Applying behavioural science to sexism and misogyny

Reducing sexism and misogyny in a policing workplace context which involved interactions between colleagues.

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This piece of work focuses on internal cultures of sexism and misogyny, specifically, reducing 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).

Step 1. Identify and select target behaviours

To build a comprehensive understanding of what sexism and misogyny looks like in a UK policing context, multiple sources of evidence were reviewed including:

- academic literature (via a rapid systematic search)
- relevant police reports (such as Operation Hotton and the Police Perpetrated Domestic Abuse super-complaint)

452 sources of evidence were screened and a total of 22 were considered relevant and were therefore included for analysis. The literature said little about the role of police Professional Standards Departments (PSD). It was felt this was an important gap as PSD staff would have sight of all formal allegations of misconduct. A workshop was therefore held with those working in PSD from several forces to understand common sexist/misogynistic behaviours seen in referrals and to understand how PSD staff respond and interact with those involved.

A total of 220 behaviours relevant to sexism and misogyny were identified from the evidence. Behaviours included:

- intrusive questions about someone’s private life
- hints that sexual favours may lead to preferential treatment
- talking over or disregarding female’s comments in meetings

- sexual harassment
- displays of loyalty towards those accused
- ostracizing those who challenge
- sexual assault
- being blocked from entering specialist roles

To reduce the behaviours to a manageable number to target, the 220 behaviours were clustered and prioritised.

A shortlist of 24 behaviours was shared with around 30 female police officers and staff from various forces. They were asked to rank behaviours based on which they thought would have the most impact on addressing sexism and misogyny.

There was strong agreement among officers and staff that ‘everyday sexism’ (ie, more subtle behaviours experienced on a day-to-day basis that often get normalised, such as commenting on women getting promoted, their appearance, or allocating tasks based on gender not competence) was key to changing culture. Officers and staff felt if everyday sexism was taken seriously, it would help to reduce the organisation’s tolerance of poor behaviour and prevent escalation. This is backed up by research (for example see Buchanan and others, 2014).

The officers and staff prioritised four behaviours. These behaviours reinforce one another and target different groups (or ‘actors’) at the same time which is necessary to bring about system wide behaviour change.

Behaviour	What this could look like

1. Officers and staff do not exhibit everyday sexism or misogyny in the workplace (including online)	• Not commenting on the appearance of women or giving them inappropriate nicknames • Not using gender-based stereotypes, sexist language or telling sexualised jokes • Not belittling or embarrassing women in front of others • Not ignoring the contributions of women or taking credit for their work • Following orders from women of senior ranks without question and not commenting on how they got promoted • If supervisor, allocating tasks or roles based on competence (not gender-based stereotypes, or whether they have a family or need to work part-time)
2. Supervisors have conversations with direct reports when they witness any behaviour that is sexist or misogynistic, or when they become aware of indicators which may suggest sexism and misogyny is occurring within their own teams.	• Intervening as soon as they notice ‘red flags’ such as nicknames which suggest predatory behaviour, non-work-related contact between senior male colleagues and junior female colleagues, inappropriate messages being shared and use of casual sexualised or derogatory language. • Having constructive and proportionate 121 conversations with direct reports to discuss their behaviour and encourage reflection. • Seeking advice from PSD about how to manage the behaviour, even if it does not meet threshold for a referral to PSD.

3. 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 seeking advice soon after	• Actively disengaging from sexist conversations, jokes and messages, or changing the subject • Telling the instigator directly that it wasn't appropriate (in the moment or soon after) • Asking the victim if they are okay and if they need support (in the moment or soon after) • Taking the victim out of the situation • Seeking advice from others such as their supervisor, PSD, HR or staff associations • Sharing what was witnessed anonymously • Reporting what has happened through official reporting channels.
4. Those experiencing inappropriate behaviour in the workplace raise it	• Having a conversation with their supervisor • Talking to HR • Talking to staff associations • Putting in a complaint to PSD • Reporting a crime (anonymously where wanted) via official channels.

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

The four target behaviours provide the focus for the work. The next step in the framework was to understand the influences on the behaviours (ie, what prevents/enables these four behaviours happening consistently across the policing system).

Each of the four target behaviours were therefore subject to a 'COM-B diagnosis'.

Undertake a behavioural diagnosis to understand the key barriers and enablers to change. Capability, opportunity and motivational influences were identified using multiple sources of evidence, including academic literature, stakeholder feedback and analysis of relevant psychosocial theories such as Social Identity Theory (how people see themselves and relate to others in a particular group, (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)); Pluralistic ignorance (wrongly assuming that other people believe in something that you do not, (Miller and McFarland, 1991)); Role Congruity Theory (prejudice against women based on social defined gender roles, (Eagly & Karau, 2002)) and self-efficacy (the belief in one's own ability to perform a behaviour, (Bandura & Walters, 1977)).

Over 120 influences were identified, several of which cut across the four behaviours and are described below.

See **here for more detailed COM-B diagnoses**. The barriers and enablers to changing behaviour span the three COM-B domains: capability, opportunity and motivation. Therefore, to shift behaviour associated with cultures of sexism and misogyny in policing, the interventions must actively aim to target all these influences.

Capability influences

Capability refers to a person's knowledge and skills to perform the behaviour. Several barriers and enablers relating to capability were identified but key influences relevant to several of the behaviours are discussed below.

Knowledge

The evidence suggested that officers and staff do not always recognise sexist behaviours, particularly more subtle, everyday behaviours that are often disguised as or dismissed as 'banter'. There also appeared to be a need to raise awareness that seemingly 'low-level' behaviours can escalate to more regular or extreme patterns of behaviour, and therefore intervening early is key to preventing misconduct and reducing harm.

Instigators themselves may not view their own behaviour as sexist and may not understand the personal harms it can cause those experiencing it, nor the wider impact it has on professionalism, performance and retention.

Feedback from stakeholders indicated a lack of clarity on when and how to raise concerns, in particular how concerns could be raised without them being escalated by supervisors or documented as formal reports. This lack of clarity appeared to act as a barrier to speaking up, both for those experiencing it and those witnessing it.

Skills

Once officers and staff can identify everyday sexism, they then need the interpersonal skills to intervene. Whatever the chosen course of action (for example challenging the instigator directly or talking to the person experiencing the behaviour separately), having the ability to start a conversation in a constructive way using sensitive language will help the person challenging the behaviour to feel more confident. Evidence suggested that for supervisors, especially those who enter managerial roles without previous leadership experience (such as those acting up), it can be challenging to have such conversations with their colleagues, and ensure they are proportionate. Stakeholders reported that often supervisors escalate ‘low-level’ issues to PSD as they see it as their duty to do so and may lack the confidence to hold responsibility and manage the issues themselves.

Motivational influences

A person needs to be more motivated to do the desired behaviour than any other competing behaviour. Again, multiple motivational influences were identified but key barriers relevant to all the target behaviours were beliefs about the consequences of challenging or being sexist and the emotions performing such behaviours can evoke.

Beliefs about consequences

A major barrier that emerged from the evidence was the belief that there would be negative repercussions for speaking up against sexism. This is grounded in reality, with research and stakeholder experiences demonstrating that those experiencing unacceptable behaviour (and those witnessing it) who report it, face exclusion by their colleagues, are often labelled as ‘troublemakers’ and experience subsequent blockers to career progression (especially if the instigator is senior and holds decision making power) (Harned and others, 2002).

Those experiencing unacceptable behaviour and those witnessing it did not trust that reports of sexism would be dealt with objectively or lead to a satisfactory outcome. Stakeholders reported that

the agreed course of action following unacceptable behaviour was subjective and heavily influenced by whether the instigator was known to and friendly with the decision maker. There were also significant concerns that confidentiality would not be upheld and that they would lose control over the process.

Furthermore, those experiencing unacceptable behaviour understood the investigation process to be time-consuming and got in the way of ‘getting on with the job’. Stakeholders shared that some female colleagues were actively discouraging other women from reporting due to the reasons listed above. To enable everyone to feel safe and trusting enough to report, they need to feel in control of process, and believe their complaint will be taken seriously, and dealt with objectively, sensitively and professionally.

Overall, the range of potential negative consequences to reporting sexism prevent those experiencing it and those witnessing it from raising concerns. Meanwhile, the negative consequences for instigators were less apparent as police colleagues are not consistently challenging sexism. Stakeholders felt strongly that unless instigators faced consequences for their actions their behaviour was unlikely to change.

Emotions

Emotional barriers to behaviour change should not be underestimated. The evidence suggested that fear of upsetting others, embarrassment of getting things wrong and even guilt about jeopardising other’s career opportunities, can inhibit staff from acting as there is too much risk. Even with the right knowledge and skills, faced with the reality of challenging sexism in the moment, emotional reactions can prevent action.

Emotional barriers may be even worse if the instigator is a friend or part of a close-knit social circle, which the witness or person experiencing the behaviour does not want to jeopardise. The desire to challenge sexism needs to outweigh the desire to ignore and avoid it, the latter of which is often easier.

For colleagues to speak up, they need to be less fearful about the reactions of others or have the confidence to act despite feeling uncomfortable.

Opportunity influences

Opportunity refers to external factors that make a behaviour possible. This includes the social environment – a person's relationships, as well as the social and cultural norms within an organisation or community.

Social and cultural norms

Evidence suggested that it was socially normal to expect and uphold a strong sense of solidarity between colleagues, particularly male colleagues. Solidarity is embedded in the culture of policing and an important part of what makes policing effective. However, when it is associated with masculinity and with protecting fellow colleagues at all costs, those who call-out unacceptable behaviour can be viewed as disloyal. For colleagues to speak up, a sense of solidarity between colleagues needs to be felt by all colleagues regardless of their gender or other protected characteristics and those who behave inappropriately need to be viewed as a threat to solidarity.

The hierarchies and power differences that exist in policing also present a barrier to raising concerns. The social norm is to follow orders from those in positions of authority, so it may not be seen as socially acceptable to offer feedback or challenge upwards. This poses a particular challenge for those who are young in service or in junior roles.

Role models

Evidence indicated that leaders need to role model expected behaviours and demonstrate to colleagues that they will be supported if they raise concerns. Supervisors themselves need other supervisors and senior staff to routinely talk about and challenge everyday sexism. This should contribute to the establishment of a new social norm that says, 'we do not let unacceptable behaviour go'.

Step three – design the interventions

Having identified what needs to change to bring about the four target behaviours, the next step was to consider what interventions were most likely to be effective. Three sources of evidence were used to develop an initial set of intervention options to tackle sexism and misogyny in policing.

- A review of the literature – to examine whether any relevant interventions already existed. The literature search was not limited to policing contexts so to not miss opportunities to learn from other sectors. 274 articles were screened and 21 were included for review.

- A call for practice – a request was sent to all 43 police forces asking for examples of interventions they had implemented to tackle internal sexism and misogyny. A total of 15 practice examples were received from nine forces and another 20 practice examples were collected over the course of the project through separate discussions with stakeholders.
- Subject matter experts – a workshop of members of the NPCC and College VAWG taskforce was held. Participants were asked to share existing practice and generate new ideas for interventions based on the **COM-B findings**. Over 50 options were shared by the group.

Using the sources of evidence listed above, 206 initial options across the four target behaviours were generated. These were clustered into 12 high level intervention groups, which were shared with around 25 officers and staff of different genders and ranks, for feedback. Officers and staff were asked questions such as how acceptable and practical they thought the 12 interventions were, and whether there could be any unintended consequences. Their feedback was used to refine the interventions which are outlined in table X below.

The 12 interventions have been grouped across four themes:

- safe environment to raise concerns
- recognition for those enacting change
- enhanced leadership capabilities
- creating a learning culture

Together, the 12 interventions cut across multiple different delivery mechanisms and target different groups simultaneously which is necessary to bring about system-wide change.

Having identified 12 initial intervention options, the next stage will see the co-production of the interventions with stakeholders to ensure the content is relevant and mode of delivery feasible within the policing context.

Testing will be undertaken to also ensure the interventions are effective at changing behaviour prior to wider rollout.

Theme: safe environment to raise concerns

Intervention name	Rationale (COM-B targets)	Intervention description	Key intervention types from BCW
1. External impartial support	Before deciding whether to formally report unacceptable behaviour, those experiencing and witnessing it should be able to safely explore their options and rights, and have the time, validation, and support to make their choice, without the situation being taken out of their control. Currently, those experiencing and witnessing unacceptable behaviour are worried about having informal internal conversations in case they are escalated against their will.	Access to free, external, impartial, anonymous advice and support, both emotional and legal, that enables those experiencing and those witnessing unacceptable behaviour to openly discuss what happened, and options for how to respond, trusting that their identities will remain protected.	• Enablement • Social restructure • Education • Persuasion

Intervention name	Rationale (COM-B targets)	Intervention description	Key intervention types from BCW
2. Anonymous reporting systems	A barrier to formally report unacceptable behaviour is the potential for repercussions, such as social exclusion and impeded career progression. Until the system can demonstrate that speaking up is safe and does not impede the person's ability to get on with the job, those experiencing and those witnessing unacceptable behaviour need to be able to make reports through trusted anonymous systems.	Anonymous reporting systems that are easy and quick to use, and which guarantee anonymity. Many local reporting systems already exist but vary in their design and uptake across forces.	• Environmental restructure • Enablement

Intervention name	Rationale (COM-B targets)	Intervention description	Key intervention types from BCW
3. Anti-retaliation policies	To further protect those experiencing and witnessing inappropriate behaviour from the potential repercussions of reporting, the organisation needs to be clear on what action will be taken in response to retaliatory behaviours (such as failure to promote or moving the person experiencing the behaviour against their will to a different department).	Anti-retaliation policies (alongside anti-harassment policies) (Becton and others, 2017)) which specify disciplinary action for those who retaliate as well as corrective actions for those who make a false claim. Such policies should be regularly socialised by senior leaders and clearly linked to expectations of professional behaviour.	• Coercion • Restriction • Persuasion • Education

Theme: recognition for those enacting change

Intervention name	Rationale (COM-B targets)	Intervention description	Key intervention types from BCW

4. Demonstration of inclusive behaviour	Explicit links between the desired behaviour and the social identity of police officers and staff should be made. In other words, to work in policing means to behave in a way that enables everyone in policing to feel they belong and can flourish. Therefore, demonstrating the ability to be inclusive and challenge unacceptable behaviour should be built into with recruitment and progression opportunities.	A validated recruitment and promotions assessment for inclusive behaviour, which assesses whether someone has the knowledge, interpersonal skills and confidence to intervene and manage unacceptable behaviour in a constructive and proportionate way for their level of seniority.	• Persuasion • Role-modelling • Education • Incentivisation

5. Recognition structures	Recognising behaviour that moves policing towards a more inclusive and professional service (for example praise, social recognition and progression opportunities) could make help to counteract some of the concerns around negative consequences, as well as normalise and reinforce that challenging and managing unacceptable behaviour is part of what it means to work in policing.	Local structures which enable staff and officers to be recognised for actively building inclusive and professional work environments. They could be delivered via several routes from PDRs to reward and recognition panels or awards ceremonies. Recognition structures should be carefully co-developed with staff to understand what incentivises behaviour and consider discrete delivery options for those who do not want to be identified.	• Incentivisation • Enablement

Theme: enhanced leadership capabilities

Intervention name	Rationale (COM-B targets)	Intervention description	Key intervention types from BCW

6. Effective, motivational communications	Messaging that is overly punitive and focused on ‘what’s wrong’ can be experienced as blaming and controlling, and have unintended consequences (such as people reacting by increasing unwanted behaviour). To get everyone on board with expected standards of behaviour relating to sexism, messaging needs to effectively tap into people’s motivation systems.	Effective communications to tackle unwanted behaviour which are underpinned by evidence from behavioural science and psychology. For example, messages that come from credible sources, are memorable, build trust, do not inadvertently normalise unwanted behaviour, and that tap into key levers such as identity, social norms, self-confidence, values, emotions and cognitive biases.	• Persuasion • Education • Modelling

7. ‘Red flag’ training for supervisors	For supervisors (sergeants and above) to respond effectively and proportionately to sexism and prevent further escalation, they need to know what ‘red flags’ to look out for, objectively decide on a course of action and have the interpersonal skills to engage those involved. Supervisors must see it as their role to intervene and manage unacceptable behaviour, and believe that doing so is worthwhile for everyone involved.	Immersive training for supervisors, which requires them to observe, demonstrate, and receive constructive feedback on their ability to recognise early warning signs and prevent escalation of unacceptable behaviour as someone with supervisory responsibilities. Training should elicit reflection on their collective role as supervisors in driving culture change.	• Education • Training • Persuasion

8. Independent reviews	Independent reviews which hold forces to account for effectively managing sexism and other unacceptable behaviours, should motivate senior managers to address known cultural issues. Reviews should also increase the confidence of those experiencing and those witnessing unacceptable behaviour that reports will be taken seriously and have an impact.	Ensure compliance with inspection criteria related to inclusion and managing unacceptable behaviour by providing an independent review (such as via His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services).	• Coercion • Restriction

Theme: creating a learning culture

Intervention name	Rationale (COM-B targets)	Intervention description	Key intervention types from BCW

9. Reflective and non-judgemental spaces	To develop a language around sexism (and other unacceptable behaviour) and build confidence to tackle it, staff need safe and constructive spaces to share their views and experiences, knowing they will not be judged. Being able to talk openly with peers about emotive issues can help to build a sense of collective agency and commitment to change and establish new social norms.	Regular reflective spaces underpinned by evidence-based models, and expertly facilitated to enable staff to safely share direct or indirect experiences of sexism and other forms of unacceptable behaviour and how they have managed them. They can be delivered at different levels (for example within teams or at specific ranks) and in several formats (such as open discussions or structured around specific topics).	• Enablement • Modelling • Persuasion • Education

10. Raising awareness	While awareness is growing, there is plenty of room for education about sexism and misogyny, and their harmful impacts (particularly the subtle acts that are harder to identify). Providing police specific examples should help information to be taken on board, for example that gender differences should not influence who is allocated to particular tasks, nor should they determine what is an appropriate emotional response to the job.	Easy to access, high-quality educational material available online (including information on sexism and intersectionality, and the harmful impacts, common gender misconceptions and societal expectations, counter-stereotypical case examples, allyship, stories from senior leaders, relevant legislation and policy, and signposting to support services).	• Education • Persuasion • Modelling

11. Experiential training	To effectively build confidence and self-efficacy in recognising and challenging sexism and misogyny, staff need the opportunity to rehearse such interactions in a realistic but safe learning environment, in which they are exposed to lower level, but authentic emotional responses to doing the behaviour (such as apprehension and discomfort) (Schultz, 2015). Practising the behaviour and receiving feedback on it, increases the chance of it translating to real-world contexts (Carey and others, 2019; Ivers and others, 2012).	Immersive training that requires participants to observe, demonstrate, and receive constructive feedback on their ability to identify and appropriately respond to sexist and other unacceptable behaviour. Scenarios should be ambiguous (Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018) and provoke ample reflection and group discussion. Ongoing post-training activities will also help to consolidate learning (Perry and others, 2009).	• Education • Training • Persuasion • Modelling

12. Pulse checks on culture	Behaviour can be influenced by feedback on performance - what is measured matters. If forces regularly measure staff experience (including feelings of inclusion, belonging and safety), and can examine staff experience by department (depending on size), it should raise awareness and motivate local leaders to improve culture in their teams (as long as senior leaders are also invested in using the data to hold others to account). To identify problematic hotspots and act on feedback in a timely manner feedback should be provided in real-time.	To take regular 'pulse-checks' of culture using validated metrics that are quick to complete and relevant to policing. Results should be shared promptly at the relevant level of seniority to enable ongoing learning and provide observable trends over time. The purpose of the 'pulse-check' is to demonstrate where things are progressing or where intervention is needed. If possible, each team or department would see where their culture scores lie in relation to other departments or the national policing average to enable social comparison.	• Education • Persuasion • Enablement • Incentivisation

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Tags

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