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Organisational justice in online harms management in UK police services: enacting a feminist ethics of care

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a novel integration of two theoretical concepts traditionally examined and applied separately in policing scholarship: feminist ethics of care and organisational justice. Drawing from pioneering empirical work on online harms management in UK police organisations, we analyse 52 interviews with managerial personnel from four partner forces to problematise the emphasis on organisational reputation in online harms management. By applying a feminist ethics of care lens, we theorise and demonstrate how care-based principles, such as attentiveness, relationality, and contextual responsiveness, can underpin organisationally just management strategies in practice. We propose embedding networks of care structures and dependencies within police organisations and advancing a politics of care to enhance perceptions of organisational justice among police personnel, while ensuring managerial officers are supported in and through their care relations. This theoretical integration offers new visions and actionable approaches to care which empowers police personnel and potentially translates into wider public good through more democratic policing. Our policy-oriented recommendations for online harms management are generalisable to international policing contexts and other public-facing professions beyond policing.

Introduction

On 16th February 2024, the British Transport Police (2024) took to X (formerly Twitter) to congratulate Karen Findlay on her new appointment as Assistant Chief Constable (ACC), an esteemed leadership position in the United Kingdom (UK) police services. This social media post was instantaneously met with homophobic and sexist comments, directly targeting ACC Findlay's appearance. As reported by *The Independent*, ACC Findlay condemned these comments as 'homophobic, sexist vileness' that detracted from a recognition of her achievement and commitment to public service (Ng 2024). As human experiences become increasingly mediated by digital platforms (Graham 2013), public-facing professionals are exposed to escalating forms of online violence that often remain invisible, unreported and unacknowledged.

Repeated exposure to an amalgam of online harms (e.g. bullying, doxing, harassment) that may intersect with physical violence creates occupational health hazards for public-facing professionals. In policing, these harms have cascading effects on personnel wellbeing, recruitment, retention, and

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ultimately the quality and fairness of service delivery (Bradford and Quinton 2014). Addressing the perils of policework and its impact on personnel wellbeing is essential for advancing democratic policing, which Jones (2008) argues necessitates 'fairness' and 'redress'. Organisational accountability and procedural fairness must therefore extend not only to the public but also to the organisation's treatment of its own personnel.

This paper examines how organisational responses to online harms shape employees' perceptions of organisational justice, adopting the Online Harms White Paper's (HM Government 2020, p. 24) definition of online harms as 'online content and activity [which] gives rise to a reasonably foreseeable risk of significant physical or psychological impact on individuals'. We apply feminist ethics of care as a theoretical lens to explore whether care-based principles can reframe digital violence as embodied, tangible forms of harm inflicted on corporeal bodies and support organisationally just[1] management strategies. Building on prior work that emphasised well-being approaches to managing online harms (Wong *et al.* 2025), this paper advances the field by theoretically integrating two concepts traditionally examined and applied separately in policing scholarship, feminist ethics of care and organisational justice, and demonstrating their combined potential in both theory and practice.

Our key contribution lies in theorising and empirically illustrating how feminist care ethics can underpin organisational justice within police organisations, offering a pathway for cultural transformation through de-gendering organisational norms and embedding relational, context-sensitive practices. This integration facilitates perceptibly fair management of emerging, less tangible online harms experienced by police personnel. While our analysis focuses on UK policing, it provides a foundational basis for future research exploring its application to other public-facing professions within and beyond the UK. Moreover, the practical recommendations derived from our findings can be adopted by policing organisations globally, and adapted to diverse contexts beyond policing.

Feminist ethics of care

The ethics of care lens emerged from feminist scholars' critical rejection of traditional moral theories underpinned by patriarchal emphasis on justice and impartiality to the extent of downplaying relationships of care[2] (Gilligan 1982). Rather than understanding moral duty in terms of principles and inherent rightness (Lawrence and Maitlis 2012), the ethics of care makes care the moral principle and foundation of governance (Noddings 2013), advocating the doing of care because of its valuable impacts and consequences. A feminist ethics of care is guided by three key principles. First, it emphasises a caring relationship as the foundation of its practice (Noddings 2013) and connects care to those in power 'meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility' (Held 2006, p. 10). Care, therefore, becomes a social practice and moral responsibility, with a focus on the specific needs of individuals with whom we develop relationships. Second, it is underpinned by 'emotions and relational capabilities' (Held 2006, p. 10) of empathy, responsiveness, and sensitivity, all of which are necessary for understanding and responding to individual needs. Third, it rejects the reliance on reasoning and rationalism underpinning masculinist, traditional moral theories, advocating instead for a respect for others and the futures they construct. This constitutes the act of 'set[ting] aside temptation to analyse and plan' (Noddings 2013, p. 30) and is a process where 'innovation takes precedence over permanence, disclosure and responsiveness over clarity and uncertainty' (Ruddick 1980, p. 352).

In the policing literature, studies exploring gendered differences in policing styles (Rabe-Hemp 2008, McCarthy 2013, Schuck 2014, Porter and Prenzler 2017, Brown and Silvestri 2020, Ba *et al.* 2021, Murray 2021, Schuck *et al.* 2023) have produced findings that align with principles of a feminist ethics of care. These studies suggest that female officers adopt more compassionate and interactional approaches in their policing practice and work within communities, reflecting care-based principles. Gendered differences in policing are further illuminated in scholarship exploring police organisational culture. Well-rehearsed themes include examining the ways in which police

organisational practices and policies perpetuate gender inequalities (Veldman *et al.* 2017, Brown *et al.* 2019, Garcia 2021, Alexander and Charman 2024), whether and how gender diversity can spearhead organisational transformation (Schuck 2014, 2017, Schuck and Rabe-Hemp 2016, Rabe-Hemp 2018) and how police officers perform gender and maintain gendered power dynamics within the organisation (Chan *et al.* 2010, Silverstri 2018).

This study develops this emerging line of policing scholarship on a feminist ethics of care by extending it to the organisational and managerial strategies adopted in the management of online risks and harms to police personnel. We shift away from existing emphases in the scholarship which attribute a feminist ethics of care to female officers and advocates for gender diversity as the vehicle for transforming police organisational cultures. Instead, we de-essentialise female officers as compassionate and caring, by proposing a radical shift in organisational strategies for addressing officers' online harms to one underpinned by a feminist ethics of care. By encouraging police organisations to support all police managers, regardless of genders, to embrace a feminist ethics of care in their online harms management approaches, we highlight the potential for facilitating organisational justice through de-gendering police organisations and stepping away from the traditionally masculinist organisational cultures problematised above. Focusing on cultural shifts at the organisational level, we contribute to Woods' (2021, p. 1527) call for 'degendering that aims to replace dominant masculinist cultural norms with antimasculinist ones' in police organisations. Our focus on de-gendering managerial strategies adds to Woods' (2021) proposed reform interventions in the areas of 'antimasculinist officer training and enhanced diversity recruitment'. Additionally, we foreground an intersectional approach to care which acknowledges diverse experiences and needs, to tackle persistent issues identified by several scholars as institutional discrimination and tokenism within police services (Akram 2022, Turner 2024).

Organisational justice in police organisations

There is a significant body of scholarship on organisational justice which examines how perceptions of fairness in the workplace influence employee attitudes (Greenberg 1990). This notion of organisational justice has only more recently been applied to the policing context (Quinton *et al.* 2015). Roberts and Herrington (2013) make a distinction between inward and outward facing organisational justice, the former within organisations and the latter between organisations and stakeholders. In this paper, we focus on inward facing organisational justice, which comprises the impact of justice judgements on staff loyalty, staff behaviours, relationships within the workplace, performance, and productivity (Roberts and Herrington 2013). More specifically, this paper examines whether and how applying a feminist ethics of care lens to the management of online risks and harms contributes to inward facing organisational justice.

Colquitt (2001) highlights how perception of fairness constitutes four aspects of distributive (fairness in resource distribution), procedural (fairness in the process of distribution), interpersonal (feelings of being treated fairly) and informational (adequacy and transparency of explanations provided about outcomes) justice. Colquitt's (2001) four aspects of fairness perception are highlighted in Quinton *et al.*'s (2015) report that policing staff evaluate fairness in relation to interactions, processes and outcomes within police service, with perceived unfairness negatively impacting their behaviours in the workplace. De Angelis and Kupchik (2007) add that when officers judge the investigations of complaints against them to be fair, they felt greater satisfaction despite the outcome. This demonstrates the importance of procedural justice in increasing job satisfaction even when potential disciplinary actions may be involved as an outcome. On a similar note, Farmer *et al.*'s (2003) study of undercover officers found higher job satisfaction, performance and organisational loyalty when distributive and procedural justice are perceived. Some scholars (Aston *et al.* 2021, Bradford and Quinton 2014, Myhill and Bradford 2013, Roberts and Herrington 2013, p. 110) add that police services that engage organisational justice principles enjoy benefits like increased employee commitment, wellbeing, satisfaction, reduced levels of misconduct or support for such behaviours, and

better engagement and service provision of officers to the public. Several studies (Crow *et al.* 2012, Sholihin and Pike 2010) demonstrate the importance of integrating different dimensions of justice when examining organisational justice, as all four aspects contribute towards officers' justice judgements.

Building on Colquitt's (2001) framework, this study evaluates the extent to which a feminist ethics of care towards managing online harms contributes towards perceptions of organisational justice among managerial personnel. Although feminist ethics of care and organisational justice originate from distinct traditions and scholarship, they converge on a shared concern for fairness and relational integrity in organisational culture. Organisational justice encompasses distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational dimensions, each shaped by respect, dignity, transparency and honest communications. Feminist care ethics foregrounds attentiveness, responsiveness and relational embeddedness, which can strengthen the four dimensions of organisational justice. For example, care-based decision-making may promote equitable resource allocation (distributive justice), participatory and context-sensitive processes (procedural justice), empathetic and respectful interactions (interpersonal justice), and transparent, explanatory communication (informational justice). This theoretical alignment provides the rationale for our study, which explores and demonstrates as its central contribution the innovative application of feminist ethics of care principles to online harms management as a means of enhancing perceptions of organisational justice in policing contexts.

Methods

While this paper focuses on managerial personnel, it is part of a wider project on protecting public-facing professionals online (*3PO: Protecting Public-Facing Professionals and their Dependents Online*). Our analysis is based on 52 semi-structured interviews with managerial personnel from four police services in the UK. These forces committed to partnering with this UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funded project and were integral to facilitating data collection. The geographic positioning of the four services spans the regions of Northern England and Scotland, with force sizes ranging from approximately 3600 to 22,000 police personnel. All forces serve a mix of urban and rural areas with varying socio-economic status. The sample comprises both community-based and specialist units managing a wide range of crimes. Interviews were conducted within a 9-month period, between July 2023 and March 2024. Interviewees were recruited first through purposive sampling and selected based on their experiences of managing online harms and holding managerial roles. We relied on specific points of contact (SPOCs) from police forces to assist with participant recruitment, before following up with snowballing techniques to expand the sample.

The sample had a 55/45 split of male (n = 29) and female (n = 23) officers from diverse units and divisions across the four police organisations. Participants who were officers represented all managerial ranks from (detective) sergeants to assistant chief constable. Two constables were included as they had expert knowledge of the field of online security and police training, and experiences of online harms which significantly impacted them. Both their perspectives informed our understanding of (in)effective organisational and managerial approaches to online harms management. Police staff in our sample also represented different positions on the managerial structure. The police officer to civilian staff ratio was 5:1, attributable to our focus on individuals with managerial responsibilities over public-facing officers, with line managers often police officers themselves. All interviewees had more than 10 years' experience in service and many had worked in more than one UK police service. Approximately 20% of interviewees expressed having experienced some forms of online harms. Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, with each session lasting between 60 and 75 min. Our decision to stop recruitment was informed by the achievement of data saturation, defined by Given (2016, p. 135) as the point at which 'additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes'.

The focus of the interviews was on mapping various understandings of online risks and harms among managers and their approaches to managing them to ensure the wellbeing of officers for which they have responsibility. We invited interviewees to elaborate and reflect on their experience of managing police personnel's online harms, the resources they drew on to address specific issues and their understanding of where responsibilities lie in ensuring the online safety and security of officers and staff. Over 57 hours of audio recordings were produced and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised and analysed using NVivo. We supplemented our empirical data with 46 documents representing 25 police forces across the UK. These included social media policies, guidance and training materials, the College of Policing's (2013) Guidance on Relationships with the Media, College of Policing's (2014, 2024) Code of Ethics, and broader level reports from the Home Office and Independent Office for Police Conduct on media relationships and social media engagement. Social media policies were identified through a Google search for publicly available documents created by UK police organisations, using the Boolean operators: 'and', 'or' alongside key search terms: 'social media policy', 'social media guidance', 'online code of conduct', 'misconduct', 'professional standards' and 'UK policing'. We also gathered a small number of protectively marked policy documents, guidance, training and intranet resources from participant forces for inclusion in our analysis to enhance our understanding of the broader organisational structures influencing managerial strategies.

NVivo was used for thematic coding, described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) as 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within [qualitative] data'. We adopt Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006)'s hybrid use of inductive and deductive approaches to thematic analysis (see Table 1). In deductive analysis, our research questions, together with categories taken from the

Table 1. Hybrid thematic analysis.

Themes from Fereday and Muir Cochrane's (2006) hybrid thematic analysis			
Deductive analysis	Inductive analysis	Thematic frames in the paper	Perceptions of organisational justice
Based on research questions			
Perceptions of risks and harms	Invisibility of online harms	Threats of punitive sanctions	Negative
		A care-oriented approach to managing online harms	Positive
	Normalisation of harms	Normalisation of online harms	Negative
Risk mitigation	Personal responsibility	Prioritising organisational needs	Negative
	Self resilience	Prioritising organisational needs	Negative
Harms management	Misconduct and disciplinary measures	Threats of punitive sanctions	Negative
		Prioritising organisational needs	Negative
		A care-oriented approach to managing online harms	Positive
Structures of responsibilities	Process-oriented	Threats of punitive sanctions	Negative
		Prioritising organisational needs	Negative
Based on principles of ethics of care			
Emotionality		A care-oriented approach to managing online harms	Positive
Relationality		A care-oriented approach to managing online harms	Positive
Care	Care deficiency	A care-oriented approach to managing online harms	Positive

principles of an ethics of care, guided the development of our coding schema and data interpretation. Drawing from Boyatzis (1998), we identified themes 'through reading and contemplation [of] the theory' and pilot coding to ensure the 'compatibility of the raw information'. Deductive analysis yielded a rigorously theorised framework covering 'perceptions of risk and harms', 'risk mitigation', 'harms management', 'structures of responsibilities', 'emotionality', 'relationality' and 'care'. This provided a well-established baseline for the overlaying of inductive analysis (see Table 1). Our inductive approach generated additional themes which were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stage approach to thematic analysis. We identified further subthemes relating to the key themes, such as the 'invisibility of online harms', 'normalisation of harms', 'misconduct and disciplinary measures', 'personal responsibility', 'process-oriented', 'self-resilience' and 'care deficiency' (see Table 1). We prioritised insights gathered from interviews, with those from the collected documents supplementing our wider understanding of organisational structures. Such is to spotlight the lived experiences of managerial personnel who operationalise social media policies and guidelines to ensure the online safety and security of their team members.

Ethical challenges were carefully considered throughout the study. Ethical approval was sought with Edinburgh Napier University before fieldwork begun. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees before interviews were conducted. We ensured that participation was voluntary and that interviewees were not pressured to contribute to the study by higher ranking personnel in their organisations. We checked that pseudonyms provided by participants did not bear any personal identifiers and suggested that they provide a different pseudonym when necessary. Care was taken to de-identify the data before storing it on the University's secure drive, with further diligence given to ensuring anonymity in our reporting.

Findings

Themes identified in our inductive and deductive analysis (discussed above) are assimilated into three broad topics. The first topic 'threats of punitive sanctions', encompasses how organisational perceptions of online risk and harm interacts with extant policies and standard operating procedures to produce an implicit connection between the experience of online harm and officer misconduct. The second topic, 'normalisation of online harms and prioritising organisational needs' comprises the themes of 'process-oriented', 'invisibility of online harms', 'normalisation of harms', 'self-resilience' and 'personal responsibility' and 'harms management'. Here we illustrate how the experience of online harms, more generally, is a normalised part of policing, and responsibility for one's protection from them has been lateralised across officers themselves, rather than sitting with the organisation. The third and final topic, 'a care-oriented approach to managing online harms' included themes of 'emotionality', 'relationality and care', 'perceptions of risks and harms' and 'harms management'. This section elaborates on each of these topics to illustrate how applying a feminist ethics of care lens may be helpful in increasing perceptions of organisational justice among police personnel and ensuring that managerial officers are supported in and through their care relations.

Threats of punitive sanctions

In our discussions about online harm prevention with managers, interviewees framed the issue through a subset of extant risk mitigation strategies mobilised by Professional Standards units and guided by the Code of Ethics (2014). Since the revised Code of Ethics (2024) was unpublished at the time of our interviews, we were unable to assess the impacts of these revisions on organisational approaches to online harms. Our interviewees described a situation where the long-term emphasis of risk mitigation strategies on maintaining online 'behavioural appropriateness' and 'disciplining misbehaviour' instilled an organisational culture towards online harms that was underpinned by the threat of punitive sanctions.

In organisational policy documents, online risks are largely constructed as those which are harmful to police organisations' reputation rather than officer wellbeing. Officers are assigned responsibility for ensuring good online conduct and exercising due diligence in online engagements, to prevent bringing policing into disrepute, undermining public trust or confidence. In this framing, an implicit connection is made between reporting negative online experiences and being subjected to the internal scrutiny of Professional Standards which naturally has implications for officers' feelings about online exposure and their employers' priorities in supporting them. Narratives from our interviewees reveal a masculinist culture that reinforces rational behaviours of self-regulation through procedural, disciplinary mechanisms involving power and control, which have implications for police personnel's perceptions of organisational justice. These organisational cultural sensibilities invoke feelings of being targeted, scrutinised and treated unfairly. Rebecca (Chief Inspector, female) reflects on the negative perceptions of the Professional Standards department among some officers in their service:

> I think there is a perception from local policing of PSD [Professional Standards Department] because, you know, unless someone's worked in this environment, they probably don't fully understand it, and there perhaps is perception of they're just out to get you. You know, and it's always bad news if PSD comes knocking on your door, that kind of thing.

Rebecca's discussion suggests a lack of procedural and informational justice, since police officers and staff 'don't fully understand' how Professional Standards units operate and the rationale behind a strong emphasis on organisational reputation. A lack of procedural and informational justice, specifically relating to explanations from the organisation about motivations behind and processes around disciplinary actions and its related outcomes, can impact perceptions of interpersonal justice. Officers and staff develop fears, anxieties and mistrust of the Professional Standards unit, perceiving it as a detached locus of internal social control that is 'out to get them'. This forecloses the possibility of developing more interpersonal relations with Professional Standards units, as police personnel do not appear to consider PSD to be a legitimate source of support for coping with personal experiences of online risks and harms, and instead see their involvement as a risky consequence of victimisation.

A masculinist approach to online risk mitigation, underpinned by punitive sanctions, can have negative implications on multiple dimensions of justice, which in turn shapes police personnel's perception of limited organisational justice. Increasing recognition of this framing has informed recent shifts in the strategic management of online risks and harms in two partner police forces, which sought to move away from a reactionary to a more preventative strategy. This is described by interviewees as giving more emphasis to online harm prevention rather than reactive and punitive deterrence. A more interpersonal, care-oriented approach aligning with principles of the feminist ethics of care appears to be adopted in the implementation of these preventative measures. Bella (Chief Superintendent, female) discusses a shift in their organisation towards taking on more responsibility for supporting police personnel in this context rather than identifying and punishing wrong-doing:

> We have a responsibility to make sure people understand what they should and shouldn't be doing. We have a responsibility to support people if they feel that they are being targeted. We have a responsibility to support people if they feel they've done something wrong, they've made a mistake, because we are human. I still think we're feeling our way through that but, you know, as an organisation, we should be able to say, if you feel you've made an error in judgement, come and seek some help and we will put that right. You know, lying, hiding it, worst thing to do.

While the emphasis on appropriate ways of behaving online persists, Bella frames this in terms of organisational responsibility for awareness raising as opposed to emphasising the individual responsibility and behaviour of police personnel. Informational justice is pursued by providing clarity to officers about 'what they should and shouldn't be doing' online. Supporting police personnel who have experienced harms appears to be framed as a moral responsibility that police organisations bear, and that officers should be supported regardless of their conduct because they 'are human' and need room to make 'mistake[s]'. In removing ambiguity and normalising human

nature in decision making, there is an attempt to reframe these processes in supportive terms. Managing conduct through care and relationality, aligning with a feminist ethics of care principle, is evident in Bella's emphasis on supporting those who have been subjected to online violence, as well as acknowledging the fallibility and humanness of police personnel. A focus on providing support and engaging with emotions to recognise humanness is presented as a means to address Westmarland and Rowe's (2018) 'blue wall' of silence. Through a feminist ethics of care framework which highlights to police personnel different ways of accessing support mechanisms in the event of crisis, procedural and distributive justice could be improved.

Police personnel may not only have a clearer idea about what constitutes online harms and 'misconduct', but also the distribution of organisational resources to support their wellbeing. Bella anticipates that downplaying the deployment of punitive sanctions will encourage police personnel to be more upfront about their online experiences especially where their actions may constitute misdeeds. This could also enable support services to be provided to mitigate anticipated risks or address experienced harms earlier on. Unlike a reactionary masculinist approach based on punitive sanctions, a preventative strategy rooted in principles of a feminist ethics of care shows potential for facilitating all four aspects of procedural, distributive, interpersonal and informational justice.

Normalisation of online harms and prioritising organisational needs

Police organisations and occupational culture can make invisible or normalise the landscape of online risks and harms. A risk-based approach to online harms management can imply that embodied harms which are not tangible or visibly inflicted on corporeal bodies can go unrecognised and unaddressed due to perceptions of low risk or harm. Deeper probing during our interviews revealed various experiences on social media platforms which impacted police personnel psychologically but failed to be reported or revealed as significant incidents requiring attention and support. Amelia (managerial staff, female) described being involved in a publicly visible inquiry at work and experiencing psychological harms from exposure to online insults both on and off-duty:

> So the [X incident], which [X] Police obviously were heavily involved in, this was very difficult because […] the comments that you were reading on a daily basis were literally around being called murderers, scum, you're covering things up […]. And even though that wasn't me or anyone else who was working there, that is quite hard to read on a daily basis and seeing what the public think about not you personally, but it does feel personal because that's your employer, that's who you work for […] I found it particularly difficult with that one, to the point where all my social media I made private and completely shut down so even on LinkedIn, and to this day I'm still kind of … you can't find me on LinkedIn because of that association that came with working for that force that was coming under such public scrutiny and criticism and nasty comments on social media. So yes, it can, definitely it can have a very detrimental effect on your wellbeing.

Even though Amelia's incident was work-related and not personally targeted online abuse, the experience implicated them negatively both on and off-duty. This psychological impact on Amelia's everyday life was long-term, extending beyond the duration of the incident and continuing to limit their personal online activities more than a decade. Amelia's experiences highlight how failures to recognise and address the psychological harms of online engagement can be permanently 'detrimental' to the wellbeing of police personnel.

Yet, online (and offline) abuse targeted at police services in general, rather than at specific police personnel, is often normalised as 'part-and-parcel' of police organisations' increased online engagement with the public. Robert (Sergeant, male) illustrates this normalisation of online harms and the psychological impacts it can have on police personnel:

> Whether we recognise it or not, I think it has a kind of, a social, psychological harm to it. It's almost a reflection of what we deal with out on the street, whereas we have to take a lot of abuse […]. So, **that's a part of our job to be expected to take verbal abuse**. I mean, **physical abuse, obviously, we can deal with that, but verbal abuse**. And then, online, you have all this anti-police, anti, hate stuff, you know, people making things up, that you know fine well, is not true. And you can't comment, you can't do anything, you just have to stay

away from all of it. It's really, it does make you feel, sometimes, like less of a citizen, if you know what I mean, you have a lot less rights.

To Robert, policing is a job associated with risks of abuse which police services expect officers to shoulder. This normalised experience of physical abuse in policing has informed risk perceptions of the digital space where online abuse is not constructed as having the potential to harm officers in an equivalent way. Such an attitude towards online abuse can contribute to the routinisation of harms exposure among police personnel. Robert highlights the challenges of coping with online verbal abuse because it is of a different scale and nature to the physical abuse experienced by officers when on the job. For Robert, not being able to freely engage online, like any other member of the public, to dispel the perceived myths and misinformation perpetuated about police services creates another layer of stress. Grumpy (Superintendent, male) labels the online insults directed to police organisations and personnel as 'online abuse' and 'verbal abuse', differentiating such forms of violence from day-to-day offline violence because it:

> can probably be perceived sometimes worse from a victim perspective because normally it's quite relentless. A face-to-face level of verbal abuse would probably involve, you know, you encountering that individual, whereas online you can be sat sending message after message after message constantly all day long without even seeing that other individual.

Our in-depth exploration of what managerial officers consider to constitute online risks has revealed various dimensions of harm which were neglected by police services due to their lack of a materiality. Yet, as Grumpy suggested, online harms can often be more persistent, psychologically detrimental, and permanent than physical abuse on corporeal bodies, as we later illustrate below. In instances where such forms of online abuse were reported, a top-down, strategic implementation of regulations, investigative and signposting procedures is limited in addressing the harms inflicted. This does not recognise the specific needs of police personnel and can generate feelings that police services prioritise organisational reputation over officer wellbeing. For example, Dave, a minority officer targeted by citizen journalism, described the immense psychological distress and anxiety he experienced when a video of him on-duty mocking his disability went viral on social media. While Dave described receiving adequate support in terms of line manager involvement and professional counselling services, he felt these provisions to be ineffective in addressing the root cause of the distress, which is the continued existence of the video. Dave expressed frustration over the long wait for investigations to be conducted and the lack of updates from the police service, adding that 'if there's a crime that's been committed against an officer, it takes time to find an outcome. But any public reports of crime [… gets] fully investigated'. This long wait for a resolution from the police service without any forms of consistent updates, led Dave to develop an avoidance of social media, for fear of coming across the video and its growing list of insulting comments from the public. This clearly indicates a lack of procedural and informational justice in the handling of his case, which was exacerbated by its comparison with services delivered to the general public. This perceived lack of procedural and informational justice compromised the effectiveness of interpersonal and distributive justice which emerged from line managerial and professional support services. Such inadequacies led Dave to perceive a lack of organisational justice in the handling of his online harm, stating that:

> I think for my line manager, middle line manager, I felt that the support she was giving was benefitting the organisation more than me. Because she stated to me. **Look, […] I have to look after the organisation, I have to look at the best interest of the organisation**. I am like, I am not doing anything wrong. Everybody is still seeing the video; they are still the same thing. But what do you suppose by the organisation when I have done nothing that could put the organisation in a disrepute, if you know what I mean? […] Well, **I felt from her she was more bothered about the organisation than about me**.

The evident prioritisation of organisational reputation and police legitimacy has the scope to completely undermine police personnel's perceptions of organisational justice, especially when police officers themselves have been victimised. A perceived lack of organisational justice risks discouring

officers' reporting of harms, leading to a vicious cycle of further routinisation and normalisation of online harm. Milke (Detective Sergeant, male) describes how the lack of perceived support discouraged future reporting of incidents among police personnel:

> I've been speaking to a colleague who works in this department, and she was treated quite badly and then it went to an inquiry, and she was pulled into the hearing and asked a number of questions without being briefed, without being supported, without being told how something would progress, even so she was the victim. And very bad, poor support to the point that she's turned around and says, I will not report anything now, I will not report it.

Our findings highlight a need for police organisations to draw on a feminist ethics of care to understand and acknowledge police personnel's lived experiences of the online space, how it is implicated by their policing identities, and their emotions and support needs around coping with online victimisation. The reliance on a masculinist lens risks personnel's perceptions of a lack of organisational justice and reluctance to seek help for future issues which may arise.

A care-oriented approach to managing online harms

Managerial approaches to police personnel's online harms were neither universal nor consistent within or across police services. Managers who adopted a care-oriented approach aligning with principles of a feminist ethics of care demonstrated effective provision of support to personnel, and increased perception of fairness. Line managers adopting a care-oriented approach were largely motivated by the desire to provide others with support they failed to receive when they were experiencing online harms. For example, Milke (Detective Sergeant, male) reports having experienced significant tension and distress due to media visibility, when

> My name was mentioned regarding the [X] investigation. Initially there was a complaint made against me which was unfounded, but I had the BBC attend my home address wanting to have comments from what I thought about the [X] investigation. [… Support] was actually disgustingly disappointing, because I reported that my name was in the public, the complaint against me didn't go any further because there wasn't any substance to it. And I got an email back from my [X] colleagues to turn around and say, your case isn't going to go any further. That was it, there was no one sat down with me, no one said to me, oh, how were you affected, no one is supporting you, there's just an expectation you get on with it, there was actually no one interested.

This uninvited media visibility due to their policing role further impacted Milke's social interactions with others both online and offline. Milke described being consistently conscious about not revealing his police identity when on social media platforms and in public events, because this can be a conversation stopper and impact on his capacity to make new friends. Despite the stress and tensions Milke experienced during and post-incident, the police service failed to provide any forms of support, leading Milke to perceive a lack of informational justice in terms of not having been briefed about the investigation. The absence of support amounted to a lack of distributive justice, and interpersonal justice was not demonstrated as he was not contacted to find out how he was coping with the incident. This perceived lack of organisational justice in his case management led Milke to contribute his personal efforts towards providing effective support by undergoing training to become 'a welfare champion'. In his role as welfare champion, Milke relates how his own experiences informed the ways he relate to those requiring support:

> I view that now as a really positive experience so I can empathise with people a little bit more and, hopefully, understand where they're coming from when they turn around and say, this situation has happened, and not just brush it off and think, well, what do you expect me to do about it?

Milke's description of his managerial strategy aligns with principles of a feminist ethics of care. Drawing on emotions to exercise care and relationality, a keystone of the feminist ethics of care, is alluded to in Milke's emphasis on empathy and understanding others' positionality, potentially contributing to interpersonal justice. Furthermore, Milke describes the importance of not 'brushing' off people and their circumstances, but giving due attention to identifying their needs, aligning with

a feminist ethics of care which respects the unique experiences of others and avoids rationalising about the event. A feminist ethics of care enabled Milke to 'reach out to other people to say I'm here even though I don't directly line manage [you]', to provide the care and support that officers require but have not been able to get from their own line managers. Milke therefore contributes towards distributive justice as a welfare champion by ensuring fairer distribution and access to support services for police personnel in the organisation. However, given this is an individual, rather than an organisational response, this appears to result in an unfair distribution of work for those adopting this approach.

Unlike Milke, most managerial officers are unlikely to invest additional time and energy to take on an additional role to support others in the organisation. However, many line managers who experienced a lack of organisational justice in the management of their own online harms have transformed their managerial practices to ensure they do not perpetuate a similar form of neglect in their leadership. For example, Katie (senior managerial staff, female) described how the lack of support and care from the organisation when she was experiencing and coping with online harms informed her motivation to be a pillar of support in her senior management role:

> And having people support you in that moment, because I think what happens, what my experience was, is when it was happening to me everybody disappeared. And it was only when things had calmed down again that people would come back and they would express their sympathies or show support at that point, but they weren't there when it was happening. And what I do now is when it's happening and they're in the eye of the storm, I will just call them and say, look, I know today is really bad, tomorrow is going to be a better day.

Feelings of being abandoned throughout her ordeal led Katie to ensure that she is available to support individuals when going through the toughest moments. Police personnel experience different stages across the investigation and rectification process of online harm incidents, with organisational failures to provide support during the most challenging periods having a significant impact on perceptions of organisational justice. Katie contributes to interpersonal and informational justice by ensuring that she provides support to officers and staff when most needed, going the extra mile by giving them a call to prepare them for the worst and reassure them that things will only get better. Officers and staff are provided information to prepare for what is to come and are given an opportunity to voice their concerns and anxieties through their interactions with Katie. In addition, Katie engaged principles of the feminist ethics of care, by establishing care and relationality with police personnel through drawing on her own lived experiences and emotions. In Katie's words:

> I think when you've been on the receiving end of it, as I was … all my family were doorstepped by the mainstream media, lots of things said about me on social media, and I think that's really fundamentally changed the advice that I give. So I talk in terms of, this is how I felt, this is what it looked like for me, this is how far it went for me. This is what I did about it. Rather than talking in the third person, I am able to talk in the first person, and I think for some of the officers, it engages them more when it's a personal story. I think it gives me a bit of credibility with them, that I'm not judging them for the position they find themselves in. I'm really aware of what it's like to be in that position and it's not that kind of remote and detached advice that I might have once given, it's very personal advice.

Relating to others through an interpersonal experience facilitates Katie's development of relationships with police personnel, which is particularly important for those at senior managerial levels within hierarchical organisations such as police services. Katie's experience of online harms enabled her to demonstrate respect for officers' and staff's narratives about their own online experiences, and to provide realistic and context relevant advice when needed. Both Milke and Katie's managerial strategies resonate with those of several other male and female line managers who have drawn on their own experiences of online harms to inform more effective support structures aligning with a feminist ethics of care lens. Their unique and self-motivated inputs have contributed towards the four dimensions of organisational justice in the management of online risks and harms, highlighting significant potentials for shifting organisational and managerial practices away from a masculinist approach towards a feminist ethics of care framework.

Discussion

The accounts of police managers highlight a complex and evolving landscape of online risks and harms faced by police personnel working within our increasingly digitised society. Above we demonstrated how masculinist organisational strategies underpinned by threats of punitive sanctions contribute to the normalisation and routinisation of online harms to police personnel. Keipi *et al*. (2017) describe online hate as perpetuated through routinised interactions between individuals in digital spaces. Boyd (2014, p. 11) points to an amplification of harm through online platforms, due to the 'spreadability' and visibility of online interactions. Police managers have indicated how online harassment and insults directed towards police personnel is more persistent online, when compared with bounded face-to-face encounters. Most incidents of online abuse described by police managers align with Keipi *et al*. (2017, p. 70) whereby they tend to be 'specifically targeted at individual characteristics' and 'motivated by developments on a global scale relating to issues central to certain identity groups'. Police personnel's identity as a police officer or staff exposes them to greater online targeting in response to changing public perceptions of policing which is informed by global and national events, scandals, and investigations. Interviewees' narratives of the different episodes of online abuse suggest that those specifically targeted tend to focus on individual characteristics, usually relating to physical appearance, gender, sexual orientation, disability or ethnicity. This means that minority officers experience greater risk and compounded multi-dimensional harms.

Police services appear to downplay non-individually targeted online insults as less harmful and requiring similar levels of risk mitigation responses to those directed at individuals. However, Scheuerman *et al*. (2021) report that insults directed at a group in general also constitute harmful content which can result in online harm. Tokunaga (2010) finds that victims of online bullying experience similar types of psychosocial and affective problems as those of traditional bullying, such as alleviated levels of depression and reduced self-esteem. We demonstrate how the negative impacts manifested among police personnel and draw attention to the often-prolonged nature of these harms. The lack of attention and support provided to officers experiencing both general and non-individually targeted online harms contributed to a perceived lack of organisational justice among police personnel.

Our findings emphasise the need to direct more attention towards addressing the online victimisation of police personnel if organisational justice is to be achieved. Police organisations need to recognise the distinctiveness of online harms from offline harms and construct new strategies for risks mitigation and harms management (Wong *et al*. 2025). Online hostility targeting police in general should not be dismissed as negligible but be recognised as cumulatively harmful content with potential negative psychological impacts, especially for officers persistently exposed as part of their duties.

Furthermore, additional work is required to understand the harms encountered by minority personnel to ensure organisational support structures meet their specific needs. To provide more responsive support structures to police personnel who have experienced online victimisation, a necessary first step is the acknowledgement of the unique challenges they face. A feminist ethics of care, with its three core principles emphasising relationality, emotional engagement and responsiveness to individual needs, provides a strong framework for the implementation of more context-sensitive approaches to online harms management. Our findings demonstrate that managerial strategies aligning with principles of a feminist ethics of care have been effectively mobilised by both male and female police managers such as Milke and Katie to address police personnel's online harms. The choice of a feminist ethics of care approach is therefore not gender specific, nor is there evidence in our study to suggest that such a framework is more readily adopted by female officers as is documented in existing scholarship. Rather than attributing a feminist ethics of care to the policing and managerial practices of female officers, our findings demonstrate that integrating this anti-masculinist framework into organisational and managerial practices contributes to Woods's (2021) call for a degendering of police culture.

We highlighted how managerial practices underpinned by a feminist ethics of care can influence fairness perception among police personnel, contributing to four aspects of organisational justice, namely distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational. The principle of relationality encourages managers to develop strong and supportive relationships with team members which increases perceptions of interpersonal justice. Through interpersonal relationships underpinned by care, managers can connect emotionally with team members to understand their specific needs for support in relation to the online harms they have experienced. We provide evidence of this emerging organically in some services. Scholars (Schoenebeck *et al*. 2021, Schoenebeck *et al*. 2021) report that individual preferences for resolutions of online harms differ based on gender, class, and ethnic identities. Senior managers, therefore, need to understand the perceptions and needs of police personnel to tailor their responses to harm and facilitate the best resolutions for each case. By respecting police narratives of their online experiences and giving them space to explain their needs, managers can ensure context-sensitive and fairer distribution of support services, contributing to increased perceptions of distributive justice.

Listening to the lived narratives of police personnel rather than reasoning about the precarity of the digital space ensures that managers can provide them with context-sensitive information about the processes and procedures involved in case resolution and relevant updates. The findings on the significance of personnel's narratives in influencing evaluations of impartiality, respect and trust echo those of procedural justice scholars (Lind *et al*. 1997, Dai *et al*. 2011, Soloman 2019). We have demonstrated how prolonged waits for investigative procedures with no defined outcomes can have detrimental impacts on psychological wellbeing, especially for those who have been victimised online. Adopting a relational care approach would prioritise constant communication between police personnel and their line managers, reliable updates on case resolution, and thereby increase procedural and informational justice.

Whilst highlighting the key role of line managers in implementing a feminist ethics of care model, we caution against overburdening them with emotional labour and responsibilising them for organisational care labour. Held (2006, p. 72) writes that 'an ethic of care that extols caring but that fails to be concerned with how the burdens of caring are distributed' can become exploitative. Police organisations need to be involved in supporting and resourcing line managers for their care provision to ensure the ethical distribution of labour and resources. Kittay (2011) states that relationships of dependence in a feminist ethics of care model needs to be supported by societal structures which acknowledge the inevitability of dependency, and the extension of care beyond the private realm of intimate relations to the public sphere of resource distribution, which facilitates distributive justice.

Police services must recognise that police personnel are, in the words of Kittay (2011, p. 56), 'all embedded in nested dependencies' and that the organisation has a moral responsibility to support these relations of care and dependencies between line managers and police personnel. By functioning as a backbone of support for human dependency, police services can encourage managerial caring labour and foster interdependence between managers and those they supervise in negotiating online risks and harms. For this to happen, police organisations need to engage in Barnes *et al*.'s (2015, p. 238) 'dialogic and narrative form of practice' to better understand the experiences of line managers and police personnel involved in caring relations. Police services can then draw on these lived realities of caring relations to inform policy discourses and the development of social media guidelines and procedures in ways that emphasise a politics of care. Embedding care principles at this level ensures that organisational strategies move beyond abstract commitments and translate into actionable practices. This includes integrating relational and empathetic approaches into training, performance frameworks, and leadership expectations, so that care becomes a structural norm rather than an institutional burden or a stigma. By institutionalising these practices, organisations can foster cultural change that is driven by senior leadership and reinforced through everyday procedures.

Barnes (2012, p. 59) adds that a feminist ethics of care needs to move beyond the personal level of providing care, to one which 'demands a response from public services to enable social justice'. A reliance on managerial officers to adopt a feminist ethics of care in their online harms management practices is inadequate and risks overburdening managers with additional responsibilities without adequate systems to support their work. Whole organisational strategies are necessary to ensure distributive justice for both line managers and police personnel. Police services need to participate equitably in caring for their personnel, making the needs of police managers, officers and staff a central concern in developing management strategies. Police organisations need to exercise a moral responsibility over the wellbeing of managers involved in care relations, ensuring that managers have access to adequate training and resources to perform their responsibilities, and that self-care is built into relations of care, so managers do not lose sight of their own needs. This requires organisational investment and leadership commitment to a shared responsibility model where care should be distributed across the leadership structure, with senior leaders and organisational units sharing accountability for creating and sustaining a culture of care. This means embedding care into organisational policies and decision-making, ensuring that managers are supported through workload adjustments, resources, and clear escalation pathways. By positioning care as an organisational responsibility rather than an individual burden, this can reduce over-responsibility and make care practice sustainable. In so doing, police organisations are tied into these relations of interdependencies and can contribute to what Ward and Gahagan (2010, p. 216) term 'responsive policy making'; which empowers police personnel who are both involved in, and benefit from new visions and approaches to care. An ethics of care approach would ideally be adopted more widely, beyond the realm of online harms, to promote organisational justice and facilitate culture change in police organisations. Furthermore, this learning is also relevant to managing online harms for other public facing professionals outside the police, including other emergency services.

Conclusion

A male-dominated police occupational culture with a masculine ethos has been linked to misconduct, unethical practices (Brown *et al.* 2019), and a 'blue wall' of silence (Westmarland and Rowe 2018). This can influence the values and practices that officers develop, impacting their attitudes towards policing and the relationships they develop within the communities they work. Scholars (Manning 2010, Myhill and Bradford 2013, Tankebe 2014, Trinkner *et al.* 2016) highlight that organisational composition and cultures in police services can influence the extent to which officers support and adopt procedurally just approaches in their policing work. Police reformists and abolitionists have called for new ways of doing policing. Meares (2017) suggests that 'policing as we know it must be abolished before it can be transformed […] to recenter policing's fundamental nature as public good'. Along a similar note, scholar and activist on prison and police abolition, Mariame Kaba (cited in Dukmasova 2016), calls for 'the building up of new ways of intersecting and new ways of relating with each other' as part of abolition efforts.

This paper responds to these advocacies for change by reframing the question posed when confronting unjust approaches in policing. By integrating two key concepts, the feminist ethics of care and organisational justice, we propose a transformation which begins from within police organisations through the fair and just treatment of police personnel. The influence of organisational dynamics on policing behaviours has long been recognised by scholars (Smith 1984, Wagner and Decker 1993, Lee *et al.* 2010) albeit less directly addressed, with no identifiable focus on online harms. We demonstrate that organisational practices and managerial strategies which draw on a feminist ethics of care to address police personnel's online harms can enable 'new relational dynamics' to emerge (see Kaba, cited in Dukmasova 2016). Managing online risks and harms through care and relationality demonstrates vast potential for meeting both the mental and physical wellbeing needs of police personnel and challenging now antiquated masculinist notions of 'self-sufficiency' and 'resilience' associated with not seeking support for experienced harms. By

addressing online harms through relationality and showing respect for others' lived narratives, a feminist ethics of care framework can reduce the threat of punitive sanctions and challenge the normalisation of online harms, all of which can contribute to a greater sense of organisational justice among police personnel. Encouraging Kaba's (cited in Dukmasova 2016) 'new ways of relating with each other' within police organisations, centred around care and wellbeing needs, can translate into the adoption of policing cultures described by Meares (2017) as centred around the 'public good'.

However, it is untenable to risk overburdening line managers, many of whom have experienced online victimisation themselves, as this ultimately risks undermining their experience of distributive justice. Although the approach of some line managers above represents an important indication of a cultural shift, systemic organisational change is required to provide appropriate support structures. A focus on inward facing organisational justice, through a feminist ethics of care framework as a starting point, may bring about a more satisfied and respected workforce more oriented towards democratic policing practices. Reform proposals focusing on changing individual attitudes and behaviours to address service level issues ignores the deeper dynamics of the impacts of a masculinist organisational culture on officers' personal wellbeing and approaches to policing.

Incidents of police violence do not justify online violence against police personnel and yet, generalised hostility and harassment have become normalised experience in policing. Our analysis establishes the need to support police personnel through a feminist ethics of care lens to build up an organisational infrastructure which addresses social injustice, harms, and inequalities fairly and justly. Rather than emphasising an ethos of discipline in cases of online misconduct to service the maintenance of organisational reputation, we demonstrate that similar objectives of increasing organisational reputation and police legitimacy can be achieved through a feminist ethics of care framework, without the backlash associated with a masculinist culture. Our findings make a key contribution to existing scholarship by highlighting how organisational justice in police services can be achieved through applying the principles of a feminist ethics of care to managerial strategies, and how such a practice can translate into wider public good in terms of more democratic policing.

Notes

1. See sections below on feminist ethics of care and organisational justice in police organisations for more in-depth elaboration of these concepts and how they are operationalised in this paper. These concepts are introduced separately to preserve conceptual clarity and their distinct theoretical traditions before being integrated to develop the paper's central argument on their combined application in policing contexts.
2. This critique targets abstract, universalist notions of justice rather than rejecting justice itself. It challenges the dominance of impartiality and universalism when these principles obscure relational responsibilities. In organisational contexts, justice is not purely abstract, it involves fairness in treatment, voice and respect, which are dimensions that resonate with feminist care ethics.

Author contributions

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