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Is banter bullying or a necessary part of the police officer toolkit?

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Abstract

When interviewed, three groups of police officers and staff reframed a complaint from a colleague about being the subject of jokes and tricks as banter. For them, banter was a signifier of in-group acceptance. However, a closer analysis suggests that far from being a benign form of camaraderie, banter is often used to create and maintain an exclusionary masculine culture which police officers and staff are reluctant to challenge. Drawing parallels with sexual harassment and racism, this paper concludes by suggesting that as part of a toxic culture, banter can represent a form of institutionalised bullying.

Keywords

Banter, workplace bullying, harassment, police culture, canteen culture

Introduction

Questions over the conduct of British police officers are not new. The acquittal of the Guildford 4 and Maguire 7 in 1991, the [McPherson Report \(1999\)](#), and the investigations into the West Midlands Serious Crime Squad in the 1980s highlighted the corruption of a 'few bad apples' in their dealings with the public. However, the murder of Sarah Everard has led to the exposure of cultural failings in the way officers treat their colleagues.

The Operation Hotton Learning report (1/2/22) by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) found evidence of misogyny, discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment in a series of linked investigations between 2016 and 2018 centred on Charing Cross Police Station. The IOPC concludes: '*we believe these incidents are not isolated or simply the behaviour of a few "bad apples"*' ([IOPC, 2022](#): 4). The HMICFRS report into

vetting and counter-corruption in English and Welsh police forces, released on the 2nd November 2022, found alarming numbers of female officers who claim to have been subject to sexual harassment and even assault by male colleagues and failures in the application of disciplinary procedures across at least 8 forces (HMICFRS, 2022: 2).

Baroness Louise Casey (2022a, 2022b) claims the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) is ambiguous about what constitutes gross misconduct and that police officers and staff do not believe that actions will be taken when concerns are raised and that 'allegations relating to sexual misconduct and other discriminatory behaviours are less likely than other misconduct allegations to result in a "case to answer" decision' (Baroness Casey, 2022a: 2).

The IOPC note how malicious comments were 'downplayed as "friendly banter" or "laddish banter," so it was not dealt with' (IOPC, 2022: 7) and that "'banter" [was] used to excuse oppressive and offensive behaviours' (IOPC, 2022: 5). Taken together these behaviours are part of a culture of 'toxic masculinity and sexism' (IOPC, 2022: 10).

This research will explore the use and meaning of banter in British policing, by drawing on interviews with three teams of police officers and police staff from three forces. It will show how banter is often conceptualised as serving several necessary functions: to identify those suitable for the role, enculturate recruits, provide in-group identity and a way to deal with the stress of the job. However, both police officers and police staff were aware that their banter could shock outsiders and needed to be hidden. Objecting to banter was interpreted, by both colleagues and supervisors, as evidence of unsuitability for the role and even as a personal flaw; those who did object could find themselves ostracised. It will be argued that dismissing inappropriate behaviour and its effects as banter normalises it as part of police culture, reinforces victim blaming and helps explain why so many complaints go nowhere. For British policing to tackle the toxic culture which has been so publicly exposed, several things need to happen. The definition of bullying needs to change. Unlike traditional academic definitions of bullying, for banter to be considered a form of bullying it must be accepted that bullying can occur even when the intent is not to cause harm, or the target does not overtly object to their treatment. Police forces need to re-evaluate their understanding of the code of ethics and how police officers and staff act and are managed in private as well as public spaces. Those who raise objections must be supported and the perpetrators exposed.

The debate: does banter serve a useful function or is it a form of bullying?

The 'rapid exchange of humorous lines orientated toward a common theme, though aimed primarily at mutual entertainment rather than topical talk, typifies what we generally call "banter" (Dyrel, 2008: 243).

Workplace humour is often believed to have positive functions. Cynical and 'black' humour is thought to construct and maintain collegiality in stressful environments

(Christopher, 2015; Rowe and Regehr, 2010). In situations where relative power is important, humour can also be used to maintain authority and control (Holmes, 2006).

Banter can be understood as a mutual interplay, in the form of 'conjoint humour' of consecutive retorts, based on a shared understanding of context (Dynel, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Rivers and Ross, 2019). Both men and women can be sources and targets of banter, and it can concern a range of topics, although it is often sexist or racist in nature (Middlemiss, 2017). Although banter can include teasing, mock impoliteness and 'jocular abuse/mockery', there is an assumption that the aim is to create solidarity through bonding (Dynel, 2008; Haugh, 2010; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012). There is a further assumption that both the source of the banter and the target are 'in on the joke', sharing a mutual understanding of the activity and its meaning.

Banter appears to be a characteristic feature of certain occupations. Alexander et al. (2012) discuss how banter is commonly used to socialise and enculturate new chefs. Engaging and copying banter provides reassurance that the target would not 'let down the team'. What might be considered bullying in other work environments was considered part of the culture of these chefs and did not appear related to low morale or organisational commitment (Alexander et al., 2012). The belief that banter helps foster a sense of community, particularly among men (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014; Rivers and Ross, 2019) has been used to explain and excuse the use of banter and aggressive humour in uniformed services, especially when directed towards trainees (Archer, 1999). The IOPC (2022) found that in the police, bullying and harassment can be dismissed as banter, but does that also mean banter can be used to bully and harass?

Because acts can be hidden indirect aggression and bullying in the workplace are more frequent than direct aggression (Lipinski et al., 2014). Indirect aggression can be social and relational, based on interpersonal, and even convivial relationships (Field, 2014). Socially aggressive behaviours include excluding others from a group, spreading rumours and use of sarcastic comments (Lipinski et al., 2014). Unwanted comments, if made as part of a pattern, can be considered abusive behaviour and bullying (Middlemiss, 2017). Banter as described in the Operation Hotton Learning report (2022) would appear to include these features. Although the Charing Cross police officers and some academics would claim that their behaviour was not bullying because the intention was not to cause harm (Field, 2014; Graves, 2002; IOPC, 2022), the IOPC, Sir Mark Rowley, the new Commissioner of the MPS and public opinion, appear to share the view that such behaviours are part of a culture of misogyny, discrimination, bullying and harassment (Davis and Keane, 2022; IOPC, 2022).

What determines how teasing is interpreted is the 'interlocutors' mutual knowledge (e.g. the propensity to joke), contextual factors (e.g. the speaker's emotions) and cues (e.g. voice modulation, winking) (Dynel, 2008: 248). If the target believes such behaviour is benign, it is interpreted as a tease (Dynel, 2008). Conversely, if a target interprets the intent of another's behaviour as malevolent and part of a pattern, they are more likely to use terms such as bullying or harassment (Agervold, 2009; Crothers et al., 2009; Radliff, 2014).

The interpretation of banter as a playful tease is predicated on the belief that the meaning and benign intent are shared as part of a common culture (Dynel, 2008;

Waddington, 1999). The assumption of the benign intent and even benefits of behaviours like banter appears to be rooted in a masculine police culture, which emphasizes camaraderie and mental toughness as evidenced by one's ability to 'take a joke'. This belief is further strengthened by a separation between the public and private behaviour of officers. In public, officers are expected to maintain professional standards of behaviour and show restraint whilst being exposed to danger, provocation and constant public scrutiny. This is often contrasted with the informal canteen culture (Waddington, 1999), where tension can be relieved and team bonds strengthened using humour, teasing and horseplay.

Police culture and the role of banter as part of identity formation

Police culture could be defined as the behaviours, beliefs and emotions that define good police work as well as 'a layer of informal occupational norms and values' (Chan, 1997: 43). Private police culture is often defined as 'canteen culture' (Waddington, 1999). One aspect of this private police culture is the use of humour. Humour has traditionally been used to bond a team as a 'family' forged through shift work, isolation and shared experiences of horrors that only colleagues can understand (Waddington, 1999).

Social psychologists have proposed several theories which help explain how membership in police teams and the police culture of which they are a part can normalise and even reify behaviours that to outsiders could appear inappropriate and even shocking.

Social identity theory posits that we categorise the world in terms of in and out groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Numerous studies have shown that identifying oneself as part of an in-group as well as discriminating against an out-group raises self-esteem (see

Hewstone et al., 2002 for a review). A powerful mechanism for doing this is disparagement humour which 'refers to remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target' (Ferguson and Ford, 2008: 283). When applied to social identity theory, disparagement humour is a way to bolster the distinctiveness of the in-group (the team) by directing it toward an outgroup, particularly those who are a threat (Ferguson and Ford, 2008). However, unlike the way disparagement humour is usually framed, in the culture of police teams, exposure to even derogatory banter is a way to identify distinctiveness and group membership, since only trusted group members give and receive banter.

If banter is considered part of police culture and a mark of in-group distinctiveness, participants and witnesses are making external and stable attributions about its cause (Kent and Martinko, 1995). They are rationalising that the participants are conforming to long-held sub-cultural norms, rather than displaying personal animosity or intent to cause harm, both components of workplace bullying.

This assumes there is a homogenous police culture, consisting of white working-class, heterosexual men (Manning, 2015; Skolnick, 1994), through which its members understand each other's behaviour. However, the police are becoming more demographically diverse (Home Office, 2018). Traditional promotion runs alongside accelerated promotion and direct entry (Barrett, 2014; College of Policing, 2018; Green, 2013). There is also an

increased use of civilian police staff, often integrated with police officers, for example, as detectives ([Police Oracle, 2017](#)).

Modern police forces consist of multiple groups and intersecting sub-cultures, therefore decisions about what banter represents cannot be based solely on the attribution of the intent of the perpetrator or assumptions about a homogenous culture. The perception and effect of banter upon the target and witnesses must also be considered. If the police are to regain the trust of the public and its own staff, it will need to redefine what is considered unethical behaviour and create mechanisms by which it can be identified, reported, and eradicated.

Method

A cultural divide identified between 'management' and 'street' cops ([Reuss-Ianni and Ianni, 1983](#)) as well as between operational and canteen culture ([Waddington, 1999](#)), would suggest those at different levels in team would have different norms and values and therefore perceive the behaviours described differently. In addition, studies of workplace bullying have found the perpetrator is often a manager or a person in power ([Baillien et al., 2014](#); [Cox, 1997](#); [Salin, 2003](#)). Therefore, in addition to learning more about the views of police officers and staff, a comparison was made between the views of team members, supervisors and team leaders.

Design

Four focus groups and 14 individual interviews were conducted with three police teams. The focus groups were made up of either team members (police officers and police staff), team supervisors (sergeants) or team leaders (inspectors and a chief inspector).

The participants were asked to discuss a vignette describing the experiences of a hypothetical team member. This vignette was written to include elements which could be interpreted as workplace bullying, that is, unfair treatment, over time ([Bulutlar and Öz, 2009](#); [Cox, 1997](#)) and possible relational aggression, framed in a way which would resonate with police sub-culture ([Archer, 1999](#); [Field, 2014](#); [Waddington, 1999](#)).

Vignette: A new team member says that people have played a number of tricks on her and made jokes about how she dresses and her hobbies. She says they discuss topics that make her feel uncomfortable. She is talking about taking it to professional standards.

The participants' responses were audio recorded and field notes were written by the interviewer ([Emerson et al., 2011](#)). An unfolding approach to theme identification and data collection was adopted ([Punch, 2014: 27](#)). In an unfolding approach, themes identified in one focus group were also discussed with subsequent groups. In this case, themes identified by police officers and staff were discussed with their sergeants and themes identified by police officers and staff and sergeants were then discussed with their managers (inspectors and a chief inspector). This approach was adopted since the aim was

to compare the views of participants at different levels of the organisation and to explore how each interpreted the others' views.

Participants

The three teams which participated in this study belonged to three different geographically spread police forces. Teams A and B consisted of specialist units, both of which contained both police officers and staff. Team C was a uniformed response team [Table 1](#).

Overall, 35 police officers and staff participated.

Findings

A thematic analysis was undertaken ([Clarke et al., 2015](#)). The themes identified were emic, based on the experiences of those who lived them ([Cockcroft, 2013](#)). This was achieved by using the field notes generated during each interview and having time between focus groups to review the contribution of each group and identify themes. In line with the unfolding methodology ([Punch, 2014](#)), some of the observations made by team members were presented to the team supervisors for comment and then the observations made by both team members and supervisors were presented to team leaders for comment. Then once away from the sites, the field notes and recordings were used to identify additional themes and verify those identified during the visits by drawing directly on each recording and exemplar quotes used to support the interpretations made.

The figure in the vignette was complaining about her treatment and humorous comments which made her feel uncomfortable. Participants at all levels in each of the teams felt that the scenario was a familiar part of the police and their team's culture ([Chan, 1997](#)). Without being prompted, participants in all three teams reframed the behaviour described as 'banter'. Team members, supervisors and leaders agreed that banter was common and served several useful purposes including stress relief, the maintenance of morale and team bonding. However, while discussing banter, it became evident that respondents knew that such behaviour could appear inappropriate, even shocking,

Table 1. Details of participants.

Team A (specialist uniform)	Team B (detectives)	Team C (response team)
4 × police constables	4 × detective constables	13 × police constables
1 × police staff	2 × police staff	3 × sergeants
2 × sergeants	2 × detective sergeants	2 × inspectors
1 × chief inspector	1 × detective inspector	
<i>N</i> = 8	<i>N</i> = 9	<i>N</i> = 18
Number of years' service: 8–42 years	Number of years' service: 6 m–15 yrs	Number of years' service: 2–21 years
Age: 34–61	Age 34–59	Age 26–48

although they stressed the intent was not to cause harm. An inability to take banter was viewed as indicative of not being suitable for the team or even as a member of the police.

The following themes were identified and will be explored in greater detail below.

1. Street Cop culture and 'banter':
 - 1.1. Banter as a part of the police cultural tool kit
 - 1.2 Team inclusion and exclusion – taking a joke
 - 1.3 Masculinity and team culture
2. Dealing with conflict at work:
 - 2.1 Supervisors as role models or moral guardians

Given that one of the aims of this study is to compare the views of team members, supervisors and managers, it is important to know the role of respondents. Table 2 below describes the meaning of the coding after each quote.

Street cop culture and banter

Banter as a part of the police cultural tool kit. The banter was viewed as an aspect of the police 'cultural tool kit' (Shearing and Ericson, 1991, cited in Cockcroft, 2013) serving several functions.

The banter was believed to maintain morale and by implication improve the resilience of both individuals and the team.

'You know what I think that banter is what actually keeps, spirits is actually kept... it's what keeps people going.' (TL, B.DI)

The belief that humour, particularly dark or gallows humour is a way the police deal with stress within teams, as well as a barometer of emotional well-being (Vivona, 2014), was noted by respondents;

'...that's how we cope with it, here you've got to have that dark sort of sense of humour because it gets you through it you know?' (TM, B.DS2)

Table 2. Key used in attributing quotes.

When reporting quotes

TM = 'team members': refers to PCs/DCs and police staff.

TS = 'team supervisor': refers to sergeants, as first-line managers/supervisors.

TL = 'team leaders': refers to inspectors/chief inspector.

Letters after the quote indicate the team: A, B or C.

PC = police constable, DC = detective constable, DS = detective sergeant, Sgt = Uniformed sergeant, Insp = inspector, DI = Detective inspector, CI = Chief inspector, Pst = police staff).

Terms in [] denote a change in terms to protect the anonymity of participants, teams or location.

Team inclusion and exclusion – taking a joke. Playing and being the subject of jokes, tricks and banter was viewed as part of group bonding and acceptance in the in-group (Dyrel, 2008; Haugh, 2010; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Moreover, it signified a person's suitability for the police.

'I think the police is just known for jest, jesting and I think you got to have thick skin as a cop and I think you've got to be able to take some banter because if you can't you're in the wrong job and the worst banter is your colleagues and that's just how it is.' (TM, C.PC7)

That is not to say, that participants were not aware of how their banter might be perceived by others, those in the out-group:

'People can be horrified by police banter, from the outside. Like some of my mates who are not in the police who've seen how we police officers talk to each other and it's kind of like; 'Christ I can't believe you're friends with that person.' You're like, you're joking, I'd have that person have my back any day. I'd go into a riot with that person stood next to me and they're like; 'really the way you speak to each other' and you're like, but yeah for me it's emotional intelligence.' (TS, C.Sgt3)

'Emotional intelligence is a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions' (Mayor and Salovey, 1993: 433). In referring to emotional intelligence the team supervisor is suggesting both parties are aware of the emotive content of what they are doing and its effect. However, in this quote, the supervisor is presenting an apparent contradiction. In noting that witnesses would be 'horrified' at the apparent treatment of the target, the supervisor is acknowledging the behaviour can appear inappropriate, even derogatory or hostile, whilst also affirming he was loyal and would protect the target from external threats and vice versa. By calling it 'police banter', this apparent contradiction is resolved by signifying that it is a special form of interaction, the meaning of which is understood within policing, even if misunderstood by outsiders. Moreover, it is being suggested that banter between colleagues, even if it appears horrific to others, is a sign of friendship, trust and even loyalty. Exposure to banter is evidence of the status and distinctiveness of the in-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

The need to restrict banter to private spaces or a trusted in-group was evident.

'If you're alone and is like a group of us all from our [team] and we know each other, then we'd probably push the banter a little bit further than we would, than if we knew there was other people around that we don't really know, we'd really tone it down, cos you never know whose listening in this job sometimes.' (TM, C.PC6)

Other emergency services seem to share the belief that those 'not in the know' would never fully understand their humour, particularly 'black humour', without knowing its origin, context or intent (Rowe and Regehr, 2010). Humour in the form of banter

reinforces group cohesion and differentiates one group from another (Ferguson and Ford, 2008). 'Laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary' (Bergson, 1911: 64).

The fear of the informant who misunderstood the intention behind the banter was evident in the way behaviour was modified not only in public spaces but with new team members.

'But you sort of judge people and that, if you got a new bloke on the team, you don't go straight into the jugular with the banter, you know you sort of work up to a bit and see what he's like. And if he gives banter back, you're sort of okay then.' (TM, A.PC15)

In the comment 'you sort of judge people' and 'if he gives banter back, you're sort of okay then' A.PC15 is assuming a norm of reciprocity (Tangpong et al., 2016) and by reciprocating tacit permission is given to increase the degree of presumably personal and offensive banter.

'They don't want to be un-politically correct because they had a new person there and they didn't feel that they could.' (TM, C.PC5)

'In case you were a grass.' (TM, C.PC6) *'Yeah'* [laughs] (TM, C.PC5)

Therefore, complaining about such behaviour, rather than a moral stance, was seen as a deficit in the complainant, akin to being an informant and conversely, acceptance of banter is part of being an in-group member.

'A colleague was, enjoyed the banter, but then one day he was like; nah I'm not enjoying it and next day he was fine. He went to his boss about it and said, well you can't switch it on and off. He said, 'how do your colleagues know when it is too far, if one day, you're saying it's fine, the next day you're saying it's not, then you're back to being fine the next? It's you can't just switch it on and off as to when this banter's acceptable. You either, it's either acceptable or it's not. You have to tell them that.' (TM, C.PC12)

Here, the boss's view (as reported and reinforced by a team member) is that the behaviour of the target was the issue, even though TS, C. Sgt3, asserted 'we all know' when to stop. The suggestion is by initially appearing 'fine' with it, the target was condoning, even encouraging such behaviour. The 'boss' apparently not considering the possibility that the target's lack of objection might be due to factors like conformity pressures, power differentials or their wish to be accepted by colleagues, nor did the boss see it as their role to support the complainant. The PC relaying these events did not see the behaviour of the perpetrator as the issue, but the 'mood' of the recipient.

'What was being said one day wasn't any different to what had been said a previous day, he was just in a different mood.' (TM, C.PC12)

Here, the PC is making an internal and unstable attribution about his colleague, that is it was the target who changed their mind, whilst the circumstances had remained unchanged. It was therefore the targets' reaction which was unpredictable and even unreasonable. The perpetrator is assumed to be acting for comic effect, even to gain personal approval rather than a dislike of the target. The target is being constructed as a willing participant and even facilitator of the aggressive behaviour.

A powerful sub-cultural norm was revealed when both sergeants of Team C agreed, *'the ones that give it out the most, take it as well'* (TS, C. Sgt1). This is again invoking a norm of reciprocity, which although it is mostly conceived as facilitating an exchange of mutual good, has also been shown to involve the exchange of immoral and unethical behaviour in the workplace (Tangpong et al., 2016). It is interesting how 'banter' can be perceived as both an exchange of mutual good, (bonding a team and relieving stress) whilst being so immoral and unethical that participants feel the need to hide it. The interactive element was continually stressed by participants, emphasising that both parties 'know' where to draw the line and its benign intent, which in turn is predicated on the belief that it was underpinned by a set of shared cultural and sub-cultural norms.

'You have to know your audience...An onlooker could come into our [team], listen to some of the things that goes on between, especially between me and some colleagues and think that's not acceptable. But me as a person is that I know that these people mean no malice or there's no sort of real judgement behind it. It's just banter and the comedy factor.' (TM, C.PC12)

This assumed mutual understanding of intent and reciprocity was used to defend the team against any accusations of bullying.

'There's a difference between joking and there's a difference between being bullied isn't there? They only make jokes with the people who make the jokes back.' (TM, C.PC3)

'I think there is a difference between harassment and bullying and such and if you've ever been bullied in school, it's to intentionally hurt that person. To make their lives an absolute misery or pick on them or destroy them, you know.' (TM, C.PC2)

Masculinity and team culture. Although police forces are becoming more diverse, conservative male and team values still dominate, particularly in patrol as opposed to managerial police groups (Brown, 2007; Cockcroft, 2020; Gutschmidt and Vera, 2020; Keddie, 2022). In sports, banter has been described as central to male friendship and forming a sense of community, by creating a private sense of humour, that positions both in and out groups (Anderson, 2009; Kennedy, 2000). The centrality of masculinity and male banter in police culture was not only accepted by both male and female participants in this study but appeared to be yet another marker of in-group acceptance.

'I think where it's quite a male-orientated kind of role. That if you are a woman that doesn't fit into that kind of. I can be that way. I can deal with male banter.' (TM, B.DC1, a female officer)

In saying *'I can deal with male banter'*, this Detective Constable, is noting two things. Firstly, police banter is quintessentially male (Lawless and Magrath, 2021). Secondly, she is not indicating any enjoyment or even reciprocity of the banter, it is an element of the culture she must cope with if it enables her to better fit in (Keddie, 2022).

For a male PC from Team A, male competitiveness produced a culture which although could be perceived as bullying, was better understood as a reflection of the type of 'males', attracted to such a specialist role.

'I'm not suggesting that there is a bully in here as in one individual, just the whole department is full of alpha males as is the ... department because otherwise, you wouldn't be doing that role. So, I guess it could be a big pack of gorillas, everyone can have a pecking order or a place within that family and it's finding your place within the family so that it works.' (TM, A.PC16)

Here again, there are parallels with studies of males in sports, where the banter is used in both defensive and competitive exchanges to establish a pecking order and reinforce acceptable masculinity (Gill et al., 2005; Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014).

Dealing with conflict

Managers at best turned a blind eye, at worst were actively complicit in behaviours, which in other contexts (and for some participants) could be described as inappropriate, unethical, and possibly bullying.

Supervisors as role models or moral guardians. When discussing playing jokes and tricks, team supervisors and leaders (sergeants and inspectors) were often active participants:

'Yeah that surprised me, I thought it would be all professional discussions, but they're just as bad, if not worse sometimes.' (TM, C.PC6)

'With our sergeants anyway, you normally give them a load of grief back, if they were taking the mick out of you, I'd give them a load back.' [laughs] (TM, C.PC4)

Coincidentally, at the time of visiting, the female officers in Police Force C had been sent a survey about sexual harassment in the workplace. When asked about this, the female sergeant said:

'I hope they don't send it out to the blokes on my [team] to be honest. I'll probably get paped, especially after the Christmas do tonight.' [laughing]. (TS, C.Sgt2)

Although this was an off-the-cuff remark, it sends a clear message to team members about how seriously this issue is taken by supervisors.

A male PC from the same team reframed the sexual harassment alluded to by the survey as a misunderstanding of banter, and thus an interpersonal rather than a cultural problem not to be taken seriously:

'I think something's happened recently, but I don't know really any of the details about it. But something's happened which may be a bit of banter between a few people, but it's happened to someone else and the balloon's gone up.' (TM, C.PC8)

Taken together, these two comments, one from a supervisor and one from a male team member, show how reframing even something as serious as sexual harassment as banter disempowers potential complainants. The female sergeant is using humour to imply she engages in what is normally considered male predatory behaviour. Surveys of police staff have shown how those in supervisory roles are more likely to be initiators of harassment, which creates further barriers to raising complaints and has 'implications for the role modelling of effective preventative interventions' (Brown et al., 2018: 370).

Disempowering complainants by reframing inappropriate behaviour as banter was evident in both Charing Cross Police Station (IOPC, 2022) and male-dominated professional sports. Yorkshire County Cricket Club, for example, claimed accusations of racial discrimination were misinterpreted banter (Lawless and Magrath, 2021; Mohdin, 2021). In addition, there is a powerful in-group norm to accept being the target of banter, particularly in male-dominated arenas (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014; Lawless and Magrath, 2021).

So, what responsibility do managers feel they have regarding banter in the workplace? The team leaders and supervisors interviewed did not seem to see themselves as 'moral managers', role-modelling ethical behaviour and ensuring it in their team (Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2014; Treviño et al., 2000). Managers saw their role as primarily reactive, only intervening after several incidents and even then, their response was somewhat passive.

'I wouldn't jump on it straight away if I did hear it and at times I probably have. You, it is more if you know if something is said and you know it's more than just a one-off comment, it's more you know, you softly remind them perhaps that it shouldn't have been said, that is something like; 'oh I didn't hear that did I?' (TS, B.DS1)

Judgement about when and where to act was based on a combination of the perceived intent of the perpetrator and the reaction of the target, rather than an objective appraisal of the behaviour itself.

'When you see someone who's actually uncomfortable. Something gets said and someone is uncomfortable about it, then I think it's time to step in.' (TS, B.DS1)

Managers asserted that a complainant would be supported. However, the finding that managers are at best ambivalent, at worst complicit in behaviours like banter, raises questions about how likely it would be for team members to raise concerns.

'If someone said that a joke was made you felt that crossed the line you would be supported.... What I think we've got over is ostracising that person, because they stand up and say about it.' (TL, A.C11)

However, team members believed that being ostracised following a complaint is a real possibility.

'The problem with this department is that it's a voluntary role, ... try very, very hard to get here and we all want to be here, so you suddenly say, you cannot throw yourself up against a bullying accusation against somebody. That's your career over really isn't it? Because what's going to happen next? If it's founded, you can't stay here because no one will trust you in the building. If it is unfounded, you're still not going to stay here. So, you make an official complaint of bullying, your career is over.' (TM, A.PC16)

The reality is probably better represented by participants who suggested that it is for teams to self-regulate.

'I think for the most part people would sort it out amongst themselves.' (B.DC3)

'It's like siblings, you bicker. That's how I see it, you have a row with your mum or your sister, you just sort it out.' (C.PC2)

Discussion and implications of findings

Banter appears to be part of police culture, the meaning and regulation of which are influenced by sub-cultural norms. In acknowledging that witnesses to 'banter' could be shocked and misinterpret it, participants in this study recognised the separation between public and private police behaviour (Waddington, 1999). Being the target of banter appeared to be a marker of in-group acceptance (Archer, 1999; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Indeed, the more trusted a team member was, the more extreme the banter they were subjected to. In interpreting banter in this way, participants were making benign external (emanating from police cultural norms) and stable (were the same over time) attributions about the cause of this behaviour (Kent and Martinko, 1995).

These findings, align with other studies of banter, particularly in male-dominated arenas, where banter is used to initiate new members (Alexander et al., 2012; Archer, 1999), exclude out groups (Lawless and Magrath, 2021) and establish positions of dominance (Gill et al., 2005; Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014). Banter is therefore assumed to perform several useful functions as part of the police 'cultural tool kit' (Shearing and Ericson, 1991, cited in Cockcroft, 2013). It helps bond the team and provides a way to deal with stress and is an indicator of well-being, helping team members more readily deal with the horrors and stresses they experience in public (Christopher, 2015; Rowe and Regehr, 2010; Vivona, 2014).

Protagonists in this study claimed banter is a sign of camaraderie although, it could be argued, only within a competitive masculine culture and for those prepared to conform

without complaint (Brown, 2007; Brown et al., 2018). Understanding how the use of even derogatory banter can have a positive effect on the in-group requires a new interpretation of disparagement humour. In social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), disparagement humour is said to enforce a positive in-group image through distinctiveness and a feeling of superiority by disparaging the outgroup (Ferguson and Ford, 2008). In contrast, police banter can be seen to create group distinctiveness and superiority by being directed inward. Only trusted in-group members, who understand the sub-cultural norms are the target of banter and somewhat counter-intuitively the more often derogatory banter they receive the greater the level of trust and loyalty implied.

However, there is also clearly a dark side to police banter. The Operation Hotton Learning report (2022) and Casey report (2023) show that sexual and racial harassment in the police can be excused or thinly disguised as banter. In 2016, an online survey of 1776 police staff found that 'the highest levels of sexual harassment were associated with sexual banter, reported by three-quarters of those surveyed' (Brown et al., 2018: 356). Although for some this sexualised banter was a 'stress buster', 13% felt it hindered their work, as compared to only 2% who felt it help them complete their work. Confidence in the organisation to deal with sexual harassment was lower where the frequency of 'banter' type harassment was higher (Brown et al., 2018: 366–68).

Why then were participants in this research so reluctant to call their experiences harassment or bullying? There cultural imperative against seeing oneself as a victim. Working in a stressful environment and being exposed to jokes and tricks was routine and even condoned to ascertain suitability for the role (Alexander et al., 2012; Archer, 1999). The police retain a competitive masculinised culture (Brown, 2007; Casey, 2022b; Keddie, 2022) consisting of insularity, toughness and resilience, aggression, competition and masculine role modelling which 'creates an environment which minimises or excuses inappropriate behaviours as banter or joking' (Brown et al., 2018: 360). Therefore, an inability to take banter is a signifier to oneself and the team of an over-sensitivity and a lack of emotional resilience and suitability for the role, rather than a bullying culture. Reframing 'being the subject of jokes and tricks', as described in the vignette, as 'banter' alters the attributional relationships; the intent behind the behaviour is transformed from potential harassment or bullying to merely an exchange of light-hearted humour, which the target misinterpreted and overreacted to. Those who make jokes and play tricks are making external attributions about the cause of their behaviour (team tradition and cultural norms) and internal ones about complainants (personal over-sensitivity or inadequacy for the role); the actor-observer effect (Jones and Nisbett, 1971). In effect, objection to banter becomes a problem with the complainant, not the perpetrator. The close-knit nature of police teams, especially those of high status, also means that raising an accusation like bullying is perceived akin to whistle-blowing, 'being a grass' as mentioned by a participant in this study, a violation of the 'blue culture' which encourages unquestioning respect, stoicism and not dobbing in your colleagues (Keddie, 2022: 9). The belief that raising a complaint of harassment or bullying would cost them their place in the team, coupled with the observation of managers engaging in the same behaviour or joking about things like sexual harassment, further reduces the likelihood of speaking out.

The ambivalence and complicity of managers to acts of banter reinforce the message that even derogatory treatment is part of the police culture. Managers also believe offence is unintentional and where it occurs, it is either evidence of the target's oversensitivity or it is for the perpetrator and victim to resolve. It is therefore not surprising that racism and misogyny appear at best to go unchecked, particularly in specialist teams (teams A and B in this study) at worst allowed to flourish (Casey, 2022b). The lack of positive role modelling and moral management (Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2014; Treviño et al., 2000) of middle management raises serious questions about how successful attempts at culture change will be. Following the publication of the Operation Hotton Learning report (IOPC, 2022), it has been reported that some managers told their officers to delete anything incriminating from their social media, implying that managers wanted to destroy the evidence rather than pursue the perpetrators or change the culture (ITV, 2023). Baroness Casey says her aim is not to knock the police but to help them change, but also that the leadership must grasp difficult issues (Casey, 2022b; ITV, 2023: 331).

Such a culture has been allowed to proliferate due to a commotion of 'fear' and 'loyalty'. There is fear of the supervisors as perpetrators, that reporting of inappropriate behaviour will result in exclusion, forced transfer and career suicide as senior officers' close ranks and fear of the process (the majority of misconduct trials take 400 days and result in no action) (ITV, 2023; Keddie, 2022). Police teams are also characterised by fierce loyalty to each other and their leaders (Richards, 2010), the cultural norm being to not complain and resolve issues informally within the team. These factors were evident in this study and in the testimonies of officers who have been empowered to come forward over the last year (ITV, 2023).

There are then two interpretations of the findings of this study. The first is that banter is not a form of bullying or harassment if it is accepted, or at least not objected to by targets and witnesses, and where the intent of the perpetrator is not to cause harm. However, in law harassment is determined by the perception of the victim. Causing alarm or distress is an offence under Section 2 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (CPS, accessed 09/02/17). Although bullying is not currently illegal in Britain, academic definitions also include repeated and persistent negative acts which involve a perceived power imbalance, creating a hostile work environment, socially excluding someone and anti-social behaviour (Salin, 2003: 1214–15, Stouten et al., 2010: 18). Participants were aware the banter could shock and needed to be hidden and were reserved for an in-group and therefore exclusionary. As a form of disparagement humour (Ferguson and Ford, 2008), banter involves denigration, derogation or belittlement and is often sexist or racist (Brown et al., 2018; Middlemiss, 2017) it therefore can be anti-social. Banter also tends to involve a power imbalance, used by established team members and supervisors, to socialise new members, establish hierarchies and define in and out-group membership (Alexander et al., 2012; Archer, 1999; Lawless and Magrath, 2021). The use of banter in this and other studies would then appear to align with definitions of bullying and harassment as well as violate the code of ethics, under which officers and staff are told to their 'behaviour and language could not reasonably be perceived to be abusive, oppressive, harassing,

bullying, victimising or offensive by the public or your policing colleagues' ([College of Policing, 2014](#): xiii).

This analysis leads to the second interpretation of the findings of this study; that banter can be a form of institutionalised bullying, where practices and policies create a toxic culture which allows bullying ([Peyton, 2003](#)). The clearest parallels are with institutionalised racism whereby cultural practices can create a set of discriminatory behaviours and assumptions, even if not directly held by the individuals involved ([Liefoghe and Mackenzie Davey, 2003](#)). However, to accept the premise that banter is a form of institutionalised bullying involves adapting existing definitions of bullying. Definitions of bullying should remove the necessity of 'intent to cause harm', and like definitions of harassment, focus on the actual and possible effects of the behaviour in question, not only on the target but the climate it creates ([Hill and Hill, 2005](#)). This in turn implies that certain hurtful, offensive and derogatory behaviour should be considered bullying, even if the target does not object or is even apparently complicit.

Accepting that banter can be bullying, by changing the definition of bullying to include unintentional acts, and thereby seeing many cases of banter and clear breaches of the police code of ethics ([College of Policing, 2014](#)), is only the first step in changing the culture. The enduring high levels of inappropriate behaviour, of which banter is often a part, 'indicate the importance of new ways of thinking about the work of the police and how policing organisations work' ([Keddie, 2022](#): 12). Police officers and staff, particularly those new in service or to a team or of low rank, need to feel able and supported to raise concerns. The traditional police culture of command and control needs to change to one which accepts and even encourages 'polite dissent' and 'courteous insubordination'; officers need to be taught when and how to challenge orthodoxy ([Keddie, 2022](#): 9; [McLeod and Herrington, 2017](#): 184). Channels need to be established whereby complaints and concerns and suggestions can be raised without fear of reprisal, and the process for dealing with allegations of misconduct needs to be streamlined ([Casey, 2022b](#); [McLeod, 2018](#)). Police managers, particularly middle managers, need to become reflective, collaborative and inclusive ([Keddie, 2022](#)). Police officers at all levels need to develop their understanding of how existing cultural norms need to change and how they can be role models and champions of change or blockers to progress. Policing needs to develop a learning culture ([McLeod, 2018](#); [McLeod and Herrington, 2017](#)) at the team and organisational level and by doing so become more open, unafraid to look at itself and embrace the benefits of an increasingly diverse workforce as well as scrutiny by the media and allied professionals.

Treating all officers with respect, fairness and dignity, is part of organizational justice, which in turn enhances officers' cooperation with each other and service to the public; whilst organisational injustice can lead to distrust, poor work relations reduce the quality of work and even lead to misconduct and corruption ([Keddie, 2022](#)).

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