
AGILE EVIDENCE REVIEW 2026

Measuring Culture in Policing

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LAY SUMMARY

This Agile Evidence Review provides an overview of methods for evaluating organisational culture in policing organisations, outlining the benefits and limitations of different approaches. Drawing on systematic database searching, the review discusses the different manifestations of culture in policing organisations, followed

by an assessment of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. It concludes by evaluating their usefulness for tracking cultural change and introduces organisational climate as a more practical alternative for understanding behaviour within police organisations.

KEY FINDINGS

- This Agile Evidence Review (AER) examines a range of methods for evaluating culture in policing organisations, highlighting their conceptual, methodological and practical implications.
- Organisational culture is presented as a complex, multi layered phenomenon associated with shared values and assumptions. Yet influenced by a wide range of internal and external factors, and prone to subcultural variation.
- Quantitative measures of culture offer efficiency, replicability and anonymity but are limited to assessing espoused values and risk oversimplifying cultural nuance.
- Whilst qualitative approaches, including interviews, ethnography and documentary analysis, facilitate rich, multi level insight they can be resource intensive, difficult to replicate and constrained by issues of access, bias and ethics.
- Mixed methods designs can mitigate these limitations but typically demand significant investment.
- The review concludes that culture is too abstract, dynamic and heterogeneous for reliable longitudinal measurement, suggesting organisational climate as a more practical alternative for informing targeted organisational development.

1. Introduction

The National Policing Culture and Inclusion Strategy (College of Policing, 2025) represents part of an increased focus across policing on organisational culture, to include the potential for cultural change and in turn implying the need for measurement.¹ This Agile Evidence Review (AER) seeks to provide policing practitioners with an overview of available methods of cultural evaluation, including presenting some of the associated limitations and benefits of each approach. It is informed by systematic searching of academic databases in October-November 2025, coupled with snowball searching stemming from the content identified in the initial structured search.

The AER begins by defining organisational and police culture as related but distinct concepts, then examines quantitative methods of cultural evaluation. It subsequently explores qualitative and mixed-methods approaches, concluding with an appraisal of their effectiveness in assessing organisational cultural change and introducing the concept of organisational climate as a potential alternative metric for the understanding of police organisational behaviour.

¹ The concept of cultural 'measurement' is itself controversial due to its positivist connotations. Consequently, the term will be applied flexibly in this paper to denote means by which culture may be observed and analysed by insider or outsider researchers.

2. Results

2.1 Culture in (Policing) Organisations

2.1.1 Organisational Culture

Whilst there is no single accepted definition of organisational culture, it is generally recognised to derive from the deeply held values, assumptions and beliefs held by its membership which manifest as 'the way we do things around here' (Lundy and Cowling, 1995). Culture in an organisation is influenced by a multitude of internal and external forces across its history and passed from generation to generation of employees via socialisation, resulting in it exerting influence at the individual, team and organisational levels. Whilst historically organisational culture was viewed as primarily monolithic, it has become increasingly recognised that organisations comprise collectives of subcultures existing at a variety of levels, including team and occupational groupings (Cockcroft, 2014). And that these subcultures frequently exert a stronger influence upon individual behaviour than the overall organisational culture (Lok et al., 2005). Subcultures therefore exist as embedded within the main organisational culture and bear similar characteristics, while simultaneously varying sufficiently to render them distinct, demonstrating the complexity and dynamism in organisational culture research.

2.1.2 The Complexity of Police Culture

Occupational cultures emerge from the distinct operating context of the particular role group. Police operational culture has been much studied since the 1970s but lacks a coherent definition or set of accepted elements. Typically being regarded as a negative force despite research demonstrating is positive dimensions as a counterpoint to the many challenges it presents. Despite this conceptual ambiguity, frequently identified elements of police culture include communication, cynicism, comradeship, categorisation, code of self-protection, and compassion (Charman, 2024).

Whilst frequently occupational in nature, police culture also has an organisational dimension. Collectively, these characteristics accounting for the similarities seen in police force cultures nationally and internationally, but also the variations which render each force culture unique. Given this polysemous nature, police culture measurement techniques may therefore present opportunities for the exploration of organisational culture in law enforcement and are therefore also explored in this paper.

2.1.3 Analysing Culture in Organisations

Organisational culture has been analysed in many different ways, with Schein's (2004) three tier model representing one of the most widely accepted frameworks as comprising - Surface artefacts (level one), organisational values (level two) and, beliefs and assumptions (level three). Alternatively, Hofstede et al. (1990) place values at the heart of culture, as constituting the enduring perceptions as to what is respected or prized within an organisation or an element of it. Including acting as barometers of what is right or wrong, or good or bad, in a given situation. Values and by implication, culture, are therefore highly influential upon behaviour. However, there is limited theory to explain why culture has such a ubiquitous impact within organisations (Ostroff, Kinicki and Tamkins, 2003).

Analytically, two broad paradigms exist in respect of organisational culture.

- A functionalist perspective suggests that culture can be observed, it is objective, and it can be quantified. Culture is therefore a tool of social control which directs behaviour, encompassing the collective values within the organisation

which influence what is perceived to be important. In addition to the norms which define appropriate attitudes and behaviours amongst the membership.

- An alternative subjectivist perspective suggests that culture cannot be observed. It is immanent and symbolic, or a metaphor used to interpret patterns of behaviour within organisations. In this context culture is an indivisible from the organisation, emerging from the social interactions of the membership.

Further, cultural analysis in organisations typically commences with the assumption that there exists a simple singular culture which may be defined and then manipulated to the benefit of the organisation (Charman, 2017). Such a reductive stance inevitably ignores the rich, complex and multi layered nature of organisational culture. Therefore necessitating the precise definition of individual elements prior to attempting any form of measurement, potentially contrasting with the notion that each organisational culture and sub-culture will be uniquely comprised, and conflicting with debate as to culture's constituent ingredients. Recognising these key conceptual tensions, the present paper will nevertheless

seek to cast light on ways in which police leaders may seek to gain insight as to discrete elements of organisational culture through examination of tools used across sectors and in policing specifically. As opposed to their seeking to understand the kaleidoscopic picture of a force's culture through a single empirical effort.

2.2 Quantitative Instruments

Amongst researchers of organisational culture, there is significant variation in the methods used, in part, due to the lack of consensus to the definition of organisational culture itself. But in practice most stem from the challenges associated with surfacing, measuring and analysing values, norms and assumptions within a social group (Kummerow and Kirby, 2014). This section will evaluate a selection of the quantitative evaluative tools professing to provide insight into organisational culture, having been identified by comprehensive empirical appraisal and/or their specific development in a policing context.

Dimensional approaches to cultural assessment examine the degree to which predefined themes are prevalent within an organisation. These dimensions, typically concern apparent and intangible phenomena regarded as associated with culture, such as vision, values, norms, belief and practices. In contrast, typological methods of cultural assessment categorise organisations based on dominant characteristics into pre-described types. Tools for measuring culture may further be categorised by their intention as either discrete measures of culture to be used to assess culture at a specific point in

time. Or as diagnostic instruments which aim to identify, assess and change culture, to bring it into line with specific dimensions or characteristics as defined in the instrument.

Quantitative methods of evaluating organisation and culture typically involve questionnaires but may also include highly structured interviews. Examples of widely used commercial quantitative instruments include the Denison Organisational Culture Survey (DOCS), Organisational Culture Inventory (OCI) and the Organisational Culture Profile (OCP).

2.2.1 Denison Organisational Culture Survey (DOCS)

The DOCS is derived from Denison Consulting and is founded upon the existence of four traits of organisational culture which may have an impact upon effectiveness and takes the form of a fifty question employee survey. Whilst the DOCS is noted to have high reliability and validity in respect of organisational effectiveness, concerns exist as to the extent to which it is truly a means of isolating and evaluating culture, and critics further note its vulnerability to the influence of social desirability

bias, though this latter concern is common to many cultural research tools (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016).

For example, DOCS identifies four aspects of an organisation's culture which influence its effectiveness – a strong mission, elevated employee involvement, internal consistency and adaptability (Boyce et al., 2015). However, these dimensions collectively and individually encompass a broad range of organisational phenomena, including but not limited to, its culture. Consequently, the evaluation of culture becomes entangled within the assessment of other constructs. Furthermore, the four elements of DOCS intersect with one another, creating additional complexity in identifying uniquely cultural facets (Chatman and Reilly, 2016).

2.2.2 Organisational Culture Inventory (OCI)

Based on the work of Cooke and Lafferty (1986), the OCI uses a Likert scale approach to measure 12 cultural styles, leading to the definition of the culture as either constructive, passive/defensive or aggressive/defensive. The OCI serves as a measure of behavioural norms and expectations within the organisation

via presentation of a list of statements describing behaviours explicitly or implicitly expected of employees. Whilst the OCI has been verified as empirically valid in that it is supported by real world data across a range of organisational contexts (Xenikou and Furnham, 1996) criticisms include the existence of overlap between the cultural categories (Khan et al., 2010) and the complex, resource intensive nature of its administration (Scott et al., 2003). The associated questionnaire containing 96-120 items, depending on the format, which are used to develop a cultural profile at the organisational and departmental (sub-unit) levels. Though Human Synergistics, the consultancy who own and administer the OCI, suggest that the dimensions of culture addressed within the instrument are those directly influential upon the functioning of the organisation and amenable to leadership influence. Yet, as with all of the commercially administered instruments, the OCI has the potential to be expensive when deployed across a large organisation, particularly if used repeatedly to track cultural change.

2.2.3 Organisational Culture Profile (OCP)

The OCP assesses values and norms concerning priorities and preferences at individual and organisational levels. Also commercially administered, the instrument comprises a comprehensive list of fifty-four cultural attributes which participants organise in relative importance to one another, leading to the development of a cultural profile which is claimed to enable the optimisation of workplace dynamics (Culture Partners, 2025) and noted as having high validity and reliability (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016). For example, the accuracy of the instrument has been demonstrated via experimentation across multiple contexts, as has its consistency in terms of yielding the same results when applied repeatedly to the same sample. However, the OCP is not known to have been tested in the specific contexts of a policing organisation or the UK public sector.

2.2.4 Alternative Quantitative Instruments

Other quantitative instruments, less widely used in industry but of note in academia, include Cameron and Quinn's (1999) Competing Values Framework (CVF) and the construct

developed by Ghosh and Srivastava (2014). The CVF employs a 100-item survey instrument in measuring two dimensions of organisational behaviour – flexibility versus control, and internal focus and integration versus external focus and differentiation. The results of which lead to an organisation being categorised as one or four types of competing culture – clan, adhocracy, market and hierarchy. Whilst the model has been adopted and expanded via other studies, concerns exist as to the extent to which the four cultural types are truly competing and note the potential for one or more to exist simultaneously within an organisation (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016).

Ghosh and Srivastava (2014) identified eight dimensions of organisational culture via a review of literature and other cultural instruments – trust, freedom to experiment, individualism, attitude toward constructive dissent, participation and result orientation. From which they established thirty-nine statements relating to employee behaviour, beliefs, evaluations or judgements which are rated via a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Whilst their work has been recognised as producing consistent results (reliability) and as an accurate tool for measuring the intended cultural dimensions (validity), it has had

limited impact when compared to the aforementioned commercialised scales but may present an opportunity for exploration in a policing context via further research investigating its utility and application.

2.2.5 Quantitative Evaluation of Police Culture

Multiple authors seeking to evaluate police culture do so at the level of shared values. As of Schein's three levels of organisational culture it is the middle tier of values which is the most accessible via quantitative approaches (Cockcroft, 2012). Values are typically group phenomena and therefore potentially illustrative of the collective culture, with subcultures reflecting the core values of the main group while simultaneously demonstrating variation.

For example, Cordner (2017) measured dimensions of police culture using a bespoke instrument designed following successive research studies with US police departments. These including officers' views of the public, their assessments of management and leadership, their evaluation of specific strategies, tolerance of misconduct and the importance of toughness and solidarity. But noted that this is not a comprehensive list of

elements comprising police culture, instead representing a snapshot of values and beliefs which may be indicative of it. Other limitations of this approach include the potential for social desirability bias or self-report bias in the responses, though the same may be said of the majority of research methods, in addition to the absence of deeper probing, which may be achieved with qualitative techniques. Notably, the risk of self-report bias is particularly acute in contexts associated with individual and organisational risk, such as matters of conduct and performance.

Elsewhere, Shim, Jo and Hoover (2015) adapted Cameron and Quinn's (1999) CVF in a quantitative appraisal of police organisational culture. However, whilst the findings of this research have received attention, their method of cultural measurement has not been adopted elsewhere. Likewise, Gottschalk and Gudmundsen (2009) used 18 values associated with policing activity in their analysis of culture. For example, the use of direct or indirect communication, equality in relationships versus hierarchy, open versus close culture, and individual versus group orientation. However, this work has not been furthered beyond its original scope.

Alternatively, Gutschmidt and Vera

(2020) conducted an extensive literature review to derive a list of twenty-two value items which informed a Likert scale survey, asking respondents to indicate the degree to which each was characteristic of an organisational unit in which they had worked for a long period. Their work seeking to reflect the cultural values of policing groups rather than individual officers. The results of which then led to the identification of four variables representing facets of police culture – diligence, team, institutional pride and conservative-male orientation. Leading to their conclusion that police culture is amenable to quantitative empirical research, but vulnerable to social desirability bias, which it is suggested here may be exacerbated by increased professional and public scrutiny. Further, their approach has not to date been widely adopted as a means of evaluating law enforcement culture.

Finally, Paesen, Maesschalak and Loyens (2019) proposed that values, norms and behaviours would vary between police forces and that such variation could be captured using a dimensional approach using grid-group cultural theory. This method is founded upon two axis which give rise to four cultural groups. The first representing the extent to which an individual’s life is directed by external

forces and the second reflecting the degree to which an individual is incorporated into the into bounded social units. The subsequent resultant quadrants of cultural types are hierarchy, egalitarianism, individualism and fatalism. Paesen, Maesschalak and Loyens (2019) further enhanced this matrix by defining eight distinct positions and fifteen dimensions of organisational culture as informed by other research in the field, enabling greater descriptive precision of cultural types. From a practical perspective, they subsequently produced a bespoke survey instrument comprising forty-eight items evaluated on a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These items being drawn from other instruments and relevant literature or alternatively being modified or created by the research team.

In developing the questionnaire, they included wording to encourage the participant to focus at the unit level rather than the individual level to reflect research, suggesting that this is the most appropriate level at which to evaluate culture given that the higher organisational level is often too far removed from an employee’s day-to-day experience. Paesen, Maesschalak and Layens (2019) further note the potential to enhance their instrument through

the addition of law enforcement specific items and observe that the unit level orientation downplays the role of organisational level dynamics. As with other measures of police organisational culture deployed in academia, this approach has not been notably adopted elsewhere, suggesting a potential preference amongst researchers for developing their own constructs.

2.2.6 Benefits and Limitations of Quantitative Instruments

As demonstrated, surveys have come to dominate the field of organisational cultural measurement in industry due to their ability to be used at scale, efficiency of analysis afforded, and the generation of comparable datasets. However, the majority of questionnaires examine the level of espoused values, leading to a focus on shared values as indicative of culture, and thereby potentially diminishing the importance of deeper exploration of shared assumptions, cultural norms, and the influence of culture upon behaviour, decisions and relationships. Whilst also shifting focus towards examination of coherency at the expense of considering the nature of intra organisational cultural variation.

Quantitative methods of evaluating

culture typically are more efficient in terms of resources and offer greater potential for comparison and replication. However, they also possess unique limitations, including being unable to delve into deeper dimensions of culture or to enable examination of unique contextual influences upon it. Nor is it possible to examine the meaning behind responses to a quantitative instrument, to consider areas of ambiguity within the data, or to explore historic influences upon the present responses. Further, the extent to which culture assessment tools genuinely surface the underlying assumptions which influence behaviour is debated, and there is further significant disparity in the quality, scope and depth of their empirical evaluation (Mannion, Konteh and Davies, 2009). Measures of individual values and characteristics within employee populations also ignore the collective nature of culture as values can exist in group settings which show variation from those espoused by individual members (Gutschmidt and Vera, 2020). Finally, many police cultural survey instruments focus on discrete elements of culture, whilst general organisational cultural questionnaires do not include police specific elements (Gutschmidt and Vera, 2020).

Previous research has identified over

80 culture assessment instruments with potential application to healthcare settings (Mannion, Konteh and Davies, 2009). In contrast the assessment of culture in law enforcement has tended toward qualitative approaches led by academia rather than police forces themselves, a selection of which are presented in the next section.

2.3 Qualitative Methods

2.3.1 A Multitude of Approaches

Qualitative approaches to assessing organisational culture typically focus upon formal practices, informal practices and artefacts (Martin and Siehl, 1983). Methods include semi- and unstructured interviews, observation, and document analysis. With the potential to blend these approaches in a multi method study. However, participant observation and interviews, whilst potentially yielding a profusion of data, will likely lack the replicability necessary to conduct the longitudinal assessment required to evaluate cultural change. Documentary analysis may present an advantage in this respect but will likely present additional challenges of gaining access to (often protectively marked information) when researching in police organisations.

Advantages of qualitative approaches include the potential for the researcher to engage with rich data and become immersed in the culture so as to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives. Qualitative approaches are particularly suited to the evaluation of culture on multiple levels, enabling the exploration of the associated deep complexity at each level and in the

interactions between levels. However, issues of researcher bias and interpretation may impede their subsequent communication. Other disadvantages, including the resource intensive nature of qualitative cultural research and the aforementioned issues of replicability and comparability.

Schein's (2004) qualitative dialogic approach to cultural evaluation is grounded in his three-tier model and predicated upon change, thereby presenting potential opportunities for police leaders seeking to chart the development of culture within a particular force or subgroup. However, it is an extensive process to replicate across an organisation, as requiring comprehensive and expansive exploration of deeply held beliefs and assumptions via qualitative methods including interview, focus groups, workshops and other dialogic techniques. Similarly, Johnson and Scholes (1999) Cultural Web uses action learning, interviews and focus groups directed toward six dimensions of culture to build understanding as to areas for development. These comprise of stories, symbols, rituals and routines, power structures, organisational structure and controls. However, this is also a resource

intensive process to administer, which requires specialist knowledge and skills to facilitate and analyse the potential wealth of qualitative data, and may lack replicability.

2.3.2 Ethnography

Outside of the use of interviews and focus groups, ethnography encompasses the researcher immersing themselves in the group under study through observation, interviews and analysis of artefacts. Organisational ethnographers seek to surface how an organisation works on a day-to-day basis, requiring the researcher to observe the natural behaviours and discourse of the group under study. Consequently, is a time consuming as a research method, and in a policing context, has the potential to expose the researcher to dangerous situations. Yet the ability to observe behaviour in situ and in depth over a long time represents a valuable form of cultural research (Westmarland, 2015). Albeit not one which lends itself to the measurement of culture for purpose of effecting cultural change due to the limited transferability and generalisability of the findings.

Access and positioning are also challenging for police culture ethnographers. An insider researcher,

as an employee of the force in question, may have fewer challenges in gaining access to conduct observations, but is inherently part of the culture being observed and may therefore be less able to impartially evaluate its nature. Whilst also potentially lacking in the research skills training and experience required to conduct this type of work. In contrast, purely academic outsider researchers may struggle to gain the necessary access and trust to conduct police ethnographic research and/or lack the specialist understanding necessary to interpret facets of police activity. Between these poles lie varying combinations of insider and outsider researchers, such as former police professionals now working in academia, who may capitalise upon their law enforcement contacts to gain access whilst also deploying knowledge of research skills developed via study or academic employment (Westmarland, 2015). For a force seeking to evaluate culture via ethnographic methods, there is a consequently a significant decision as to whom to employ and their position vis a vis the group under study. Particularly given the further complexity associated with suspicion, cynicism and mistrust directed towards outsiders as an enduring facet of police organisational and occupational culture.

Ethically an ethnographic approach raises issues of informed consent to observation, particularly in public and/or large group contexts. Whilst maintaining anonymity and considering how to manage the disclosure of confidences are also key issues, particularly where the researcher has developed trusting relationships with participants. The Hawthorne Effect is a further potential limitation of ethnographic research, whereby individuals undergoing observation act differently from their natural behaviour when in the presence of a researcher (Oswald, Sherratt and Smith, 2014). This is proposed as particularly likely in respect of negative dimensions of police culture. Yet despite its limitations, the depth of insight which ethnography may yield when time and resource are available renders it with the potential to provide a more detailed cultural assessment than the majority of other research methods.

2.3.3 Digital Sources

Alternatively, researchers are increasingly incorporating digital sources into their evaluation of organisational culture. For example, documentation, reports and social media content. These sources are considered unobtrusive because they do not require engagement

with employees and consequently present a lower risk of self-report bias, which is potentially exacerbated in contexts of poor culture (Reader and Gillespie, 2023).

Access to digital data may take different forms. For example, it may be limited to that which is publicly available. Whilst this is arguably the simplest form of access for the researcher and does not place a burden on the organisation the resultant analysis is likely to be limited as only derived from that which the organisation wishes to be known publicly. Alternatively, a researcher may work with the organisation to gain access to internal eyes-only content, though this too may be limited at the organisation's behest. Whilst a carte blanche approach to accessing the organisation's digital domain would raise considerable issues relating to informed consent and privacy. And in the policing context, almost certainly require a higher level of security clearance, complicating what prima facie appears to be a less bureaucratic, from an access perspective, approach to cultural research.

Unobtrusive, digitally derived sources of organisational cultural evaluation enable examination of naturally occurring data representing the ways

of working and communicating within the organisation. Their comprising the organisational artefacts in Schein's model wherein culture is apparent through the practices, processes and structures therein. However, cultural research via unobtrusive measures

is at an embryonic stage compared to survey and other forms, but offers an interesting opportunity, either in its own right or as part of mixed methods projects. The use of body-worn video footage offering a particularly intriguing opportunity in this respect.

2.4 Mixed Methods

Historically, quantitative and qualitative techniques have been employed in the measurement of organisational culture, with multiple studies employing both in mixed methods designs to reflect the multi-level nature of culture (Kummerow and Kirby, 2014). Ashkanasy, Wilderom and Peterson (2000) arguing that conceptualisation of culture through approaches directed only at a single level are incomplete and lacking a theoretical basis.

Mixed methods studies seek to overcome the limitations of qualitative and quantitative approaches, typically through combining both in a multistage project. However, such studies are inherently associated with additional resource and time requirements for all parties, potentially reducing their appeal, particularly where replication is sought over time to chart cultural change.

2.5 Alternative Methods

Looking elsewhere in the public sector, alternative measures used as indicators of culture within the National Health Service (Simpson et al., 2019) include:

- Staff surveys – These have the advantage of being already familiar to employees and do not require additional resourcing to implement. But lack empirical validation as cultural instruments and may be viewed with suspicion as to the degree of anonymity afforded.
- Reports from inspections – Similarly, these have the advantage of already existing (for example, PEEL) and therefore require limited further resourcing. However, the degree of authentic engagement with inspection teams and the Hawthorne effect may mitigate the validity of the resultant insight.
- Insight and feedback from staff training on expected organisational values and behaviours – This approach is often highly resource intensive and challenging to differentiate between genuine and performative engagement.

- Digital applications – Through which staff regularly respond via an app to questions such as ‘how was work today?’, ‘what went well at work today?’ and ‘what challenges arose at work today?’ Data is collected across the organisation to enable an overall perspective with the ability to conduct further analysis by department or role. Such applications offer the advantage of enabling ongoing insight but require commitment and resource to implement and maintain staff engagement.

Notably, whilst these tools may be presented as means of evaluating culture, it is proposed that instead they may be more appropriately conceptualised as barometers of the related concept of organisational climate.

2.5.1 Organisational Climate

Organisational climate may offer a more readily measurable and accessible means of effecting organisational development. Culture and climate are distinct but connected phenomena within organisations. Culture concerns the fundamental

values and belief systems, derived from shared assumptions, which inform meaning within the organisation and therefore exists at a deeper, less accessible, level for analysis. In contrast, climate is arguably more superficial, encompassing attitudinal and behavioural phenomena, and is associated with shared perceptions (Ashforth, 1985; Moran and Volkwein, 1992).

Studies of organisational culture have demonstrated that social relationships, productivity and employees’ approach to their work, amongst other factors, are influenced by their perception of the work environment – its climate. Encompassing elements including:

- Conflict and ambiguity
- Friendliness and warmth
- Job challenge, importance and variety
- Leadership facilitation and support
- Mutual trust
- Professional and organisational esprit
- Workgroup cooperation (James et al., 2008; Wallace, Hunt and Richards, 1999).

Climate concerns the interactions between an organisation, its membership and the environment. Whereas culture results from a panoply of internal and external influences, including some beyond the control and influence of leadership. Consequently, it is proposed that climate may in practice serve as a more appropriate focus of analysis and intervention in policing organisations seeking to achieve behavioural and attitudinal change.

Alpert, Rojek and Porter (2012) suggest it is necessary to evaluate both culture and climate to understand the influence of an organisation upon the behaviour of its membership. Notably, Wallace, Hunt and Richards (1999) sought to evaluate the culture, climate and managerial values of a large public sector organisation - the Victoria Police, Australia. Their method incorporated a four-part questionnaire involving sixty-four items rated on a Likert scale as to the extent of the participants’ agreement or disagreement with each item. Whilst their method has not been subject to notable further development, it may present an opportunity for police leaders seeking to understand the nature of the culture-climate interaction within a force at the outset of, and during, a change programme.

3. Discussion of Implications for Policy and Practice

3.1 Are measures of culture effective in informing and tracking cultural change?

3.1.1 Perspectives on Culture

Organisational culture has been interpreted from a functionalist perspective as a phenomenon amenable to management, in effect an organisational asset which can be enhanced and moulded. However, contrary views perceive culture as the organisation itself, including the dynamic forces operating at multiple levels. This latter view is associated with cultural exploration via dialogue and visual means, alongside doubt as to the potential for management directed change. Whilst the former conceptualisation more readily accepts the potential to measure and manipulate culture to achieve particular ends. Though the extent to which cultural improvement is associated with increased organisational effectiveness and performance is widely debated.

3.1.2 Cultural Complexity

Notably, as culture is apparent in the identities, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and values of its members, tracking a change in culture will require engagement with these phenomena over an extended period via longitudinal approaches (Charman, 2017) with an associated strategic commitment to the purpose of the cultural study. Further, as organisational culture is multi-level in nature, analysing culture at a single level has the potential to conceal inter-level influences or suggest the existence of false phenomena. For example, cultural phenomena at a lower level will not necessarily manifest in the higher dimensions, whilst relationships and effects in the higher tiers may not be observed at lower levels. Consequently, change may occur at differing rates to differing

degrees and in different directions across each level of analysis. Adding considerable complexity to the evaluation of cultural change at the organisational level, particularly with respect to assessing cause and effect as a result of specific interventions. Consequently, if cultural comparison is to be conducted, at the outset it is necessary to determine at what level is there sufficient cultural homogeneity to make comparison possible.

In the policing domain, Cordner (2017) emphasises the organisational dimensions of police culture. Consequently, different cultural challenges are likely to surface in individual forces as derived from their unique contexts. It is therefore necessary that cultural interventions are bespoke in nature, as are expectations of their effectiveness and subsequent evaluation criteria. Further culture is rarely uniform

across an organisation, problematic subcultures may exist within the healthiest forces, and vice versa. Consequently, the outcomes of an intervention cannot be assumed to be linear, consistent or predictable, and therefore the deployment of such strategies should be approached cautiously, flexibly and reflexively.

Therefore, as demonstrated thus far, culture is a challenging field to research as it exists in the abstract and is associated with perceptions and attitudes. Making precise scientific measurement and comparison unviable. Instead, it is necessary to identify themes within the data and prioritise long term strategic change over short-term initiatives. Given these limitations and the others mentioned thus far, the use of instruments to periodically measure culture is unlikely to be an effective means of informing and tracking cultural change.

3.2 Other Challenges of Cultural Evaluation

Other concerns with respect to the measurement of culture include its nature as an intangible phenomenon, the existence of which is evidenced in human behaviour, language and decisions (Cockcroft, 2012), and therefore necessitates interpretation on the part of the researcher. Which may be influenced by their own preconceptions or expectations of culture within the particular organisation or occupational group. This presenting a specific risk where police employees are tasked with measurement of culture within their own organisation as insider researchers.

A second key question in the assessment of culture concerns the degree to which it is shared throughout an organisation as focusing on culture solely at an organisational level presents a risk of missing nuance at subcultural levels. For example,

integration cultures are typified by the wide and deep coherence of culture across the organisation. In contrast, differentiation cultures are associated with concordance within subunits, which differ between one another, in effect creating a series of subcultures. Whilst fragmentation cultures are associated with the prevalence of individual rather than shared values (Martin, 2002).

Finally, where trust in leadership is low, perceived organisational injustice is high and/or a culture of suspicion and cynicism dominates, staff may be unwilling to engage in cultural evaluation work. Especially that which uses methods where anonymity and confidentiality are not facilitated. A particular challenge therefore arises for police leaders seeking to assess culture within their forces, given current levels of trust in police leadership (Oscar Kilo, 2025).

4. Future Research

Despite considerable attention to culture in policing organisations by researchers, there remains notable opportunities for further research in respect of the potential for consistent longitudinal cultural evaluation for purposes of tracking change. Though given the complexity of assessing culture holistically, it is recommended that any such cultural evaluations are targeted toward discrete aspects or levels of culture within the policing organisation. Alternatively, researchers may progress initiatives aimed at developing and evaluating organisational climate in policing, recognising the greater potential for climate change as a result of organisational initiatives, and its more measurable nature. In this vein, possible research questions may include:

- How effective are existing measures (for example, staff surveys) as providers of insight into organisational climate in policing?
- How may the reliability and validity of these measures be enhanced?
- How may measures of organisational climate in policing be used to track change over an extended period?
- How may measures of organisational climate in policing be used to inform Police Reform? Particularly in the context of police force amalgamation.
- How may measures of organisational climate in policing be used to enhance the human sustainability of the sector?

5. Conclusions

This AER endeavoured to provide a response to three questions relating to the assessment of culture in policing organisations.

i. In what different ways is organisational culture measured and what are the strengths/weaknesses of these different approaches?

A substantial range of quantitative instruments exist purporting to measure organisational culture. Cultural instruments range from those seeking to measure specific facets of organisational culture to broad encompassing constructs aspiring to assess culture as a whole. Further, some tools have been designed to assess culture in specific occupational settings, whilst others aim for a more universal applicability. Attempts have been made to develop police specific cultural assessment tools, but the impact of these has been limited to date.

Quantitative tools in general have the advantages of being comparatively efficient to administer, are replicable, and allow for anonymous participation. But are inherently limited in the depth of insight which may be derived, resulting in a potential loss of nuance

in the resulting analysis, particularly in respect of sub-cultural variation.

ii. What other ways (i.e. qualitative) are there of assessing organisational culture?

Qualitative assessment of culture may be achieved through documentary analysis, observation, and semi-structured interviews in their own right or as part of a comprehensive multi-method ethnographic study. These have the advantage of potentially yielding rich data concerning values, beliefs, assumptions and behaviours at multiple levels. But are generally resource intensive and lack the necessary replicability to inform the tracking of cultural change.

iii. Are measures of culture effective ways of informing and tracking cultural change?

Measures of culture are unlikely to represent an effective means by which policing organisations may inform and track cultural change in their own right. However, alternative approaches may include the measurement of discreet items of

organisational climate to inform and evaluate specific interventions. Though further research is necessary to develop, evaluate and validate means by which this may be achieved.

Culture is challenging to define and therefore measure. It may not have a physical form and exists in the interactions between people and organisations. Further, it changes over time, yet has enduring features and has many different antecedents, forms and consequences. Collectively these facets are presented as substantial impediments to the measurement of culture for purposes of tracking change and particularly when taken in light of the fact that there is no single ideal cultural instrument which will fulfil the needs of every organisation. Factors influencing this decision will include, but are not limited to, the size of the organisation, the resources available to administer the research and analyse the results, and philosophical perspectives as to what constitutes knowledge. Consequently, the potential comparison of culture between forces, or within a single force over time, is unlikely to be a valid and effective exercise via this means. Particularly in the absence of a change in narrative from a focus on negative conceptualisations of culture

to include consideration of more positive dimensions which serve to enhance organisational effectiveness.

Finally, culture is only one piece of the puzzle, which makes up an organisation and cultural change will not resolve all of the issues an organisation faces. The inappropriate use of cultural insight and interventions carries a considerable risk of creating greater problems than they were originally intended to resolve. Further, the degree to which cultural attitudes, beliefs and values influence the behaviour of officers is debated. Perspectives ranging from limited influence (Waddington, 1999) to marked influence (Shearing and Ericson, 1991), and cultural research in policing organisations is perpetually challenged by the 'acknowledged chasm between what officers say and what they do.' (Waddington, 1999, p.288). With all this in mind, police leaders are encouraged to develop partnerships with academia to explore opportunities to derive specific cultural insights in respect of their forces as part of a long-term commitment to organisational development informed by evidence and critical reflection.

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