Executive summary

Overview of applying behavioural science to sexism and misogyny.

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Introduction

Multiple investigations and reviews have highlighted the existence of sexist and misogynistic behaviours within policing (IOPC, 2022; HMICFRS, 2022; Baroness Casey Review, 2023).

There is no easy or quick way to change ingrained behaviours such as these, so a systemic and concerted efforted is needed.

The College of Policing has applied a behavioural science approach to help understand:

- what is enabling sexist and misogynistic behaviours to persist in policing
- what interventions are most likely to be successful in addressing them

The focus of this work is on problematic behaviours that occur in a policing workplace context (including online and work events) and which involve interactions between colleagues (not between police and members of the public).

Behavioural science approach

Behavioural science is the study of how people act and why. By understanding when and why people act in a certain way, targeted and effective interventions can be designed to change behaviour.

Behaviour change wheel

This piece of work used the behaviour change wheel (BCW) as the underpinning framework (Michie and others, 2011).

The BCW provides a systematic, step-by-step approach that draws on multiple sources of evidence to understand complex problems and develop interventions for change.

Applying behavioural science to sexism and misogyny

Step one – identify and select target behaviours

A review of published and unpublished evidence identified more than 220 different ways that sexism and misogyny present in a policing context.

The terms sexism and misogyny covered a whole spectrum of behaviours, including:

- comments about someone's appearance
- sexualised jokes
- blocking the career progression of a female officer or member of staff
- sexual harassment
- sexual assault

Female officers and staff were consulted with as part of this work. They felt there was a need to prevent escalation and reset expectations around what is and is not acceptable. They felt this would be achieved by focusing on the more subtle, everyday behaviours that can often be normalised and go unchallenged.

They selected four target behaviours that they felt would have the biggest impact on tackling sexism and misogyny, if achieved.

- Officers and staff do not exhibit everyday sexism or misogyny in the workplace (including online).
- Supervisors have conversations with direct reports when they witness any behaviour that is sexist or misogynistic, or when they become aware of indicators that may suggest sexism and misogyny is occurring within their own teams.
- Colleagues take action when they witness everyday sexism and misogyny in the workplace, by discussing the behaviour directly with the instigator or the person experiencing the behaviour, or by seeking advice soon after.
- Those experiencing inappropriate behaviour in the workplace raise it.

Step two – develop a behavioural (COM-B) diagnosis

Central to the BCW approach is the COM-B model. This model states that for any behaviour to occur, a person needs to have the:

- capability to perform the behaviour
- opportunity to do so
- motivation to do it

By determining what the barriers to behaviour change are terms of capability, opportunity and motivation, it's then possible to identify what interventions are most likely to be effective.

Each of the four target behaviours was therefore subject to a 'COM-B diagnosis' to understand what was preventing them from happening consistently across the policing system. More than 120 barriers and enablers were identified. These included:

- a lack of knowledge of when to act and the skills to do so
- a culture of internal solidarity creating conditions where those instigating the unacceptable behaviour are protected and those who speak up are seen as disloyal
- the belief there will be negative repercussions after speaking up, including being excluded from the team and damage to career progression
- fear and embarrassment of upsetting others or getting things wrong
- not trusting that reports of sexism and misogyny would be dealt with objectively or lead to a satisfactory outcome
- concerns that confidentiality would not be upheld and a likely loss of control over the process
- everyday sexism being an accepted social norm
- leaders not role-modelling the desired behaviours

Step three – design the interventions

Step two identified what needs to change to bring about the four target behaviours.

Following this, multiple sources of evidence were used to develop an initial set of intervention options to tackle sexism and misogyny in policing. This included the views of police practitioners.

The interventions use multiple delivery mechanisms and target different groups simultaneously. This is necessary to bring about system-wide change.

Interventions to tackle sexism and misogyny include a safe environment to raise concerns, recognition for those enacting change, enhanced leadership capabilities and creating a learning culture.

Safe environment to raise concerns

This looks like:

- external and impartial support for victims and witnesses (pre-reporting)
- anonymous and/or confidential reporting systems
- policies that protect those who raise concerns from retaliation

Recognition for those enacting change

This looks like:

- demonstration of inclusive behaviour in recruitment and promotion assessments
- recognition of those working to create inclusive services

Enhanced leadership capabilities

This looks like:

- effective communications that motivate people to take action and minimise resistance
- 'red flag' training for leaders to spot an dmanage early signs and prevent escalation
- independent reviews of expected behaviour

Creating a learning culture

This looks like:

- raising awareness of sexism and common misconceptions
- experiential training on how to act on sexism and misogyny
- reflective and non-judgemental spaces
- regular pulse checks of cultural change

Conclusions

The work has found that sexism and misogyny in policing takes many forms, and that there are multiple barriers to bringing about change in this area.

For those who experience unacceptable behaviour, the evidence suggests that the risks of reporting it outweigh the benefits. This makes it important that colleagues who witness poor behaviour make a stand on behalf of the person experiencing the behaviour.

There are also many barriers preventing witnesses from challenging inappropriate behaviour when they see it. These include:

- not knowing what to say and do
- being seen as disloyal
- not having senior role models who offer support

These issues can only be addressed by giving everyone in policing the capability, opportunity and motivation to address sexist and misogynistic behaviours. The work has proposed a package of interventions that taken together, should start to tackle sexism and misogyny within policing.

The next phase of the work will see the careful development of the interventions in partnership with forces and other stakeholders. The development will be informed by relevant behaviour change techniques and subsequent implementation and evaluation.

References

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Tags

Violence against women and girls