important finding and should be taken into consideration in future investment decisions.

This study contributes additional, unique knowledge to the literature by employing the use of police occupational culture theory with relation to autistic suspects. Police occupational culture was found to be able to frame the attitudes and behaviours of the police towards autistic suspects. By utilising the core characteristics of the police as suggested by Reiner (1978), these attitudes and behaviours were able to be analytically reviewed. Police participants were found to have joined the police with an idealised vision of being a crimefighter, with an emphasis on excitement, action, and catching criminals. However, their role in reality was found to be more of a peacekeeper, or in modern policing, a social worker. While police officers spoke of a fundamental desire to help people, they also expressed frustration at this job role, and felt unsupported by other services (such as ambulance and social services). Police were represented as the 'catch-all' service, required to wear many hats but having received little, or no training for these new roles. This contributes to a sense of isolation and strengthens the solidarity between colleagues. Throughout this, participants demonstrated 'canteen-culture', by romanticising previous experiences that represented 'real' policing to them; dangerous criminal chases, filled with adrenaline and crimefighter mentality (Waddington, 1999). This predilection for crimefighting action may influence police officers' approaches to autistic encounters, particularly if the autistic individual is presenting as violent or challenging.

Police officers were found to have cynical views towards the public and the police organisation. Perhaps most importantly in this study, police expressed cynicism towards people who 'claim' to be autistic during encounters. There was a belief that autism is often used as an 'excuse' for offending behaviour, and so, police officers were pessimistic about the legitimacy of disclosures of autism. Autistic participants discussed during their interviews that they felt that their disclosures of diagnosis were not taken seriously by police, and as a result, they felt that very little effort had been made into accommodating their additional needs. If indeed, police officers believe that autism is disclosed as an excuse to garner leniency, then autistic suspects will suffer during encounters through a lack of their genuine needs being met.

A novel and nuanced finding of this study was the core characteristic of suspicion within occupational culture being utilised by police officers as a positive tool to enable them to detect *difference*. Contrary to the negative framing that suspicion has in previous literature, suspicion was found to be a developed skill that allowed participants to identify behavioural differences, and suspect autism in suspects. As opposed to suspicion being used to discriminate against neurodivergent behaviours, this study found that suspicion was presented as a non-judgemental tool, used to prompt officers to gather further information about the situation. Police participants also used communication as a tool to diffuse escalating situations, rather than physical control or force. This is a more appropriate method to de-escalate tense situations with autistic people, who may well experience sensory hyper-sensitivities. Fairness was a strong theme throughout the police interviews and police participants demonstrated an alignment with the due process model of policing (King, 1988). Despite their draw towards the crimefighter mentality and canteen culture story-telling, they simply wanted to do the *right* thing by people. Whether that be victims, witnesses, suspects or the public, they displayed a strong moral code and wanted to connect with people and be acknowledged as *human*. These themes of suspicion, communication and fairness present a positive aspect to police occupational culture. Policing is a continually difficult career, and the occupational culture that they create allows them to navigate those challenges, particularly in the modern era, and retain their bearings.

The theme of *perceived procedural justice*, and the subthemes (*feeling heard and respected, trustworthiness* and *fairness)* explored the previous experiences of autistic participants' police encounters, including arrest, interview and custody. Overall, participants did not feel that they had been *heard* by the police, were not treated fairly according to their needs, and following their experience, were untrusting of the police. This lack of trust in some cases extended to other emergency services and professionals, demonstrating the strong impact that police interactions can have on autistic individuals. While some reasonable adjustments were made, not all participants were provided with an appropriate adult, and often, they did not understand what was happening to them and why. Participants suggested that police officers not only need autism training, but that it must incorporate face-to-face training exercises with autistic people. Further, there must

be a fundamental change in occupational and organisational culture towards neurodiversity and difference.

Autistic people have been identified as a vulnerable population with regards to the criminal justice system, and more specifically, the police. Current literature had previously addressed police knowledge using quantitative methods, but has not yet viewed this knowledge and behaviour through a criminological lens of occupational culture. While there is an increasing awareness of autism amongst police officers, their knowledge remains superficial due to insufficient training. However, facets of occupational culture have a positive impact on their ability to identify and accommodate autistic suspects. With effective autism training which provides police officers with real-life experience of how best to treat autistic suspects, and tools to allow them to adopt needs-based approaches to policing, autistic suspects can receive more equitable treatment.

Chapter 8 – Recommendations and Future Research

Based on the insights provided by participants, and the findings of this study, this chapter will make several recommendations for *a)* future police training, *b)* police procedures and policy, and *c)* future research to expand on the contributions to knowledge. This chapter is split in to two sections for ease, with the first discussing recommendations for change, and the latter outlining potential areas for future research.

8.1 Recommendations for Change

Participants from both the police and direct experience group offered several suggestions for improving police knowledge and understanding of autism, both at a personal and institutional level. The findings of this study have the potential to improve future police interactions with autistic individuals, primarily as suspects, but these would also be beneficial to autistic victims and witnesses.

Police participants acknowledged that there is currently a lack of specific training on neurodiversity, and offered recommendations for how training could be offered in an effective manner. Direct experience participants discussed the changes to attitudes, training and procedures that would be most beneficial for them during police interactions and custody. Drawing on the insights from both participant groups, there are several recommendations that this thesis can make in order to improve future police interactions with autistic people. These have been categorised into different sections below for ease of reading, and also in acknowledgment that they would require different levels of input.

Training and Knowledge Based Recommendations

- Mandatory autism training should be implemented across all police forces in England and Wales. The Police Officer Training (Autism Awareness) Bill, which would have addressed this, was proposed to the House of Commons in 2017, yet it failed to complete passage through Parliament and progress. It would be beneficial for the National College of Policing to create this training to ensure a standardised level of training across forces. It should be a stand-alone training module, rather than being included within mental health training materials to help reduce confusion for police officers. It may be necessary to tailor different content for different ranks of the police force. For example, police constables and custody

sergeants may require different levels of knowledge in order to provide them with the tools to suit their job roles. Training should be designed by or with autistic consultants, and best practice would be to have autistic people during the training session to discuss direct experiences and provide interactive learning. Similar to the recent publications from Holloway et al. (2020), a training exercise that includes a walkthrough of police processes would be most beneficial to minimise the empathy divide between neurotypical police officers and staff, and autistic suspects.

- Police officers would benefit from increasing their interactions with the neurodivergent community to increase direct experience of autism. This would give them opportunity to learn how to adapt their social and communication skills, to reduce the empathy divide between neurotypical police officers and autistic civilians. This could perhaps be done as part of community drives, such as police community engagement days, "meet and greet" events and visits to neurodivergent support groups. This would also benefit the autistic community by giving them an opportunity to meet local police officers in a safe and stress-reduced environment, and may improve perceptions of the police.

Policy and Procedure Recommendations

- Specific wording of custody check-in questions to include autism/neurodivergent diagnoses, to ensure best chances for self-disclosure of diagnosis. This should include follow up questions asking the individual how they personally would like to be supported during the custody/interview process would be beneficial to ensure that each individual is given the best chances at equitable treatment. This could include asking about any specific sensory sensitivities, stimming behaviours, or preferred communication methods.

- Provision of written/alternative formats of questions asked during custody for individuals who may not understand verbal communication during times of stress. This could also be extended to a 'guide to custody' for the autistic individual to be given, which outlines any information that might be helpful to their time in police custody. For example, their rights as a suspect, how to ask for help from police staff

if they need anything (e.g., food or drink, mental health support). This would help to eliminate any barriers to welfare for autistic individuals in custody, ensuring their wellbeing during detention.

- Inclusion of autistic Appropriate Adults – this would help to reduce the empathy divide during interviews, and ensure that the autistic suspect has somebody who understands their needs if a parent/guardian/friend is not available or suitable to be present. As discussed in the previous chapters, while any detainee identified as being vulnerable should be allocated an Appropriate Adult, this was not found to be the case in all participants (as found in previous research). Their role is to facilitate communication, and ensure the welfare of the individual; something which the direct experience participants in this study would have found helpful during their interactions. It is vital that Appropriate Adults are able to understand the individual's communication styles, and so this should be somebody with empathy and knowledge of autism to allow them to perceive situations similarly to the detainee.

- A comprehensive, standardised Autism Awareness Card campaign across all forces in England and Wales. As discussed earlier in this thesis (see section 4.5), some police participants had knowledge of autism awareness card schemes, whereas others did not. This is in part due to each county having individual agency over whether they subscribe to a campaign, with different variations of autism awareness card schemes across the country. A nationwide, standardised campaign would improve police awareness of the scheme, and ensure that a person from one county could feel confident to use their autism awareness card in other counties without confusion. This would help to ensure equality across England and Wales for autistic individuals who come into contact with the police.

Occupational Culture and Recruitment

- Investment in additional police officers would reduce this staffing pressure, ensuring that there are enough police officers to attend the required jobs and have enough time to appropriately respond to situations. This study found that some facets of police occupational culture had the ability to impact positively on police

officers' treatment of autistic suspects, with particular regard to characteristics such as suspicion and sense of mission. It is suggested that for these characteristics to maintain a positive impact, police officers need encouragement from management and additional time to utilise these traits. Participants spoke of time and staffing pressures on their job, which prevent them from being able to take the time to tailor their approach to different situations.

- During initial police recruitment and training, police recruits should be encouraged to adopt a 'peacekeeper' approach to policing, with a focus on the more realistic aspects of daily police work. Effective communication and fairness should be key in the police culture. Policing is a job role which yields substantial amounts of power and control, and it is imperative that the 'right' people are recruited and mentored to become effective police officers, able to deal with the variety of tasks that they will encounter. The attitudes and values of police officers must be focused towards supporting the public, including any neurodivergent needs that they may have. This would help to improve perceived procedural justice in the police in the long term, by ensuring that police officers treat individuals fairly and with empathy.

- To reduce the effect of 'othering' autistic populations, current police neurodiversity communities (such as the National Police Autism Association, NPAA) could consider greater integration and interaction with police officers who are not members. By autistic police officers discussing their personal experience of autism, it would help to reduce the empathy divide, and further, could help to minimise the 'othering' of autistic people. If police officers are aware that autism is not an 'outside' difference, but that it exists within their police force, then they may be more motivated to learn and understand it.

8.2 Future Research

This study addressed a gap in the literature, and combined criminological theoretical topics to the emerging knowledge base of autism and policing, by analysing through the lenses of police occupational culture and perceived procedural justice. Given the exploratory nature of this study, there is opportunity for further research within this topic area.

Firstly, I must acknowledge the limitation of self-selecting participants within this type of research and their potential biases. It is possible that the participants that volunteered to take part in this research did so because of a vested interest in autism, or following particularly negative experiences with the police. It would be beneficial to carry out a similar research study utilising a different means of participant recruitment strategy, to compare findings with a wider range of participants, both police and autistic individuals.

Future research would benefit from building on the positive aspects of police occupational culture identified within this study, perhaps with larger sample sizes to assess these traits within other police officers and forces. While the trait of suspicion was proposed to be a positive trait in this study, future research in a randomised sample of participants may provide different results. Continued research may also yield different findings in terms of police occupational culture and traits across different police forces, which may result in additional characteristics and avenues that could be explored.

As this study originally planned to include police observations, but had to be removed due to COVID-19 restrictions, this would be a worthwhile addition to future research into policing and autism. Observations would provide the researcher opportunity to record interactions between the police and autistic individuals and gather data, thus minimising any social-desirability bias in the data. Observations and interviews would also provide opportunity to explore the physical actions of police officers, and then discuss their perceptions and gain their insight on the situation.

Studies might be carried out in individual police forces, in order to provide more specific evaluations of any current autism training, and suggest improvements to this training. These could assess the current autism training provided, and whether this leads in a difference in attitudes or perceptions of autism when dealing with autistic suspects.

Furthermore, as this was the first study to explore perceived procedural justice in autistic populations within the UK, future research could expand on this area, particularly within geographical locations where there is partnership working between autism research centres and police forces, such as Nottingham. Carrying out research that involves both the police and autistic individuals with direct experience of the police would allow to explore whether specific autism training programmes have any impact on perceived procedural justice by the autistic community in that area.

Lastly, while it had to be removed from this study, research exploring intersectionality and autistic suspects would be a beneficial and unique contribution to the literature and would provide an exploratory insight into the different barriers to justice that autistic people may face. Some consideration would need to be given to how best the concept of intersectionality could be presented in an easy-to-understand manner, as it proved challenging as additional questions within this research study.

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Appendices

A. Ethics Approval Letter

Research, Enterprise and Engagement
Ethical Approval Panel

Doctoral & Research Support
Research and Knowledge Exchange,
Room 827, Maxwell Building,
University of Salford,
Manchester
M5 4WT

T +44(0)161 295 2280

www.salford.ac.uk

31 October 2018

Dear Diana,

RE: ETHICS APPLICATION–HSR1718-107–'Investigating Police Perceptions and Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder.'

Based on the information that you have provided, I am pleased to inform you that ethics application HSR1718-107 has been approved.

If there are any changes to the project and/or its methodology, then please inform the Panel as soon as possible by contacting Health-ResearchEthics@salford.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

Professor Sue McAndrew
Chair of the Research Ethics Panel

B. Police Recruitment Poster

CAN YOU HELP?
POLICE OFFICERS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH

Exploring Police Training and Knowledge of ASD

A PhD research study wants to speak to police officers in England and Wales about their knowledge and experiences of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). You will be asked to take part in an online interview and all your data will be anonymous. This study is to fulfil a PhD thesis and to help improve the awareness of ASD in the criminal justice process. Please contact the researcher to take part.

PhD Supervisors: Dr Muzammil Quraishi, Dr Clare Allely & Dr. Toni Wood

University of Salford MANCHESTER

This research project has been approved by the University of Salford research ethics committee under reference HSR1718-107

Are you a serving or recently retired police officer?

—

Would you like to help research about Autism?

—

Participants for interviews wanted

—

Discuss your experiences and training

LEAD RESEARCHER

Diana Hepworth
PhD Student
University of Salford

d.hepworth@edu.salford.ac.uk

C. Direct Experience Recruitment Poster

CAN YOU HELP?

AUTISTIC PEOPLE NEEDED FOR RESEARCH

Exploring Police Training and Knowledge of ASD

A PhD research study wants to speak to autistic adults (over the age of 18) about their experiences with the police. You will be asked to take part in an online interview and all your data will be anonymous. This study is to fulfil a PhD thesis and to help improve the awareness of ASD in the criminal justice process. Please contact the researcher to take part.

PhD Supervisors: Dr Muzammil Quraishi, Dr Clare Allely & Dr. Toni Wood

University of Salford MANCHESTER

This research project has been approved by the University of Salford research ethics committee under reference HSR1718-107

Are you autistic?

—

Over the age of 18?

—

Have you had experiences with the police?

—

Participants for interviews wanted

—

Discuss your experience and feelings about the police

LEAD RESEARCHER

Diana Hepworth
PhD Student
University of Salford

d.hepworth@edu.salford.ac.uk

D. Police Information Sheet

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of study: Investigating Police Perceptions and Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Name of Researcher: Diana Hepworth

Email: d.hepworth@edu.salford.ac.uk

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study that will explore the knowledge, training and perceptions of police officers and staff on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Before you decide whether to take part in this study, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you would like to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study aims to investigate the knowledge of police officers and staff of autism spectrum disorders. This will include personal experiences of autism, knowledge of the disorder, and whether any specific training has taken place. It will also explore the experiences of autistic individuals who have had interactions with the police. The research hopes to evaluate the current awareness and suggest ways to improve autism awareness in the police so that suspects with autism are treated fairly.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate because you may fit the criteria for the research study. I am recruiting two groups of interview participants:

- Serving or recently retired police officers
- Adults with an ASD diagnosis who have had interactions with the police

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide. I will ask you to confirm that you understand what is being asked of you, and for you to sign a consent form if you agree to take part.

There is a data withdrawal timeline and that possibility to withdraw will be based upon this. You will have 2 weeks to withdraw from the study following your interview session, after which your data will have been transcribed and anonymised. It will then no longer be able to be withdrawn.

Expenses and payments?

You will not incur any expenses whilst participating in this study.

What will happen to me if I take part?

I would like to invite you to take part in a one-to-one interview. You can email or telephone me to express your interest in taking part.

If you choose to take part in this research, I will schedule a time and date for an interview either online (using Microsoft Teams) or via telephone if preferred. The interview will take between 40 – 90 minutes. The interview can be conducted as a series of shorter interviews if this is more suitable for you.

The interview will be recorded, and handwritten notes will be taken. You can be referred to during the interview using a pseudonym if you wish – this will be discussed before the interview begins.

If you are a police officer, you will be asked about your knowledge of ASD, professional experiences and training.

If you are an autistic person who has had experiences with the police, you will be asked about your autism, experiences with the police and perceptions of the police.

Following the interview, the audio recording will be transcribed by myself, and fully anonymised so that you cannot be identified by the data.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

There are no disadvantages of taking part as I am not planning to collect any information that should cause distress.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Through taking part in the evaluation, you are contributing towards an evidence base of best practice in training for the future.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to the researcher **(Diana Hepworth**) who will do their best to answer your questions. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally you can do this by contacting the PhD Research Supervisors:

Dr Muzammil Quraishi	Dr Clare Allely	Dr Toni Wood
Email: m.quraishi@salford.ac.uk	c.s.allely@salford.ac.uk	a.wood2@salford.ac.uk
Tel: 0161 295 3552	0161 295 0112	0161 295 2824

If the matter is still not resolved, please forward your concerns to Professor Andrew Clark, Chair of Health and Society Research Ethics

Email: a.clark@salford.ac.uk

Tel: 0161 295 4109

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your confidentiality will be safeguarded during and after the study. Procedures for handling, processing, storage and destruction of your data match the Cadicott principles and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential, and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised.

Data will be collected through audio recording and handwritten notes. Data will be stored safely with research data, such as interviews being anonymous and given a research code, known only to the researcher. A master list identifying participants to the research codes data will be held on a password protected computer accessed only by the researcher. Hard paper/taped data will be stored in a locked cabinet, within locked office, accessed only by researcher/research team. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer known only by researcher. Only authorised persons such as researchers within the team, supervisors, sponsors and for monitoring the quality, regulatory authorities/R&D audit) will access the data. The data will be stored and destroyed in line with GDPR guidelines.

I am aware that if I reveal anything related to criminal activity, or something that is harmful to self or other, or poor practice, the researcher will have to share that information with the appropriate authorities.

What will happen if I don't carry on with the study?

You can change your mind at any time and a decision to withdraw or a decision not to take part will not be held against you in any way. However, it is worth noting that you will have 2 weeks until the interview has been transcribed and the data gained from it becomes totally anonymous. At this point, your data cannot be withdrawn from the study.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of the study will demonstrate the current knowledge and experiences of police officers on ASD. This information will be used primarily as part of a doctoral thesis for the award of a PhD. It may also be used to assess any current training schemes and provide suggestions for future training and policy to improve police standards.

Summaries of findings will be published in newsletters. Articles will be published in academic journals and presented at conferences. We will make a copy of findings available to all participants. You will not be identified in any report/publication unless you have given consent.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering taking part. Please get in touch if you would like to discuss the study further and/or to arrange an interview.

E. Direct Experience Information Sheet

EASY READ INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of study: Investigating Police Perceptions and Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Hello,

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project about **police knowledge and perceptions of Autism Spectrum Disorder.**

As part of the research, I want to speak to autistic people who have had interactions with the police in the past 5 years. I would like to know how you feel about the police and what has happened when you met them. This will help us to understand what the police know about autism and how they can understand it better so people are treated fairly.

Who is carrying out the research and why?

My name is Diana. I am a PhD student at the University of Salford. This research will be for my thesis and the results might be published. I hope that the information we find out will help to improve police training so that they understand autism better.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you want to take part, I would like to talk to you about your experiences. This can be on a video call, or on the telephone – whichever you are more comfortable with. The interview will last about one-hour and it will be recorded so that I can use the information. The interview can be done in smaller sessions if this would help you. We can do 15-minute interviews over the space of a few days to reduce any stress or time pressures.

What happens to my information?

All of your information will stay safe and confidential by me (Diana Hepworth) following the rules set by the University of Salford and by the Cadicott principles and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Nobody else will see your information and I will make sure you stay anonymous. The data will be used for the PhD thesis and maybe some published reports. I won't use your name in any reports, or any information that could identify you. Information about the University of Salford's data protection can be found here. The only reason I would tell anybody about you being part of the study is if I was worried about your safety, or if you tell me you have committed a crime.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a problem with the research study, you can speak to me (Diana) about your concerns. If you are not happy with this, or if you want to complain to somebody else, you can speak to one of my PhD supervisors:

Dr Muzammil Quraishi	Dr Clare Allely	Dr Toni Wood
Email: m.quraishi@salford.ac.uk	c.s.allely@salford.ac.uk	a.wood2@salford.ac.uk
Tel: 0161 295 3552	0161 295 0112	0161 295 2824

If they cannot help you, you can speak to

Professor Andrew Clark
Chair of the Health Research Ethics Panel
Tel: 0161 295 4109
Email: a.clark@salford.ac.uk

Do I have to take part?

You are free to decide if you want to take part or not. Please think about it carefully – you might want to talk to a parent, friend or somebody you know well before you decide to take part.

You can talk to me (d.hepworth@edu.salford.ac.uk) if you have any questions about the study.

I want to take part – What do I do?

You can email or phone me if you want to take part in the study. I will ask you to read and sign a consent form on the computer. Then we can organize a time and date for the interview to happen that is okay for both of us.

Some of the things we talk about might feel personal to you. Remember, you can stop whenever you want. If you feel like you need to speak to somebody about how you are feeling, you can phone the National Autistic Society (0808 800 4104), the Samaritans (116 123) or Mind (0300 123 3393) for extra help.

F. Police Consent Form

University of Salford MANCHESTER

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of study: Investigating Police Perceptions and Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Name of Researcher: Diana Hepworth

Please complete and sign this form **after** you have read and understood the study information sheet. Read the following statements, and select 'Yes' or 'No' in the box on the right-hand side using the tick boxes.

1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the study information sheet version 4, dated 21/03/2021 for this study.	Yes ☐ No ☐
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without my rights being affected.	Yes ☐ No ☐
3.	If I decide to withdraw, I understand I need to inform the researcher of this within 2 weeks of being interviewed in order for my data to be removed from the study.	Yes ☐ No ☐
4.	I agree to participate by being interviewed, with the interview being recorded, and handwritten notes taken.	Yes ☐ No ☐
5.	I understand that my personal details will be kept confidential and will not be revealed to people outside the research team. However, I am aware that if I reveal anything related to criminal activity and/or something that is harmful to myself or others, or poor work practice, the researcher will have to share that information with the appropriate authorities.	Yes ☐ No ☐
6.	I understand that my anonymised data will be used in the researcher's PhD Thesis, other academic publications, conferences and presentations.	Yes ☐ No ☐
7.	I agree to take part in the study:	Yes ☐ No ☐

Name of participant:

Date:

G. Direct Experience Consent Form

University of Salford MANCHESTER

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of study: Investigating Police Perceptions and Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Name of Researcher: Diana Hepworth

Please complete and sign this form **after** you have read and understood the study information sheet. Read the following statements, and select 'Yes' or 'No' in the box on the right hand side

1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version 4, dated 21/03/2021 for this study.	Yes ☐ No ☐
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can stop at any time	Yes ☐ No ☐
3.	I understand that if I want my data to be removed, I need to contact Diana Hepworth (the researcher) within 2 weeks of the interview by emailing d.hepworth@edu.salford.ac.uk	Yes ☐ No ☐
4.	I am happy for my interview to be recorded	Yes ☐ No ☐
5.	I understand that my personal details will be kept confidential and will not be revealed to people outside the research team. I understand that if I reveal anything related to criminal activity or something that is harmful to myself or others, Diana will have to share that information with the appropriate authorities.	Yes ☐ No ☐
6.	I understand that my anonymised data will be used in the Diana's PhD Thesis, other academic publications, conferences and presentations.	Yes ☐ No ☐
7.	I agree to take part in the study:	Yes ☐ No ☐

_____ _____

Name **Date**

H. Police Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Prompts in *italics*

Before starting, check that the connection is okay and they are comfortable.

Explain what research is about and how long interview lasts – thank them for their time!

******ASK ABOUT RECORDING INTERVIEW******

Part A – Demographics and Rapport Building

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify as?
3. How would you describe your ethnicity?
4. What police force do you currently work for?
5. Have you worked at any other forces?
6. What made you join the police?
    a. Did you always want to join the police force?
7. What rank are you?
    a. How long have you been working in this rank?
    b. How long have you been working for the police in total?
    c. Do you have a specialism?
        i. How long have you been in this particular specialist role?
    d. Would you like to progress further? *Why?*
    e. Do you socialise with any colleagues outside of work?
        i. *Why/Why not?*
8. Do you have autism? *(Have you been diagnosed?)*
    a. Do you have any friends or family with ASD?

Part B – Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder

1. When you hear the word 'disability', what does it mean to you?
2. What does Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism) mean to you?
3. How do you think you can recognise that someone might have autism?
    a. Why do you think these factors may be important?
4. Can you think of any factors that might make it difficult to detect autism?
    a. *What are these?*
    b. *Why? How?*
5. How do you know about autism?

a. *Where did you learn this from (police or another source)?*
b. *[If no knowledge, "Have you received any training on autism?"]*

6. Have you received any formal training on autism (from police or otherwise)?
    a. *Where from?*
    b. *When was this?*

Part C – Experiences of Autism

1. Can you recall any experiences with autistic suspects?
    a. What was the reason for the interaction?
        i. *[If stop & search]* why did you stop that individual?
        ii. *If related to ASD, were there any other factors in the stop?*
    b. *What happened during the interaction?*
        i. *Was the individual restrained? Why/why not?*
    c. *What was the final outcome?*
    d. *How did you feel dealing with the situation?*
    e. *If this happened again, would you want anything to happen differently?*
2. How would you decide whether to stop an individual on the street?
    a. *[prompts – behaviours, appearance]*
    b. *Do any of the person's other characteristics come into the decision? [race, clothing, gender?] If so, why?*
3. Do you think that autistic people have any other aspects of their identity that might make them more vulnerable to being stopped by the police?
    a. What are these? Why?
        i. *Do you think autistic females are as likely to be stopped as males?*
        ii. *What about someone with autism who is also black?*
4. Have your colleagues ever spoken about experiences with autistic people?
    a. *What did they tell you? Did you agree with them?*
    b. *Did this change your thoughts about autism?*
5. When logging details for a stop and search or arrest, is there a section to include details on mental health diagnoses?
    a. *Is this/Would this be helpful?*
    b. *Is this information then recorded further?*

Part D – Transference of knowledge & Job Role

1. Thinking back to the identifying features of autism, can you think of any other scenarios where people may display these behaviours?

2. When you think of your job role as a member of the police force, how would you describe your role? *What makes you get out of bed in the mornings?*
    a. Do you view yourself as a crime-fighter or a peacekeeper?
    b. *Are there any other ways you view yourself?*
    c. *Is this what you expected when you joined the police?*
3. Do you think that training/more training would be helpful to your job role?
    a. *How would it benefit you?*
    b. *What kind of training would you prefer?*
        i. *Why?*

I. Direct Experience Interview Guide

Lived Experience Interview Schedule

Check that the participant can see and hear me clearly, and that there are no connection issues

Introduce myself and explain what the study aims are, and remind of their right to withdraw

Part One - Demographic

1. Are you comfortable?
    a. Do you have anything with you that will help you to concentrate? *Fiddle toy etc*
    b. *Can I do anything to make you more comfortable?*
2. Can you tell me something about yourself?
3. How old are you?
4. What county do you live in?
5. How would you describe your race and ethnicity?
6. What gender do you identify as?
7. What level of education have you finished?
8. Who do you live with?
    a. Do you have a carer/guardian?
9. What do you like to do for hobbies?
10. Do you have a job?
11. Have you been diagnosed with ASD?
    a. How old were you when you were diagnosed?
    b. Do you have any other diagnoses?
    c. How would you prefer me to refer to your autism?
        i. *Person with ASD/autistic person/other?*
12. Have you ever had an interaction with the police?

Part Two – Police Interactions

1. How many times in the past 5 years have you had interactions with the police?
2. Was this as a suspect, witness or victim? *[n.b. rephrase if they don't understand these terms]*
    a. *What was the crime involved?*
    b. *Why do you think you were stopped/spoken to by the police?*

c. *Did you understand why you had this interaction with the police?*
d. *Probe for further detail about the interactions including age when interaction occurred*
e. Were you taken to a police station or office to speak to the police?

3. Did you disclose your ASD to the police?
    a. At what point?
    b. Why/why not?
    c. If disclosed, were you asked, or did you tell the police without them asking?
4. How do you think this affected the way you were treated?
    a. Were any adjustments made for you? (*communication styles, physical environment etc)*
    b. Could they have made any more changes that might have helped you?
    c. If being interviewed, did you have anybody with you? *Appropriate adult/guardian*
5. Do you feel that the police were helpful?
    a. Did they treat you with respect?
    b. Did you understand why the police made the decisions they did?
    c. Did the police tell you what was going to happen next?
        i. *If yes, how was this helpful?*
        ii. *If not, would this be helpful to you?*
6. If you encounter the police again, would you disclose your ASD?
    a. Why/why not?
7. Are you confident that the police will treat you fairly if you encounter them again?
    a. Would you be scared or intimidated by the police after your previous interactions?
        i. Why/Why not?
    b. If you were a victim/witness to a crime in the future, would you report it to the police?
        i. Why/why not?
8. Thinking about your gender, sexuality, race and autism, which do you feel is the most important to you? Or is it hard to think of them as separate identities?

a. Do you think that any of these things make it difficult when you speak with the police? *What/why?*
b. Are there any other things about you that you think might be important if you have an encounter with the police? *[probe]*

9. Do you have anything else you would like to add or discuss?

J. Universal Debriefing Sheet

Researcher: Diana Hepworth

Email: d.hepworth@edu.salford.ac.uk

Investigating Police Perceptions and Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Thank you again for taking part in the research project.

Aims of the study

To investigate the knowledge of police officers and staff of autism spectrum disorders. This includes personal experiences of autism, knowledge of the disorder, and whether any specific autism training has taken place. It also explores autistic people's experiences with police and their perceptions of the police awareness and treatment. The research hopes to evaluate the current awareness and suggest ways to improve autism awareness in the police so that suspects with autism are treated fairly.

Questions?

If you have any questions about the study, or your involvement, please contact the researcher (details at top of this letter). You can also ask me to send you a copy of the research report if you would like.

Please remember that you can change your mind about taking part and a decision to withdraw will not be held against you in any way. After two weeks past the interview date, your data will have been completely anonymised and it cannot be removed from the study.

Concerns

Please contact the researcher directly if you have any concerns about the study or the way in which it was carried out. If you wish to speak to somebody other than the researcher, or make a complaint, you may contact the PhD supervisors:

Dr Muzammil Quraishi	Dr Clare Allely	Dr Toni Wood
Email: m.quraishi@salford.ac.uk	c.s.allely@salford.ac.uk	a.wood2@salford.ac.uk
Tel: 0161 295 3552	0161 295 0112	0161 295 2824

Need further help?

The National Autistic Society provides free information about ASD and has a confidential helpline

www.autism.org.uk Phone: 0808 800 4104

The Samaritans offers a safe space for to talk about problems and provides emotional support to people over the phone

https://www.samaritans.org Phone: 116 123

Mind is a mental health charity that offers help advice about mental health

https://www.mind.org.uk Phone: 0300 123 3393

K. Excerpts from Researcher Diary

27/09/2021

Today was my first ACTUAL interview. I was terrified! Not only because I always suffer with anxiety during things like this, but I had built the idea of the police interviews up so much, particularly with the police participants, that I was certain I'd make a fool of myself. I have been reflecting on this during writing, and even more so after today's interview. Why am I so nervous around the police? I've never been arrested, I am more than aware that they are just people, and yet I'm utterly terrified. Is it a symbolic thing? Is it because of their power? Something to keep pondering.

Of course I expected there to be a few niggles and bumps in the first few… Aside from some wifi issues (and the amount of times I say uhmmm and err), it went really well! The participant was lovely – really friendly and happy to be taking part, so that helped a lot. I noticed that as the conversation naturally flowed during the demographic questions, we ended up talking about a lot of things that I planned to ask later in the interview. I found it quite hard to keep track of the conversation, what we HAD talked about, and my interview schedule all at the same time. I do struggle with juggling things mentally anyway, but I'm hoping this will get easier – or else I'll keep repeating myself and look stupid.

Looking back at what we covered (and the order), I've decided to move some of the demographic questions around a little. I don't think that it will impact the data in any way – it just flows a little more naturally (I think!).

The interview lasted far longer than I expected – I think it was around 2 hours. I was absolutely exhausted by the end of it. A little to overwhelmed to sit down and do anything immediately after. I had planned to start transcribing right away, given that I had the rest of the day, but perhaps that was a little optimistic. I'm going to try and take notes or diary entries straight after the interviews so that I don't forget anything that seemed important at the time.

09/03/2022

Today is my second autistic interview (I really need to think/discuss my terminology for that!). I'm nervous about this one. It's over a phone call, and the participant has come across as blunt over emails, which I've interpreted as rude. I also know that he is a retired [redacted job role] and that makes me nervous. Again, a white male in a position of power.

Call scheduled for 6pm – spent 20 minutes setting up (and hyping myself up!) and… It went straight to voicemail. Left a message, but realised that this has also added to my judgement of him…

6:15pm – called again. Still no answer so left another voicemail. I feel frustrated, but also somewhat relieved. Which is silly because I need the data!

After a few more (blunt) emails, we managed to conduct the interview, and he was actually very nice over the phone. Very articulate, able to comprehend questions and answer without too much effort. He was so articulate, that during the first 20 minutes I

questioned myself. I hadn't confirmed a diagnosis of autism with him prior to the interview. He had seen my advert and got in touch, so I just assumed that he was autistic and had been diagnosed. Eventually, he did talk about his diagnosis and it has <u>really</u> made me think. This must be a common thought for professionals/police! Despite the fact that I am a researcher, specialising in autism, it concerns me that I was doubting it. Would I even have expected it if he hadn't told me? Would I have thought to ask?! I feel both validated, and frustrated with myself.

My perception of this man changed completely within 15 minutes of speaking to him. He was well-spoken, clearly well-educated and knowledgeable. I find it difficult to marry up the rude, blunt emails that I'd received before with the voice on the phone. This must be a disadvantage in an age where emails are the norm, rather than phone calls or face-to-face. He did speak about his bluntness in the interview, and suggested it was part of his autism. Spending a lot of time this evening thinking about this. This is the reason why my research is important.

<u>12/10/2022</u>

Different day, more analysis. My brain feels like it's made from jam. I knew this was going to be challenging. Everybody said it would take longer than I expected. But lordy am I feeling overwhelmed. How do I know if I'm doing it right?! Starting to realise that as much as I love social science, I equally don't like it for the same reasons. I am so full of self-doubt during every phase, that I work myself up… Then find out it was all okay.

It feels like I've spent forever looking at this data. The coding was quite fun – I really enjoyed that part. Now I'm left with 500+ codes and I keep hoping that divine inspiration strikes me. Some are obvious themes. Others not so much. I keep second guessing myself – I'll add a code to a theme, or think that it clearly fits, and then wonder if other people would agree. Surely I know my data best? I'm worried that I'm interpreting things too much, and it's not 'proper' analysis. Imposter syndrome is hitting me hard this week.

I'm drawn to a kind of conflict in the codes/data – police participants seemed to almost contradict themselves with their views on joining the police force to help people, but then this underlying disdain towards offenders. Also, they sound so frustrated with the 'social worker' aspect of their jobs, which I understand is a little outside of their job role – particularly when they have to spend hours waiting for A&E. But they're still helping someone in crisis – isn't that the help that they wanted to <u>do</u>? Or are they hoping for a more glorious, heroic kind of help?

L. Table of Example Themes, Codes and Quotes – Police dataset

Theme	Initial Code Label	Example Quote
Negative Perceptions of Autism	Stigma and Stereotypes of Autism	*"A lot of challenging behaviour, just probably mainly for the fact that they can't communicate very well, so they get frustrated. That would probably be my image of an autistic kid"*
	Negative Discourse	*"But it's a spectrum condition so, there will be those who really do suffer"* *"It's a nightmare condition"*
Ability to Adapt Procedures	Treating People as Individuals	"*To be honest, I think, actually, if someone's got, if someone's demonstrating a behaviour or a need, then does it need a label for us to be able to put in place the special measures? Because ultimately, there's 1000s and 1000s, or probably millions of people that are undiagnosed. That just because they haven't got a label on their diagnosis, that doesn't mean their needs are any less or any greater. So for me, it's about treating people according to how they present rather than what label they've got."*
	Using Clear Language	*"When, you know, when we're talking about stuff is to be sort of direct and plain language. You know, certainly with people with autism cut down on sort of acronyms […] keep the language simple. So they can process it, because they process different than say, you or I, for example."*
	Physical Adaptations	*"But in the interview as well, traditionally in the interview we sit down on a chair, they sit on one side of the table I sit on the other side of the table - actually some people with Autism hate tables, they don't enjoy that, actually they'd rather sit on the floor. Well, you want to sit on the floor let's sit on the floor."*

	Personal Willingness to Adapt	*"People say I'm autistic. It's like okay. How might we need to adapt a couple of things to help you?"*
Challenging Occupational Culture	Desire to Help People	*"Helping, and doing the right thing. Doing the right thing by everybody, whether they be the person in custody, whether they be the person, the victim, it's my thing is do the right by them."*
	Fairness	*"It's there to be a fair process, believe it or not, it's not there to just get someone to admit that they've done it. Yeah, you know, it's about being fair and about doing things non oppressive. And if they're struggling to articulate what they're thinking, and that's not fair on them, you know, that's going to leave potentially them getting prosecuted for something that they, they maybe shouldn't be."* *"the best way I can ensure that a conviction is safe and robust, and we're getting the best out of victims is by making sure that we're treating our suspects really fairly, so that there's nothing that can fall down in that process and that the right outcome is happening, for the right reasons, not because we're taking advantage of people that are vulnerable. And I think if we addressed vulnerability at an earlier stage anyway, we'd have far less people in our cells, which means we'd have less work and means that people would be happier and the world would be a better place."*
	Communication as a Vital Policing Tool	*"…yes, you can restrain someone. But is it lawful when you can talk them down?"* *"It may, it could be a different approach from the use of force angle, whether it be: you don't go in and rugby tackle someone straight away, or you consider talking to, you're obviously trying to talk to someone, but you'll sort of be talking to as you're moving them away. But instead of saying, like, "what the fuck you doing?", you could*

		be saying, like, "calm down, take a minute".”

M. Table of Example Themes, Codes and Quotes – Direct Experience Dataset

Theme	**Initial Code Label**	**Example Quote**
Lack of trust in police	Suspicion of police motives	*"So I'm very suspicious of police. I think they do things for their own... They like to get all their targets or they like to get money. They like to minimize the work that they do. And I think they're just, the experience that I've had, is that they're horrible people."*
	Manipulation by police	*"Well they're experts at it, and they do trick questions, and they do things in a way they can use it to make you look guilty."* *"Well yes, I would do. I feel there was looking to manipulate things to suit themselves. They're no longer, think that they're actually looking to get justice or truth. They want to avoid getting responsibility for anything. They want to manipulate things so that they get an arrest or something or other, and they manipulative for their own reasons."*
Vulnerabilities during police encounter	Communication related vulnerabilities	*"And then, well they're obviously experts at doing the questioning, they asked me questions I can see now, I should have just shut up and not said anything to them. Not having spoken to them at all."* *"And this guy's telling me not to say anything. You're demanding an answer. I'm outraged by what you're asking me. Maybe that's not quite the right way of putting it. I know why you're asking me. But I'm still outraged by it. So that was really difficult, and I kept stopping the interview to speak to the solicitor to say, I really want to sort of answer that. And he was like, "No, do not answer". So that was difficult."* *"Yeah, the, the way it was structured that the questions were very open and sort of lead, leaving it to you to sort of expand on everything. And that was very difficult for me to know where the lines where a lot of the time between a question and the how much answer you have to give, I suppose."*

	Stress caused by lack of routine	*"Are we looking at hours? Are we looking at minutes? Are we looking at tomorrow, is, is a big thing. You know, they didn't give you any indication at all."*
	Compliance	*"And I've, you know, I'm clearly distressed at this point, I'm worried about things. And I just wanted to get out of there at that point, and I was trying to look for the quickest route to sort of get to a resolution. So I refused legal advice at that point, because it was it was about, if you have legal advice, it's gonna take a while for someone to... And I just wanted to get things moving and get on and I was only going to tell them the truth anyway, so I didn't see what was involved in that."*
	Physical environment	*"And I was talking about the physical environment and how there were things that were distracting in the environment. Like I had a row of plug sockets down the wall that had gaps between the plug sockets and the thing and they weren't lined up properly. And it's driving me a little bit wild looking at it and me not being able to straighten that out."*