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## **Black Police Associations and the Police Occupational Culture**

Megan O'Neill and Simon Holdaway

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### *Introduction*

Research and debate on the issue of racism in the police are hardly new topics. Racist canteen 'banter', for example, was identified as an aspect of the police occupational culture many years ago (see Smith and Gray 1985) and disproportionate policing of minority ethnic groups is also well documented and researched (see Bowling and Phillips 2003). Minority ethnic police officers have also discussed their experiences of prejudice and discrimination in the police service (Holdaway and Barron 1997, Cashmore 2001). Holdaway (1996, 1999) has written about the prevalence of stereotypes in police work, both racial and otherwise, and how the framing (or lack of framing) of an event as racially significant is a part of the police occupational culture. His work is based upon the concept of *racialisation*, indicating that race is constructed socially and, within the context of constabularies, negatively for many minority ethnic police staff.

The Lawrence Report (Macpherson 1999 – also referred to, elsewhere in this volume, as the Macpherson Report) is often cited as a pivotal moment in the history of the police and race relations. Its finding of 'institutional racism' within the Metropolitan Police Service (and, by implication, all police forces in the UK) in light of its botched investigation of the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence was expected to lead to wide-spread changes in the quality of service offered to minority ethnic communities and police staff. One of Macpherson's recommendations was for all police constabularies to establish a local Black Police Association (BPA).

Over the past ten years, and especially since the publication of the Lawrence Report, BPAs have been gaining influence and prominence in police constabularies throughout the UK. With a National Black Police Association established in London and a local BPA group<sup>1</sup> in almost every constabulary in England and Wales (and a growing number in Scotland and Northern Ireland), these groups cannot be ignored when it comes to the consideration of ethnicity and diversity in police work within and outside the police service. Black Police Associations are voluntary groups of minority ethnic police officers and support staff. They first started forming in the UK in the mid-1990s (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004), stemming largely from informal (and sometimes secret) support groups that had existed previously for minority ethnic officers and staff in several constabularies.

The objectives of BPA groups are multifarious, but paramount among them is the desire to support police minority ethnic employees through any hardship or

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<sup>1</sup> Not all local groups have adopted the name 'Black Police Association'. Some are called the 'Black and Asian Police Association' and others have entirely different names such as 'Black and Asian Staff Support Group'. The reasons behind these variations in name are beyond the scope of the current paper, as they involve differing interpretations of ethnic categorisation and organisational relationships with police senior management. For simplicity's sake, only the term 'Black Police Association' or 'BPA' will be used here.

discrimination they may suffer by virtue of their ethnicity. This can range from lending an occasional sympathetic ear, to emotional or even legal support in an employment tribunal. They also aim to work with chief officers to address matters of ethnicity and diversity in order to bring about a police service that is beyond reproach in these matters. This is pursued through membership of formal policy and advisory boards, informal consultation with senior management, involvement in recruitment and training, as well as mentoring services for new recruits (O'Neill and Holdaway, forthcoming). Further, BPAs are often involved in local communities, especially those with a high minority ethnic population, to improve relationships between them and their police service.

All of these efforts are related to addressing what Lord Macpherson (1999) defined as institutional racism in police forces. BPA members and chief police officers alike tend to agree that institutional racism existed or still exists in the police service (Rowe 2004) but opinions differ as to what it means and how it can be identified. This can include outcomes of policy, lack of awareness of specific cultural issues or neglecting the general 'black perspective'. We have discussed the implications of BPAs for the institutional racism discourse at length elsewhere (see Holdaway and O'Neill, 2006). It seems fair to say, though, that there is not a clear understanding of the term in police constabularies and, that being so, adequately addressing the matter will be difficult (Foster, Newburn and Souhami 2005). In particular, many rank-and-file police officers remain unconvinced that the 'institutional racism' accusation was accurate or helpful for the police service.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of institutional racism infers a related occupational culture with features that discriminate openly or covertly to the disadvantage of minority ethnic groups, including police staff. This can include negative racialised stereotypes, through jokes, banter, and exclusion from the police team. We use the term 'occupational culture' here to refer to not only the ideas and related informal practices and procedures that develop in the course of doing and discussing police work, but also the particular sense of self that develops throughout one's career in the police service. There are many other definitions for this concept (See Cockcroft in this volume) but the one we have indicated will suffice for the purposes of this chapter. The BPAs have identified the institutional racism within police culture as a key issue for their group. However, it is not the only issue with which they concern themselves. Other aspects of police culture are also affected by their work, intentionally or not. It is these other cultural changes that we will consider here.

We will begin with a brief description of the research project from which this chapter is drawn. We then describe some subtle changes in the police occupational culture brought about by BPAs, such as the resistance to using rank and grade designations among the BPA membership. This leads on to the question of whether a distinct, parallel, police occupational culture can be detected among BPA members. What we argue in this paper is that, regardless whether or not a parallel BPA police culture has been forged, BPA members as well as chief officers view the BPA as playing a significant, although embedded, part in a wider process of change in the police service (especially in light of the 1999 Lawrence Report). It is these indirect influences and the relationships between BPAs and chief officers that are considered next. The final two sections of the chapter consider more cognitive aspects of changing police occupational culture. We demonstrate how some BPA members are

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<sup>2</sup> See the forthcoming book edited by Michael Rowe (2007), *Policing Beyond Macpherson*, for more on this issue.

willing to accept a change in colleagues' actions in relation to ethnicity and diversity, even if this falls short of a more fundamental change in their attitudes. These BPA members regard behavioural change of this nature as a minimal indicator of the positive impact of the BPA on the police organization as a whole.

### *The Research*

This chapter is based on data gathered from a two-year study of BPAs in England and Wales<sup>3</sup>. The research was conducted from October 2001 to September 2003, and was largely based on in-depth, structured interviews with BPA chairs, deputy chairs, Assistant/Deputy Chief Constables (with a Personnel portfolio), Human Resources Directors (if in post) and the local Police Federation Joint Branch Board chair. Interviews were tape-recorded and ranged from 45 minutes to three hours. At the time of the research, 33 BPAs were in existence, so we contacted 22 of these and their respective chief officers for interviews to provide a sufficient sample<sup>4</sup> for the research. All interviewees were assured complete confidentiality, which is respected in this chapter.

Prior to our project, no specific research had been done on BPAs in the UK. Such previous research as had been conducted on minority ethnic police officers chiefly highlighted their extensive experiences of discrimination and isolation (Wilson, Holdaway and Spencer 1984; Holdaway 1991; Holdaway and Barron 1997). Minority ethnic officers were subjected to joking and banter that they found offensive, excluded from full acceptance in their operational teams, and often lacked support from senior officers in dealing with the situation. They adopted various ways of coping. Some just accepted that this is a part of police organizational life; some regarded the joking and banter as harmless because their colleagues did not really mean it; some resigned their posts; and a small number took a confrontational approach by telling jokes about white people or offering a rebuke. All of these were individualistic responses. Before the formation of the London Metropolitan Police BPA in 1994, no formal support groups existed to assist aggrieved colleagues. Since many constabularies had a relatively small number of minority ethnic officers and staff, these officers often found themselves stationed at great distances from one another, making it even more difficult to offer mutual support. A few officers did manage to set up mostly informal support groups but, in order to avoid questions and confrontation from colleagues, they would usually meet off-site and out of working hours (Holdaway and Barron 1997: 106).

Prior to the launch of the first BPA, minority ethnic officers would tend to describe themselves as 'police officers who happen to be black', but felt that their white colleagues would see them as 'black people who happen to be police officers' (Wilson et al 1984, Holdaway and Barron 1997). In this respect, the minority ethnic officers were trying to minimize the centrality of their ethnic identity and status for their job, whereas their colleagues would accentuate ethnicity and use it (deliberately or not) as a basis for exclusion from full membership in the police team. This is important to note as our research on Black Police Associations reveals that the opposite is now the case for many minority ethnic officers: they tend to see themselves as 'black police officers' in that their ethnicity is a source of pride and

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<sup>3</sup> This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Award number: R000239360.

<sup>4</sup> As there were such a small number of groups, the sampling could not be done randomly. Therefore, we selected constabularies that would best present a balance between rural and urban areas, different types of minority ethnic populations, and number of minority ethnic staff employed.

central to their self-identities (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004). However, this is not the case for all minority ethnic officers in the UK, as the work of Cashmore has revealed (2001, 2002). Many are not members of BPAs, and even for those who are, instances of discrimination or isolation can still be experienced. Nevertheless, BPAs are becoming significant forces for change in the occupational culture.

*Small steps for cultural change – challenging hierarchy*

We will now consider the subtle developments that the BPAs have effected, at least within their own groups, and the implications these may have for the police occupational culture as a whole. While there is certainly no single, monolithic, police occupational culture (Fielding 1988, Chan 1996, Waddington 1999), common attributes can be found in police cultures both in Britain and elsewhere (Reiner 2000, Foster 2003). One of these is the importance placed on a hierarchical rank structure. While rank itself is a feature of the organisation and not the occupational culture, the importance of rank in the ethos of the rank-and-file can be seen, for example, in their attitudes towards their university educated peers, as Punch points out in Chapter XXX of the present volume.

Unlike the police organisation itself, the vast majority of the BPA members we interviewed did not attach any importance to rank during their meetings and other ventures. This was reflected in the ways that the BPAs organised themselves internally. The chair and deputy chair of each BPA were not necessarily the highest-ranking police officers with full membership. Any full member could run for any post within the executive committee; high rank was not a requirement. In addition, when BPA members encountered each other, either in group meetings or elsewhere, most would refer to each other by first names only. The BPA principles of unity and mutual support in the face of a generalised experience of prejudice and discrimination would dictate that the group should not self-segregate by rank or position. The institutionalised and hierarchical rank structure had no place in a BPA group. As one BPA chair put it:

It is first names . . . because (rank) completely defies the ethos of the BPA where we are challenging and tackling discrimination and unfairness per se. And if we were the perpetrators why are we there?

It would seem that an unofficial edict has developed within the BPA that rank should be replaced with ethnicity and that its use is inverted. For example, only those of minority ethnic status are allowed to be full members of the BPA and hence eligible to vote and run for executive committee places. Majority ethnic members are thus subsidiary members, without voting privileges or executive committee seats. One's ethnicity becomes the deciding factor in one's place in the BPA, not rank.

The problem, of course, is that once the BPA members are back in their police jobs and roles, the usual rank structure comes into play. They acknowledge that they must respect the rank of other officers, regardless of ethnicity. This is perhaps especially so for minority ethnic officers of high rank – the fact that they have managed to progress far in the organisation is something many BPA members want to honour:

In formal areas I will refer to him as Sir . . . and that is out of respect to his position, because I am acutely aware of the fact that there are very few minority ethnic senior managers. And the last thing I want to do is see other people see him or her being treated in a familiar way, because that gives them the excuse that they need to undermine them (BPA chair).

So while rank is seen as a barrier within the BPA group, it gets very explicit acknowledgement in interactions with those outside of the group, especially in the case of high-ranking minority ethnic officers.<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed in more detail below, there is some ambivalence among BPA members as to how much they should challenge the way the organisation works.

Another non-traditional aspect of the BPA group is the presence of support staff. Any person of minority ethnic origin directly employed by the police service can join a BPA as a full member.<sup>6</sup> While police officers and support staff often work together, they are usually regarded as separate groups within the police service. They have different unions, training, uniforms, contracts and hours of working, and different kinds of encounters with the public. One BPA chair put it this way:

They are second-class citizens, and even if they are not, they perceive themselves to be because we don't do enough to shatter that perception. You know, you are our support staff basically, you know, civilian staff. You are something different, you are not just an employee, you are a support to me, a policeman. So you are less important than me obviously.

The BPAs have a very different practice in regard to support staff.<sup>7</sup> As with rank, all ties to role within the police are dropped when it comes to the BPA. In their view, to maintain the differentiation between police officers and support staff would be to perpetuate a discriminatory system. Once again, self-segregation based on the formal police structure of employment is avoided. Consequently many of the BPAs we interviewed had support staff among the members of their executive committees.

Considering the non-traditional internal arrangements BPAs have, and their consultative role with senior management (another contrast to the usual rank boundaries) on matters both internal and external to the organisation, is it possible to see the BPA as a model for police reform? We posed this question to one BPA chair. He responded:

[LAUGHS] No comment. I think we definitely have some good practices which the organisation could adopt and the \_\_\_\_\_ Project, I think is showing the new models of consultation and empowerment.

While BPAs are adopting non-traditional working practices internally, a constabulary-wide overhaul is not on their agenda. There seems to be no direct attempt to translate successful internal BPA practices to a review of practices within the police organisation more broadly. This is not surprising, in that many BPAs have to struggle continuously to prove to their ethnic majority colleagues that the group is not attempting to take over the police service in a total cultural and organisational revolution. They want to work within the system, to earn their rightful places throughout the ranks, and to change the system for the better in partnership with

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<sup>5</sup> Rank is a feature of police culture that may be changing generally. Many of our respondents indicated that referring to others by rank or as 'Sir/Ma'am' is a custom that is losing its force throughout the police service. The growing influence of a managerial culture among chief police officers (see Marks' chapter in this volume) may be related to this trend. It is impossible to say how far this change in the wider organisation of the police and in the police culture is due to the BPA, but it is certainly clear that the strict observance of rank is an aspect of the police that is changing, in one way or another.

<sup>6</sup> Some BPAs allow all employees of a police service to be eligible for full membership, regardless of ethnicity, but this is not the norm.

<sup>7</sup> The British Association for Women in Policing (BAWP) is another organisation within the police service that observes no distinction between support staff and police officers.

senior management. But should the service come to see the BPA as an example of good practice to emulate, so much the better.

### *Parallel culture?*

If BPAs work differently from the rest of the police service in relation to rank and grades, could it be argued that a distinct, or parallel, police occupational culture is emerging for minority ethnic staff? As many recent writers on police culture have noted, it is more appropriate to refer to police *cultures*, rather than one homogenous police culture (Foster 2003; Chan 1996; Sklansky in this volume). We use the word 'parallel' here to refer to a distinct police culture where ethnicity is an issue of such primary importance that it influences how the officers and staff work in certain respects (such as in relationships with the community or with senior management). However, in other respects, these officers will follow similar paths to their white majority colleagues (such as in the preference for action-orientated police work). It is still a *police* occupational culture, in that they do not deviate from majority culture and practice in every respect, just one where ethnicity plays a very different role. We will discuss this in more detail later.

In exploring this issue of a parallel culture for minority ethnic staff, let us look at the BPA of the Metropolitan Police Service in London. This was the first BPA to be formed, in 1994 amid great controversy. It was the end product of several years' work among its members, and evolved from a more informal support and networking group. This group would meet annually for formal social events that were characterised by attributes that 'members of the Afro-Caribbean communities within the police liked' (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004: 859). This included things such as formal attire, strict rules of decorum and a prohibition of racist jokes and banter. It was felt that social events organised by white police officers did not always share these characteristics; the black events were in this respect culturally distinct and 'safe' for those attending (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004: 860). It is from these roots that the Metropolitan BPA was formed. The legacy of these early gatherings can still be felt in National Black Police Association (NBPA) Annual General Meetings. The first evening of each conference is a formal dinner with Asian and Afro-Caribbean food and music – attendees are required to wear either traditional or formal attire and the celebrations carry on into the early hours.

Can the cultural markers in these formal police events be seen as evidence of a parallel police occupational culture emerging? The Metropolitan BPA is the largest of all the regional BPAs and is certainly an active group – both within the community and within the police service itself. It has an extensive range of activities and projects with which it is involved<sup>8</sup>, and has served as a catalyst for black and Asian colleagues in other police forces to start up their own groups. As one BPA chair commented in describing the launch of the Metropolitan BPA,

when we went there we listened to some of the problems that some of the Met officers were having. . . . The problems in (our force) were very small in comparison to the Met. Having said that, the Met on that particular day was quite inspirational for those of us who went down in terms of, sort of inspired us to do something more forward . . . we felt that we should do something as well.

The Metropolitan BPA emerges as a strong force in the history of BPAs in the UK, culturally and organisationally distinct from other members of its police service. It

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<sup>8</sup> See the Metropolitan BPA website for more detail on their activities: <http://www.metbpa.com>.

was a force to be reckoned with at the time and remains so. This is not to suggest, however, that BPA members perform their police duties entirely differently from their ethnic majority colleagues. BPA members are still police officers and staff, and their parallel culture will still be a *police* occupational culture, just one that takes a different perspective on a number of identified subjects related to race and ethnicity, and engenders a distinct sense of self in its members. However in other respects, such as in their routine work outside the organisation, their occupational culture may not be distinguishable from that of their colleagues.

When considering if this pattern has been repeated in other BPAs, difficulties emerge. The first problem is that many of these groupings are struggling to get off the ground. One BPA chair from a rural police service commented:

There isn't very many of us. I think that a lot of black staff feel as if, you know, if I start joining things like the Black Police Association and I'm on a shift with sixteen white officers, they are going to think what's going here then? You know, why does he need to join that? . . . And a lot of people embarrassed about being a member of the BPA. They don't want to be sort of be going to BPA meetings and be looked upon as a BPA member. That's the situation here. . . . It's totally different in London and places where you are surrounded by black officers, and there are plenty of black officers.

This feeling was repeated in many interviews – the sheer number of minority ethnic officers in the Metropolitan Police means that they will find it much easier to make their presence felt and work within the service as a united group. A BPA general secretary talked about the isolation that minority ethnic people in general can experience in rural areas:

If you look externally in the police service, if you look at the 'shire forces, there's rural isolation, rural racism. And that's the probably the biggest effect on discrimination is that people live in isolation, they don't actually meet anyone who's similar to themselves or have empathy. So they end up acquiescing to the majority or basically keeping quiet. Well that's going to be reflected identically if not compounded in the police service. So the desire to keep one's head down and be the same as everyone else would be even greater.

Small numbers and the subsequent isolation and pressure to conform for minority ethnic people in rural areas as well as in rural police forces makes creating a parallel and culturally distinct organisation very difficult. Similar difficulties appear to confront BPAs in urban areas as well. One BPA chair of an urban police service commented that

The problem with the police service is that sometimes officers are very narrow-minded, and we've had cases of harassment, we've had cases of bullying. Bear in mind that when you are in a group you are by and large in the minority and you are working with, as I said the dominant culture is white Anglo-Saxon males who look after their own. . . . I suppose that is the worry. And I suppose it means that one or two of our essential members would prefer to acquiesce than to actually stand up and be counted. So they will go along for the easy ride, get by and be seen to be one of the boys if that's a phrase I can use.

Even when there are relatively large numbers of minority ethnic staff in an organisation the pressure to conform is still present, and will prevent some people from joining the BPA. Thus the experiences of the Metropolitan BPA in respect of a parallel culture cannot be generalised. Other experiences are of course shared across the country, such as in a common history of racist language and discrimination in their organisations, but the notion of an embryonic culture seems to be unique to the Metropolitan BPA.



### *Indirect influences*

The discussion so far may seem rather negative in regard to the influence of BPAs on the culture of their organisations outside of the Metropolitan Police. However, there are more indirect challenges that the BPAs throughout the UK have presented. Many of our respondents discussed subtle influences that BPAs have had, or the role the BPA has played in the police service *alongside* other key developments in the broader field of police ethnic relations. Chief officers seem to support this perspective. In the words of one of the several Assistant/Deputy Chief Constables and Human Resource directors who made this kind of point,

There's certainly greater awareness that people aren't inappropriate and it's not banter and you can't carry on like this and it's not a joke. Especially you know, not just the BPA, but the grievances and the tribunal cases around things like that. They've become more aware. Whether it was, you know, fear that did it or awareness or whatever, but [the BPA] did have an impact.

This HR director quoted here points to a general appreciation among staff as to what is and is not acceptable behaviour and language, even though the exact catalyst for this increased awareness is not clear. The ACC quoted next also identifies a range of factors, one of which is the BPA:

I don't think it is the BPA. I think it is about . . . not compartmentalising. It is not saying 'well because of the BPA this is happening'. It is because the BPA is part of a whole suite of things that the force has used and because of that whole suite of things relations are much stronger because, I mean part of it is down to the BPA bringing a change in the culture.

This ACC seemed reluctant to single out one group or event for credit in the perceived change of culture. An HR director who took a similar line emphasised the role of police officers themselves in changing their culture:

I think that the BPAs played a role in as much as . . . they're part of that whole, you know, this is where we used to be and this is how it's changed. You know, police officers are not stupid, they can see all of that and so they do recognise that there are issues for Black officers . . . the establishment of the BPA would be in another layer in their sort of, for them in terms of thinking yeah 'well life has moved on and this isn't acceptable' . . . the establishment of the BPA would have been another factor in making that shift.

It is not just chief officers who made these observations. One BPA general secretary spoke of the well-publicised events in the recent history of the police as also significant contributors to change:

I won't put that down to just the BPA. I'll put that down to the fact that, as I said, once you start getting, once you got the Macpherson report and all the rest of this type of stuff and police officers and Chief Constables being hauled up in court and what's-his-name highlighting that there was institutionalised racism and they felt that they were opening themselves up for litigation which was going to cost them a lot of money, then all of a sudden things had to start being done . . . I think the BPA was just an added avenue.

One BPA deputy chair was a little more cynical in his analysis of the role of the BPA in changing the police culture, and described the dynamic this way:

Nobody who makes decisions that influence everybody else's life in [this constabulary] ever comes back and says that the BPA has made a difference. Put it this way, a lot of people know the BPA exists so from that point of view the BPA must be doing something. . . . Police officers are very, very interesting by nature. They will take an idea, plagiarise it and say it is

their own. No one is going to say 'well the reason why policy changed was because the BPA did it.' They'll say it was a joint effort; it was a joint coming together of minds. So I like to think that because we get involved in the joint coming together of minds, the BPA has at least made a difference somewhere.

So while this officer may not expect the BPA to get much of the credit for organizational and cultural change, he does acknowledge that the BPA has had an impact.

Although some of our BPA respondents spoke of the impact of the BPA on the occupational culture as being indirect, most of the comments made to us in this vein came from chief officers. This is not unsurprising, considering that their perspective on this issue will include detailed knowledge of the full range of equal opportunities legislation, tribunal cases, the impact of Lawrence and other inquiries, the internal plans and policies to address issues of diversity and ethnicity, and the pressure they face from external organisations. The BPA is one influence in a wider organisational field of change (Chan 1996). BPAs are of course aware of these issues, too, especially through their past and current involvement in tribunal cases. However, chief officers will see all these issues from a management perspective that enviably packages them together under the banner of their diversity portfolio; to them the BPA is one of a number of variables.

#### *Chief Officers' Views*

The fact that BPAs now seem to be a taken-for-granted organisational entity for chief officers is in itself a signifier of cultural change. As our previous work has indicated (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004), the first BPA (as well as the next few) encountered many difficulties in establishing itself. Chief officers were by no means eager for it to be formed. Other BPAs have encountered very different receptions, however, and today most have some kind of consultative relationship with senior management, either informally through open-door policies with the chief constable (or ACC/DCC) or on formal committees (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004) such as policy advisory boards<sup>9</sup>. Chief officers have not only welcomed the most recently formed BPAs, but were in some cases actively involved in helping the groups to launch. This makes for a marked change in chief officers' views from those of a decade ago; today BPAs are no longer resisted, they are openly embraced.

Thus it would seem that the occupational culture of senior management has indeed experienced a significant change – one that welcomes the influence and input of the BPA, as noted by this BPA chair:

We're pushing on an open door now. It might change in a couple of months when we get a new Chief Constable but at the moment we are pushing on an open door. So in terms of change, change in terms of policy the Chief is prepared to listen to his ACC, this union is very, very supportive.

Another BPA chair recalled an earlier experience where chief officers welcomed a direct challenge from minority ethnic officers on the racist aspects of the occupational culture of the 1980s and 1990s:

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<sup>9</sup> The exact relationship between BPAs and senior management will vary depending on the constabulary in question. In most the BPA has no more than a consultative role, and does not have power to directly affect force policy. In some forces, however, this consultative role has become ingrained in policy-making procedures in that the BPA is contacted as a matter of course on all related issues.

And then we started to challenge the Chief Officers, and in fair play to them, they put on a forum where all the Superintendents, you know the top of the organisation, had a two-day diversity seminar. We had (names several prominent figures in the police and National BPA at the time) there and it was a real top-notch crowd and I said 'brilliant, absolutely superb this. It's about time the organisation did something about diversity.'

This groundbreaking event was not quite as radical as had been hoped, however. It took a bit of work on the part of this BPA chair to get the highest-ranking minority ethnic officer in the force to be invited, as he was not of Superintendent rank at the time. But it was in some part a result of minority ethnic involvement that the event happened in the first place.

Some BPA officers expressed doubt to us as to whether their senior managements' current enthusiasm and support of the BPA is deep-rooted. They argued that because of the exterior pressures on police forces to address racism the executive management knows how to 'talk the talk' (as one BPA deputy chair put it), but whether or not they also 'walk the walk' is a different matter. This BPA general secretary agreed when asked if the views of chief officers need to be changed:

Yes, in the fact that support is more than rhetoric. And support has to be real, tangible and they have to be, have the confidence to be able to answer to the rest of the service when they ask the question 'why is this group here?' So they have to have the confidence in order to be able to say 'well, these are the reasons' . . . Acknowledging a thing like institutional racism would help.

In our interviews with chief officers, nearly all agreed that there was a place for the BPA in terms of consultation on policies and procedures, and as we have noted elsewhere (Holdaway and O'Neill 2004) this is an integral part of a new, collective approach to addressing institutional racism. Regardless of the extent to which this might be just rhetoric, the way in which BPAs are welcomed in arenas that used to be the sole preserve of the most senior of police officers is indicative of a very telling cultural shift, and one which BPA members were involved in bringing about.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Attitudes Versus Actions*

There was some doubt among BPA members about whether or not chief officers' rhetoric about diversity matched their action. Our respondents also felt that the cultural shift detected in senior ranks has not been fully replicated at the lower ends of the police hierarchy. Part of this is seen to be a result of 'race' issues being interpreted as separate to the daily experiences of police officers, as this BPA chair noted:

I think people are quite happy to sort of say well there is the BPA, let them get on with race. Just let them do it, you know, so there is no problem changing things that way. But I think probably changing attitudes is different. You know, getting people to see it as a serious burning issue is more difficult. You know, right ok, we're legally bound to see this as a serious issues. But do we actually see it as serious issue? Now a lot of well meaning people do, but quite a sizeable minority probably don't see it as relevant. It doesn't impact on their day-to-day policing so they don't see it as a relevant issue.

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<sup>10</sup> In some respects, the BPA now takes the place of the Police Federation when it comes to representing the interests of minority ethnic members of the service. This is significant in cultural terms in that for rank-and-file police officers the Police Federation was formerly their only voice and tended to enshrine the occupational culture. Even though BPAs are not trade unions, they do often appear at the same tables as the Police Federation and signify a significant challenge to its ability to speak on behalf of all lower-ranking police officers and defend their way of doing things.

One BPA general secretary laid the blame on the kind of training police officers receive, which inadvertently presents diversity as a *problem* to be addressed in a particular way:

I mean Community Race Relations Training is churned out. And I think it is just stereotypical and inherently causes the problem. Because it just perpetuates Black people. . . . I mean you have to understand their religion, their diet. You know, it's all technical isn't it? I mean it's all very important stuff . . . but ultimately, we should be doing that for everyone. It's dealing with people's differences as a problem, rather than 'we're all different.'

While some of our respondents were indeed concerned about an ongoing lack of understanding about issues of ethnicity and diversity, others inclined toward a more pragmatic approach:

I mean if people want to be racist then so be it, but it's just I think you need . . . the only thing you can ask for is for people to have a neutral value at work. 'Cause if people want to be complete and utter sort of like Nazi's/racists in their home lives then so be it. You can't be the thought police can you? It's just like keeping a neutrality at work. That's the only thing you can . . . 'cause you can't stop freedom of thinking can you? It doesn't matter if you're prejudiced against people really does it? As long as you don't discriminate against them by treating them differently. (BPA general secretary)

Another saw the matter in terms of professionalism:

They can have their views . . . it's a democratic society, people are entitled to their views. But there are standards of behaviour they that they are getting paid for as professionals. If I do something wrong and it is shown that I have done something wrong out of bad disrespect or whatever, I expect to be punished for it. . . . There are too many examples within this organisation of where they have . . . brought their own private views of people, of colour, and brought it into the organisation and criminalised ordinary citizens, because of their bigoted views outside. (BPA chair)

In this respect, some BPA members feel that changing the actions of police officers alone is preferable to having no impact at all. Although the ideal for BPA members is to have police services entirely free from more deep level discriminatory assumptions and values, achieving a service that is free from racist *action* is a first and important step. This separation of action from thought has also appeared in the police culture literature in the past (see for example Smith and Gray 1985), but as Holdaway (1996) points out, this view neglects the interrelated nature of police thought about 'race' and police work and culture in general. This will be explored in more detail below.

Numerous official policies and procedures about ethnicity and diversity have been put in place by senior management, along with training, to ensure that officers and staff are well aware of the behaviour that is expected of them. Greater Manchester Police, for example, has gone so far as to institute an acceptable-language policy to make sure that its employees never use certain racist terms, under penalty of termination. For many BPA members and chief officers with whom we spoke, altered actions are the most that can be expected in terms of change at the moment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> These policies and hard-line approaches to racism in the police service have had the unintended consequence of making it *covert*, according to some of our respondents. Officers know what not to do in front of superiors and/or minority ethnic colleagues, but will still find ways of expressing their racism elsewhere that are hard to detect or to prove. We explore the idea of covert racism more fully in a forthcoming publication (Holdaway and O'Neill, forthcoming).

### *Individuals and the Institution*

What we have been considering so far is the connection between what individual police officers think or say and what they do in the context of the police occupational culture. This has of course been debated before (see for example Waddington 1999). However, there is also a further relationship to consider, and that is the relationship between individuals and the institutions in which they work. Holdaway (1999), drawing on the work of Jenkins (1996), has argued that institutions are in fact the product of the taken-for-granted action of their members. If the actions of the individuals change, then so does the nature of the institution. The police occupational culture is the primary context in which these processes are articulated.

The comments of our BPA respondents about the tension between thought and action are pertinent here. Holdaway (1996) has noted that police action is *racialised*, in that routine police work and mundane relationships attribute a racial framing (Goffman 1974) to an event that could be defined in a different, non-racial, way. In order for the institution to change, the actions of its members also need to change. If we follow the logic of our respondents then we can argue that if police officers, through their individual experiences of the BPA along with the overall policy changes in the institution (such as the 'zero tolerance' approach to racist language) which the BPA helped to bring about, modify their actions to the extent that some of these racialised processes are stopped or altered, then a significant shift in the police occupational culture could perhaps be possible. The taken-for-granted action of the officers would not be racialised (or, perhaps more practically speaking, would be less so) and the resulting nature of the institution itself would also be less or not racialised.

However, as some BPA members have noted, their impact on the way officers *think* may only be detected in a few individual officers. For example:

M.O. *Do you think the BPA will be able to help change their views?*

Oh, I think individuals would be able to influence individuals, yeah.

M.O. *But not like the BPA as a group?*

No. No. (BPA general secretary)

One BPA chair discussed the following intervention with a single white officer which, while successful, did not have a significant impact in the organisation as a whole:

I was on a discipline panel, where there's a young white officer who was there, who had been, I'd been involved in the recruitment process with him. But he was under the discipline scenario for alleged racist comments . . . and he went through the process and at the end of the process, he was having some difficulties with regards to understanding where the force was coming from, how he himself was gonna take it forward, and I said 'give us a call.' He came back in here, and we sat down and we had about, ooh, a good half an hour or so. Talked things through and notwithstanding that, he has now gone back into the work environment, very positive. Understands the issues, where we're coming from. He hasn't gone back on the BPA. I see that officer on a regular basis, and we have a good working relationship. So I think that there is an educational process, there's an awareness process that goes on.

BPA work in the police service has certainly made an impact on police actions, but their impact on officers' ideas and attitudes is less consistent when it comes to rank-and-file officers. What needs to be considered here is the extent to which one must also change the way police officers *think* as well as how they *act* in order to engender long-term change in the police occupational culture. According to many of the BPA officers and chief officers we interviewed, changing actions alone is sufficient (or the most one can expect).

Can altered action alone address issues of institutional racism and the racialised nature of police work? Previous research in this area (Holdaway 1999) has described police thought processes and police action as congruous. Some of our respondents, however, would describe them as separate and would not see this separation as problematic (as does Waddington 1999). Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov (2004) have argued that cognitive processes (such as stereotyping, categorisation and schemas) are vital in the act of social construction, especially in relation to issues of race or ethnicity. They argue that 'it is only in and through cognitive processes and mechanisms that the social construction of race, ethnicity, and nation can plausibly be understood to occur' (Brubaker et al 2004: 52). Therefore, if we take Holdaway's (1996) notion of racialisation in police work, which is in fact the social construction of a situation as being a race-related one (which then informs subsequent acts), then cognition is vital to this process and cannot be entirely separated from police action. Looking back at Macpherson's (1999) definition of 'institutional racism', we see that he allows for 'unwitting' prejudice within this (para. 6.34). The idea of 'unwitting' prejudice implies that racist behaviour (or, the racist outcomes of collective action) can happen without the actors intending it. The work of Brubaker et al would support this in that they argue these cognitive processes are without conscious effort (2004: 39).

Considering these arguments, it would seem that our respondents' view of there being racist 'thought' alongside non-racist action is not an entirely accurate assessment of these ongoing processes. BPAs have helped to create an uncertainty in what used to be certain – the old way of doing things in the police is no longer an option, methods must change. However, this process is more complex than a simple decision to 'hide' one's racist feelings or methods. The cognitive processes that inform police cultural knowledge involve more than just racist thoughts and feelings (there are schemas and categories as well as the officer's own lifetime of personal and occupational socialisation). This cultural knowledge must be mediated by the police actor and cannot be simply ignored. Therefore, each actor may respond to this tension in a different way (Chan, Devery and Doran 2003), but perhaps this is a tension that some of these officers can manage.<sup>12</sup> The recent documentary 'The Secret Policeman'<sup>13</sup> has shown that this now covert (rather than overt) racism is indeed present for some officers, but the film's aftermath demonstrated that discovery of this covert racism can have devastating consequences.

### *Conclusion*

Is there a possibility that BPAs can effect a significant change in the police occupational culture? As BPA members have pointed out, much of their impact is in their individual relationships and interactions with colleagues, rather than at the constabulary-wide level. As we have noted in this chapter, some of the challenges that BPAs have presented to traditional police culture and practice have been subtle, like ignoring rank or support staff grade demarcations at BPA meetings and events.

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, not all police officers and staff reject Macpherson's (1999) findings about institutional racism (Foster et al 2005). This discussion thus only concerns those who do and who see the 'new' way of doing things as unnecessary.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Secret Policeman' was a BBC documentary by journalist Mark Daly in 2003. He went undercover as a new recruit for Greater Manchester Police and discovered deep-seated racist feelings among a number of his fellow recruits. These feelings were not detected by their trainers and only came to light when the documentary aired. All were removed from duty immediately afterwards, either through their own resignations or by suspension (Daly 2003; BBC News 2003).

The BPA is one of very few police groups where support staff are welcomed and treated on an equal footing to police officers. BPA executive committee members, regardless of their rank or grade, are welcome in many senior management consulting arenas. The official separation of the top of the police service from the lower ranks is disregarded in the case of the BPA, in either formal or informal mechanisms. These aspects of the police service (rank and role) are anathema to the ethos of the BPA, which is all about breaking down barriers that separate colleagues in the service. Thus this group can be seen as an example of how the police could operate in a more egalitarian way across the board.

While most BPAs may be too small or overall numbers of minority ethnic members of the police service too few to bring about a parallel police occupational culture, the Metropolitan BPA does possibly seem to be in a position to offer a challenge of this nature. This group is very large, active, powerful, and has a wide base of minority ethnic police officers and staff. This development is probably not generalisable to all police services, but in the case of the Met significant cultural changes could be possible because of the BPA. At the very least this reinforces the argument that not all constabularies have the same occupational culture (Reiner 2000) (for example, some have working definitions of racialised groups; others might be less wide-ranging). In other constabularies, the impact of the BPA may be embedded within a wider range of events. The Lawrence Report (Macpherson 1999) was published at a time when many BPAs were starting to gain prominence. It may therefore not be possible to entirely tease apart which organisational and cultural changes were due to which developments, but it is clear that BPAs are part of a fabric of events from which has grown a significant shift in organisational policies, practices and police relationships.

Our research on BPAs indicates that the impact of a BPA on the police occupational culture takes place within the context of a wider series of events and actions and in individual interactions with white colleagues. In relation to the 'field' and 'habitus' of policing as analysed by Chan (1996), the BPA has a role to play in altering both of these. BPAs are a part of the historical events that have shaped the British policing field in the past decade, their power located in their being a recommendation of the Lawrence Report and in the symbolic capital they hold as vocal and politically active minority ethnic members of a police service. They are of course not the only factor that makes up this field – wider social processes of ethnicity as well as other aspects of policing history are relevant here – but they are a definite part of it.

BPAs particularly influence what Chan defines as the habitus (referred to earlier in the chapter as police cultural knowledge). This term describes 'a set of historical relations "deposited" within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action' (Wacquant 1992: 16). BPAs have to some extent influenced the perceptions and actions of individual police officers through their encounters with them as described in this chapter. Some of these encounters, especially the more individualistic ones, have left a deep impact on the officers concerned in that ways of thinking about ethnicity have been altered. For other officers, only a surface-level change in behaviour has been affected.

Chan (1997) has argued that changes in police officers' habitus can be sustained only if there is supportive change in the policing field. However, BPAs and issues of ethnicity are not always at the forefront of officers' minds, nor always at the top of the wider political agenda. On their own and with the non-radical stance they have adopted within their constabularies (as they tend to work with senior

management rather than directly against it), BPAs will probably not have a dramatic influence on policing at this moment. But BPAs are still relatively new to the internal police world and so their impact may not yet be fully realised. There are no easy answers to the question as to how the BPA is changing the police occupational culture, but it is fair to say that the influence is there, and will perhaps make a deeper impression in line with further developments in the broader field of police and minority ethnic relations.



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