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What matters to the public when they call the police?
Insights from a call centre

Contact with the police impacts upon public judgements of the police. The experiences of those who contact the public police by telephone concerning non-emergency issues have received little attention in the existing literature. This article presents findings from a qualitative examination of a police Constabulary's non-emergency call-handling processes, exploring some of the factors which shaped the contact experienced through this channel. Interviews were conducted with 70 members of the public who contacted the Constabulary through its call centre, with the police call-handlers who answered some of these calls, and with call centre supervisors and senior managers. Police call-handlers were positive about their jobs, despite acknowledging the somewhat repetitive nature of the work, as they believed they were helping the public by providing a valuable, worthwhile service. Callers were primarily concerned with how they were treated and noted that the most memorable and helpful components of their calls to the police were the ways in which call-handlers conveyed empathy, understanding, interest, sensitivity and politeness. Having a call answered in under 40 seconds, one of the quantitative performance targets used to measure performance in the police call centre, appeared to be less important to callers. The article concludes by arguing that quantitative targets are ill-suited to measuring and supporting the kind of emotional labour that call-handlers undertake and the emotional engagement that callers value. Providing high-quality service should be the priority for police call centres, as this is likely to generate positive judgements of the police.

Keywords: police call-handling; public opinion of the police; procedural legitimacy; contact management

Introduction

It matters what people think about the police as the latter rely on the 'consent, assistance and cooperation of the public' in order to operate effectively (Jackson et al. 2013, p. 2). The way in which the police behave during contact with the public has been shown to influence a range of interrelated judgements of this key public institution. Trust in the police, for example, often defined as the belief that the police perform competently when undertaking the tasks assigned to them (Hough et al. 2010, Jackson and Bradford 2010, Jackson et al. 2011), has been shown to be closely linked to experiences of contact with the police. A substantial body of research has illustrated that contact with the police, particularly when deemed to be less than satisfactory by a member of the public, can reduce levels of public trust and confidence in this institution (Schafer et al. 2003, Rosenbaum et al. 2005, Allen et al. 2006, Skogan 2006, Schuck et al. 2008, Bradford et al. 2009a, Bradford 2011). Although perhaps less apparent, evidence also exists that demonstrates how experiences of contact which are judged to be satisfactory by the public can have a positive effect on ratings of trust and confidence in the police (Tyler and Fagan 2008, Bradford et al. 2009a, Myhill and Bradford 2012). It is important, therefore, that efforts are made to ensure experiences of contact with the police are positive.

But what, specifically, are the public considering when constructing judgements of the police? Many studies have considered the social and moral connection between the public and the police and the role this connection can play in judgements of the police (FitzGerald et al. 2002, Loader and Mulcahy 2003, Jackson and Sunshine 2007, Bradford et al. 2009b, Hohl et al. 2010, Hough et al. 2010, Bradford 2011, Jackson et al. 2011). To judge the police as trustworthy, the trustee should feel that the police understand what is important to them and share the same moral values as they do. In turn, perceiving the police as legitimate involves the belief that the police can be voluntarily deferred to on certain issues and will behave fairly and respectfully towards those they direct (Sunshine and Tyler 2003a, Tyler 2006, 2011, Tyler and Fagan 2008, Jackson et al. 2011). If members of the public feel that they have been treated fairly and with respect by the

police, they are more likely to perceive the police as procedurally fair. Indeed, where the police behave in a manner which is assessed as procedurally fair by members of the public, the social bonds between the public and the police are likely to be consolidated (Tyler and Huo 2002, Sunshine and Tyler 2003b, Tyler 2006).

Tyler (2011, p. 258) argues that 'quality of treatment dominates people's reactions to personal encounters with the police'. There is a wealth of research which supports this statement, arguing that when making a judgement of the police people are primarily concerned with how fairly they feel they were treated during contact (Reisig and Chandek 2001, Tyler and Huo 2002, Sunshine and Tyler 2003a, Belvedere et al. 2005, Hinds 2007, 2009, Tyler and Fagan 2008, Bradford et al. 2009a, Gau and Brunson 2010). According to Skogan (2006, p. 104):

> victims are less 'outcome'-orientated than they are 'process'-orientated – that is, they are less concerned about someone being caught or (in many instances) getting stolen property back, than they are in how promptly and responsibly they are treated by the authorities. Police are judged by what physicians might call their 'bedside manner'. Factors like how willing they are to listen to people's stories and show concern for their plight are very important, as are their politeness, helpfulness and fairness.

As noted by Jackson et al. (2013, p. 216), 'the argument is less about what police do than about how they do it [and it] is the quality rather than the quantity of policing that is the critical ingredient in securing public order'. It would appear that judgements of the police are concerned with how fairly and respectfully the police treat people, and that assessment of this treatment against these criteria will influence judgements of legitimacy and trustworthiness.

The police in England and Wales receive 80 million calls a year for assistance from the general public (HMIC 2007). A call to the police is the most common form of contact between the public and the police and is often the first contact that a person will have with the police concerning a matter. The Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) 'Open All Hours' report (Povey 2001) highlighted a number of inconsistencies

concerning standards, training and performance measures in police call-handling and helped initiate a period of substantial policy focus and reform in this area. In 2005, national call-handling standards were introduced in an attempt to implement a unified approach to police call-handling for Constabularies in England and Wales (ACPO 2005). Soon after this, HMIC conducted a broad thematic inspection of contact between the public and the police, which included examining various elements of non-emergency call-handling (HMIC 2005, 2007). In 2010, a 'Contact Management Strategy' was introduced for police Constabularies in England and Wales (APA 2010, NPIA 2010a, 2010b) to inform police call-handling and public contact policy in eight areas of strategic importance (customer needs and satisfaction, management, leadership, training, value for money, supply and demand, resources and working with partners). Efforts to improve the ease of contact for the public and 'make every contact count' (NPIA 2010a, p. 4) underpinned a range of changes made by the police in the areas identified through the Contact Management Strategy.

Many of the changes made during this period directly concerned the way in which the police handled and responded to non-emergency calls for service. This was an incremental process whereby telephone numbers for individual police stations were gradually replaced with single non-emergency telephone numbers for each Constabulary, which, in turn, were replaced by a national non-emergency police telephone number. This change also saw the increased use of police call centres staffed by civilian call-handlers. This gradual shift in call-handling process was accompanied by increased efforts from the police to engage with the public concerning issues of anti-social behaviour and low-level disorder. The police have increasingly encouraged members of the public to bring the

issues that concern them locally to the attention of the police, to cooperate further with the police and to generally become more involved with local policing (Home Office 2010). In many cases, this was achieved through the use and promotion of non- emergency police telephone numbers as a convenient way of contacting the local police.

Considering the volume of contact between the public and police experienced through telephone calls, and the impact that experiences of contact can have on judgements of this institution, it is clear that there is a need for research on this topic. The recent police focus on improving non-emergency call-handling and encouraging the public to make further use of this service to bring the issues that matter to them locally to the attention of the police makes such research particularly timely. Moreover, studies of this kind can now be enriched by drawing on the increasing body of literature on call centres, particularly those with a commercial purpose (for example see Holtgrewe et al. 2002, Deery and Kinnie 2004a, Burgess and Connell 2007).

This article presents some of the findings from a larger exploration of contact between the police and the public experienced during and after a non-emergency call. Following a methodological overview, the first part of this article considers the environment inside the police call centre and the nature of the labour undertaken within it, examining call-handler accounts of what it is like to work in a police call centre. Although it was clear that the police call-handlers and their supervisors sought to provide the public with a high-quality service, there appeared to be a bureaucratic requirement to balance quality with the speed at which this service was provided, enforced by managerially imposed quantitative targets. The second part of this article examines dialogue from a number of non-emergency calls made to the police and considers the effects that the language and techniques employed by police call-handlers can have on members of the public. This article concludes by arguing that members of the public can find the most memorable and helpful aspects of a call to the police to be the manner in which they are treated. Callers in the sample reported that police call-handlers treated them fairly, sympathised with them, were polite, caring and used language which demonstrated that the call was important to the police. As a result, the callers expressed positive judgements on their experiences of contact. This finding is broadly in line with arguments made by Skogan (2006), Tyler (2011) and Jackson et al. (2013), among others, that people are primarily concerned with how they are treated by the police.

Methodology

This research centred on an examination of 70 experiences of contact between the public and a single police Constabulary in England. Each of the 70 members of the public in the sample had contacted the police about a matter regarded as 'non-emergency'[1] by the Constabulary. The calls in the sample were dealt with by civilian police call-handlers working in the Constabulary's non-emergency call centre. Call-handlers recorded information from callers, usually making use of the Constabulary's electronic 'crime report' form when doing so. The information collected by call-handlers would play a large part in determining how the Constabulary responds to a matter.

A multi-faceted qualitative methodology was employed as a means for examining these experiences of contact between the public and the police. The research began with five days of observing call-handlers and listening to calls from the public within the police call centre. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with samples from distinct participant groups (70 interviews with members of the public who had called the police, 30 with police call-handlers and 11 with call centre supervisors and Communications Department senior managers). Following each interview conducted with a member of the public who had called the Constabulary, to gain a second perspective on the call to the police, interviews were conducted, where possible and appropriate, with the police call-handler who answered the call. Interviews with these two groups covered the reason

for the call, the content of the call, the response to the call, and other closely related topics. Before an interview, call-handlers were played a recording of the call in question so that the call content was fresh for them. Other data sources included transcripts of the 70 calls to the police and of the crime reports completed by the call-handlers for 50[2] of these calls. Each research participant was given a unique reference code, used in this article when participants are cited.[3] This fieldwork was conducted between September 2009 and May 2010.

Inside the police non-emergency call centre

The call centre industry has experienced rapid international expansion in recent years, and with this has come a wealth of academic research into various aspects of this work. According to Shire et al. (2002, p. 1), this body of research has tended to highlight a negative image of call centres 'as the digital communications factories of the post-industrial service economy'. Others, similarly, have described call centres as 'twentieth-century Panopticons' (Fernie and Metcalf 1998) and as 'electronic sweatshops' (Garson 1988). Call-handlers are often closely monitored and required to operate within tightly controlled time restrictions (D'Alessio and Oberbeck 2002). Working in this environment can be highly stressful and leave call-handlers mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted (Morris and Feldman 1996, Taylor and Bain 1999, Deery et al. 2002, Korczynski 2002). Moreover, Wegge et al. (2006) argue that there has been a common misconception that call centre work is neither complicated nor demanding. The reality is that: 'Call centres require their employees to be skilled at interacting directly with customers while simultaneously working with sophisticated computer-based systems which dictate both the pace of their work and monitor its quality' (Deery and Kinnie 2004b, p. 1).

There were certain similarities between the police call centre and the picture of commercial call centres portrayed by this body of research. Police call-handlers sat in a large open plan office space at computer work stations from which they simultaneously operated various (often complicated) computer systems and answered a constant stream of calls. The calls appeared to be frequent, relentless, largely similar and require intense concentration, attention to detail and the use of sophisticated questioning and listening skills to handle appropriately. The service that call-handlers provided was closely monitored and call-handlers were trained and instructed to deliver this service politely, enthusiastically and sympathetically. Call-handlers were subject to complex shift patterns, mapped to the highs and lows of customer demand. Staff numbers were often noted by call centre staff to be insufficient when compared to the volume of calls received, and the long, inflexible hours which call-handlers worked were made worse by the frequent denial of holiday dates.

The call-handlers who participated in this research were asked questions about working in the police call centre, and, despite being exposed to what could be described as difficult and stressful working conditions similar to those which can be found in commercial call centres, only one of the call-handlers expressed dissatisfaction with their job (n = 11). A typical description was that '[it] can be interesting, challenging, can be satisfying, you get a wide range of calls … it's generally good' (CH2). Although accounts indicated that the work was generally found to be satisfying, call-handlers did not deny that elements could be mundane. As one call-handler illustrated:

> I like the place, I like the people, I like the job, and it's what you make of it … because it is repetition, you know, after you've had your third or fourth stolen mobile, it can get a bit monotonous. (CH8)

Another call-handler explained that 'I like the unusual ones, the ones that make you think,

rather than just go through the process. A lot of the calls that come in are very samey' (CH10). Although some similarities can be drawn with descriptions of commercial call centre work, particularly the 'endless sequence of similar conversations' (Taylor and Bain 1999, p. 115), this did not appear to negatively influence police call-handler accounts of working in the call centre.

Deery and Kinnie (2004b, p. 12) note that call-handlers can find their work greatly rewarding, and that satisfaction, among those who feel this way, is derived from 'helping people'. Glucksmann (2004, p. 807) notes how 'urgency and accountability' can distinguish the work of certain call centres from that of those which operate as a straightforward 'information provider'. Police call-handler accounts of working in the call centre were largely positive, often so because the call-handler believed that they were providing a valuable service to the public. For example, 'it's nice to be able to help sometimes' (CH2), and 'that victim has been helped, he's been given advice, he's gone away knowing that we did something for him' (CH6). One of the call-handlers who had previously worked in a commercial call centre stated that '[working in the police call centre] is far more involved and far more worthwhile, if you ask me' (CH13). The positivity call-handlers expressed in relation to their work appeared to stem from the belief that the nature of the work and the assistance they provided made their job worthwhile, and a sense of satisfaction was clearly drawn from this.

Undertaking emotional labour

It was evident from observation and the accounts of call-handlers that police call centre work requires technical skills (for coordinating the use of multiple computer systems) and emotional awareness (for dealing with a uniquely varied and sensitive range of calls). 'Emotional labour' is the requirement 'to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind on others' (Hochschild 1983, p. 7). Performing emotional labour involves 'enhancing, faking, or suppressing emotions' (Grandey 2000, p. 95), to directly influence 'physiological, experiential, or behavioral responding' (Gross 1998, p. 285). Emotional labour, a noteworthy component of call centre work, can be extremely demanding to perform, and has been associated with emotional exhaustion (Martínez-Iñigo et al. 2007) and with call-handlers having to 'turn to each other to cope' with the emotional stress caused by irate and abusive customers (Korczynski 2003, p. 55). Although stress will be experienced by those in many customer-facing roles, the content of calls to the police adds unique and complicating dimensions to call-handling work and to the emotional labour that those delivering this service will undertake.

The requirement to be calm, empathetic and courteous while handling a constant stream of potentially upsetting calls is clearly a demanding form of emotional labour. A senior officer in the Constabulary's Communications department provided a pertinent summary of how this form of labour can affect call-handlers:

> [Call-handlers] take calls from anything from 'what time does the next 37 bus go through?' … to 'I've just been raped', you know, and we're expecting them to go from one end of the scale to the other, and back again, all day, and deliver the same quality of service to all callers, and they do, the vast majority of them do a fantastic job, in an incredible stressful situation. It's not unusual to see men and ladies put the phone down and have a few tears because they've just dealt with someone who's about to commit suicide … but then five minutes later, hanky put away, they'll get on with the calls again.

The frequency, range and subject of calls were noted by many call-handlers in the sample to be emotionally challenging and require considerable energy and effort to handle appropriately. The emotional labour undertaken by call-handlers did not just consist of coping with their own exposure to issues which were sometimes sensitive and distressing,

but also involved reacting and providing a service to members of the public wishing to bring issues of this nature to the attention of the police. The way in which call-handlers undertook emotional labour by empathising and using language to show callers that the issue being brought to their attention was important to the police is explored in the second part of this article.

Quality, quantity and measuring performance

Every call centre must strike a balance between the quality and the quantity of service that it provides. Senior management in any call centre will typically instruct call-handlers to answer calls as quickly as possible, keep calls to a certain length, answer a certain number of calls in a shift and keep the time they spend unavailable between calls under a certain amount, while at the same time being courteous, polite, employing a range of questioning and listening techniques and completing various administrative tasks accurately. The desired balance between these two sets of objectives will vary depending on the precise function of a call centre, the nature of the service that it provides and the steer and pressure imposed by management. Bain et al. (2002, p. 172) argue that:

> There are no 'pure' call centres in which management policy is dedicated exclusively to either qualitative or quantitative objectives. In even the most quantity-driven operation, the aim is to ensure that the customer receives comprehensible information; conversely, employees in the most quality conscious centres are monitored, do not enjoy unlimited time on the telephone and, de facto, are expected to handle a minimum number of calls.

However, Korczynski (2002) argues the twin objectives of quality and quantity, or being cost-effective and customer-orientated, are fundamentally contradictory. Indeed, increasing the speed at which calls are handled while at the same time communicating and completing tasks in a manner which can be recognised as high quality is not a simple objective.

An over-emphasis on quantity and output can erode customer loyalty and undermine customer service (Alferoff and Knights 2002, Deery and Kinnie 2004b). Where quantitative indications of performance are prioritised, call centre managers are less likely to be able to discover how customers felt during or after contact with the call centre (Gilmore 2001), and a genuine personal service becomes harder to deliver (Hochschild 1983). The way in which the police have made use of quantitative performance indicators more generally has received criticism. As Fielding notes (2005, p. 177), 'if there is a performance indicator for answering the phone, officers will sit by the phone … at the cost of activities less directly measured'. An over-reliance on quantitative targets, according to Seddon (2005, p. 203), can shift an organisation's focus to '"meet the targets", rather than "improve the work"'. The problems associated with too pronounced a focus on quantitative performance indicators in call-handling have also been recognised in police policy documentation. The 'First Contact' report (HMIC 2005) argued that high numbers of quantitative performance measurements leave call-handlers with less control over a call, in turn linked with high levels of call-handler stress, absences and turnover. The report indicates that broader and more varied performance measurement methods are required to ensure a more rounded measurement of call-handling performance.

Performance in the police call centre was measured through a variety of means. Quantitative data (on the total time spent on the phone or available to answer a call; the time spent unavailable between calls; the length of each call; and the number of calls handled per shift) were recorded each shift for individual call-handlers and in total for the call centre. Call-handlers were required to be available to take, or be taking calls for 70% of their shift; the only one of the four performance measures described here which had an attached delivery target. The police call centre's overall performance was also measured

by the extent to which it met its managerially imposed 'Service Level Agreement' (SLA); the percentage of calls which were answered within 40 seconds. The live SLA figure was displayed on large electronic screens, so that every call-handler could see the call centre's current performance against this target. The only formal assessment of the quality of the service conducted by the Constabulary was made by call centre supervisors, who would assess two calls handled by each call-handler as part of a quarterly employee performance review process. Quality was understood as whether and how the call-handler had used appropriate empathetic and caring language when conversing with the caller, made use of appropriate questioning and listening techniques, provided advice and/or a solution where possible, and completed various administrative tasks (such as recording information from the caller). Although the Constabulary engaged in sporadic research exercises to gain feedback from members of the public on specific issues, a caller's assessment of the quality of their call to the police was not a standardised part of the call centre performance measurement process.

Call centre senior management, supervisors and call-handlers were unanimous in their accounts that quality of service was more important than the speed at which it was provided. As one call-handler noted, they would 'give quality work to the call, rather than rushing [the caller] off too much, because if you rush them off too much, and are not thorough enough, they're going to think the police don't care' (CH8). The large majority of call-handlers reiterated these sentiments:

> Service is what we are about, and in my two years I've never been told to hurry up, work faster, those sorts of things … I don't think you're pressured, there's not people beating a drum so to speak, there's none of that sort of thing. (CH6)

> You are not encouraged to rush calls, because if you do you're going to miss stuff out, you're going to make mistakes, you could cause problems for the victims of the crime, beyond the fact that they've already been a victim of crime, I mean imagine what would happen if the victim of a crime knew everything about the suspect of a crime, and you got the details mixed up with them, and the officer accidently phoned the suspect instead of the victim, so it's very important that you have the scope to take [the time] you need. (CH10)

However, there were accounts which suggested that the quantity and speed of service was a concern for senior management. One call-handler and one supervisor stated that they had been asked respectively to justify why they were answering fewer calls than other call-handlers, and why their team was answering fewer calls than other teams, in both instances explaining that this was because the quality of the service they provided was higher than that provided by others. Although the quality of call-handling and associated administrative tasks appeared to be the primary focus for those providing the service and was noted to be of great importance by senior management, quantity and speed were far from unimportant.

It was evident that a balance between quantity and quality was sought in the police call centre. The emphasis on providing customers with high-quality assistance was not completely devoid of time restrictions for service delivery; the latter appearing to be of more concern for those with responsibility for the operation of the call centre than those delivering the service. Senior managers explained that an over-emphasis on quality could lead to longer calls and call-handlers answering fewer calls, yet acknowledged that increasing the speed at which call-handlers operate could lead to crime report forms containing insufficient information for investigation and callers not receiving a personalised service. There was clearly a tension between, on the one hand, providing an empathetic, caring service and recording crimes in the level of detail necessary so that they are likely to be investigated and, on the other hand, the bureaucratic desire for speed, enforced through the use of performance targets. A Communications Department senior manager explained that performance targets were not widely used in the call centre as

divergence in call subject, emotional state of callers and volume of administrative duties generated could all affect the length of time a call-handler needs to spend on a call, and targets could not easily be set to allow for this. Despite this and the various other issues associated with their use, two distinct quantitative targets were in place to steer the performance of individual call-handlers (towards spending 70% of their time either on or waiting for a call) and the performance of the call centre (towards answering calls in under 40 seconds). Seddon (2008) argues that such targets are essentially arbitrary and valueless, as attempts to achieve a number at the expense of other activity will distort systems of work. There was evidence of such distorting behaviour occurring. For example, so as to minimise the amount of time spent unavailable between calls, call-handlers carried out many of the related administrative tasks whilst on the phone. This behaviour could extend the length of calls and result in periods of silence while call-handlers entered information on computer systems.

Calling the police call centre

Seventy callers, in each case following a non-emergency call with the participating Constabulary, agreed to participate in this research.[4] Fifty of the 70 calls in this sample were made to report or discuss a crime. The remaining 20 mainly concerned lost property or information requests. The large majority of callers in the sample had contacted the police following the first occurrence of an incident, and within 24 hours of it happening. This section of the article considers the content of these calls to the police, the language used by the call-handlers and the elements that callers found to be most helpful and memorable from these calls.

Making a call to the police

When contacting any call centre, callers may have to wait to receive an answer, and wait again to be connected to the appropriate person. Singer (2004) highlights dissatisfaction with a non-emergency police call-handling service among callers concerning, amongst other things, the time taken to answer calls. These concerns are echoed by findings presented in the Assessment of Police and Community Safety (APACS) guidance document (Home Office 2008), which recorded only 57% of non-emergency callers as satisfied with the accessibility of the service, due to factors such as lengthy delays in answer, and being transferred to the wrong team or person. Call-handlers and supervisors at the participating Constabulary explained that callers would often have to wait for their calls to be answered. For example, a call centre supervisor stated that 'we don't reach performance targets [of answering calls in under 40 seconds] probably ever now'. Many other call centre employees explained that the call centre received more calls than it could answer within this timeframe and with the resources set by senior management. Observation of the electronic screens in the call centre also revealed that waiting periods of over 40 seconds were common.

To explore this issue, callers were asked questions on the ease with which they made contact with the police and whether they experienced periods of hold when doing so. Despite the reports from call-handlers and supervisors of lengthy waiting periods being commonplace, only four callers stated that they had a problem contacting the police, with another four stating that they had been kept on hold or that the police had taken a long time to answer their call (n = 70). The large majority of the sample noted that they found it relatively simple to contact the police and did not report a noteworthy period of hold before or during their call. Even the four callers who did recall a period of hold seemed to describe its length as acceptable, consisting of 'about a minute if that' (C10), 'maybe 30 seconds if that' (C97), 'a bit, but not too long' (C34) and 'a short while, not too long' (C60). Although four callers stated that they had experienced a 'problem getting through'

to the police, these callers did not appear to consider their experience of calling the police as negative as a result of this. Caller 119 explained that their issue had resulted from the police call centre being extremely busy, and that the call-handler had consequently called them back 'about half an hour later, so it was alright'. Two of the callers who reported an issue making contact (C55 and C104) explained that this was because after their call was answered they were both then placed on hold to be transferred to another person. Only one caller stated that he was kept on hold for an unacceptably long period (of 15 minutes) when calling to report a crime.

The large majority of callers did not report difficulties making contact with the police, but analysis of the transcripts of calls made by this majority suggested that there were delays to calls being answered. For example, call-handler 10, aware that a caller had waited for their call to be answered, began an exchange in the following manner:

Call-handler 10: Hope you've not been waiting too long?

Caller 57: Ages actually.

Call-handler 10: Oh dear.

Caller 57: But it was very nice of you to say that.

Other calls in this sample also began with some form of apology or comment on the length of time that the caller had waited before their call was answered. However, this was not something that callers expressed any real concern about during interview. When caller 57 was asked whether they had experienced any problems trying to get through to the police, they responded 'no', explaining that they were kept on hold for only a 'minor time, not long at all'. This clearly differs from the account provided during their call. Similarly, when the call made by caller 96 was answered the call-handler stated 'sorry about the wait', but when the caller was asked during the interview whether he had experienced any problems in getting through to the police, he answered 'no, not at all'. Although the call-handlers in these instances appeared to consider that time spent waiting warranted an apology, presumably because it exceeded the call centre's target time for answering calls, these callers did not find this period of wait particularly memorable or significant when discussing their experience of contact with the police during interview. The ease with which callers reported getting through to the police suggests that having to wait longer than 40 seconds for a call to be answered, which according to comments made during the calls and interviews and observation in the call centre was common,[5] did not appear particularly to influence judgements of this part of the process. Not focusing on this period of wait could be the result of callers being more concerned with other elements of their call to the police.

Language used by call-handlers

Waddington (1993) argues that empathy, interest, consideration and rapport are the requirements for a caring police response. Social skills are particularly important among call-handlers (Frenkel et al. 1998, Thompson et al. 2001), and the way in which they communicate feeling and emotion to a caller can influence assessments of contact made by the latter (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). The call-handlers in the sample used a wide variety of language to convey empathy, understanding and interest during calls. Primarily, these took the form of short statements, such as: 'it's horrible isn't it' (CH2); 'let's hope this is the last of it' (CH3); 'oh that's a shame' (CH4); 'oh no' (CH5); 'it's very unpleasant' (CH12); and 'you can't help it from happening' (CH13). When callers in the sample were asked about what was said to them during their call to the police, they most commonly recalled empathetic statements made by the call-handlers, and did so with considerable accuracy. For example, a call-handler empathised with a caller who had contacted the police to report the theft of two garden statues, using the following language:

Caller 81: I'd like to report the theft of two wooden sculptures from our front garden.

Call-handler 8: Oh, sorry to hear that.

…

Call-handler 8: What value is it?

Caller 81: Um, £1200.

Call-handler 8: Oh dear.

Caller 81: Yes.

…

Call-handler 8: Oh right, very expensive isn't it.

…

Call-handler 8: Is it made of oak?

Caller 81: Yes, it's all in one piece

Call-handler 8: Oh, sorry to hear this, it's upsetting isn't it.

Caller 81: It is, yes.

Call-handler 8: You get attached to your things don't you as well, you know.

When this caller was asked about this conversation, they stated that '[the call-handler] was just very helpful, she said "oh dear", "that must be upsetting" or something like that, I mean she was sympathetic'.

Call-handlers used language to show that they sympathised with callers and that they possessed an understanding of the experience to which the caller had been subjected. This often created a sense of common ground and rapport, which appeared to be valued by callers. For example, a caller (C9) had contacted the police to report the loss of a necklace, given to her as a present. The call-handler who answered this call (CH1) remarked that 'it's horrible when it's a present. I hate it'. The call-handler, by making this comment, demonstrated that she could appreciate the unpleasantness of the experience for the caller. The caller subsequently described the call-handler during interview as having been 'very friendly' throughout their conversation. Another call-handler (CH3), when speaking to a caller who had reported damage to his car previously to the police (and who was annoyed at having received no updates about this), stated that:

> I understand, it's very frustrating, yes very frustrating, as you say it's a lot of problems, and you just want it sorted out, and … even if you can make a claim against insurance you still
>
> have to pay … I can totally understand your frustration, this has been going on a long time and you obviously want someone to actually, you want it done and dusted and sorted to your satisfaction don't you, and that's what should be happening, but I mean, as I said, I'd love to be able to just go down there and say 'look you've got to speak to this man, because he's frustrated'.

Not only does the call-handler demonstrate that she understands why the caller feels frustrated by reiterating his position, she also confirms that she agrees with him, that the police should in fact be responding as he wishes, and that she would do more to help if it were possible. By suggesting a common position, the call-handler established rapport with the caller and sympathised with their experience. When asked about this, the caller (Ref15) explained that the call-handler he spoke to:

> was kind of on my side if you like, she was saying 'I think it's a little bit naughty that they

haven't got back to you, you'd think that somebody would have rang you up and just spoke to you and put your mind at rest'.

Call-handlers also demonstrated to callers that the issue their call concerned was important to the police and where appropriate reassured them that it was the correct decision to report the matter, even if perceived as trivial by the caller. This was partly achieved through the professional manner that call-handlers employed, and also, where necessary, suggested more directly. Caller 87 had misplaced a bank cheque, and, fearing identity theft, had contacted the police to report its loss. This caller provided the following account of her experience of calling the police.

> So after a morning of really worrying and panicking, and thinking 'oh what shall I do?', I thought 'well I'll phone the police', only because almost for somebody to talk to and reassure me that maybe it's not that bad, really. So I phoned the police about it, and said 'look, I'm really sorry, I'm probably wasting your time, I shouldn't maybe be phoning you about this minor little thing, but I'm worried about it, so I'll tell you what's happened'. So I told her the whole story, and she was very nice, she was very, you know, it wasn't sort of 'why are you bothering with that?', she was very good, you know [she said] 'you didn't do it on purpose, you lost it, it was just a human nature thing to do really', so she was very very kind and told me, you know, it's not worth losing sleep over.

The caller accurately remembered much of the language employed by the call-handler to show the matter would be taken seriously by the police, and that the decision to call the police was appropriate. The call-handler, during the call, explained to the caller that 'even if it's something you consider minimal, it still lets us know what's going on in the area, so it's always worth reporting incidents. Even if you feel them trivial yourself, you need to report them'. The call-handler then attempted to reassure the caller by stating: 'don't lose any sleep over it, because it's a simple mistake at the end of the day, and you've done everything you can, you know, to back yourself up, really'. In a further attempt to reduce the concerns of the caller, the call-handler gave an example from her own life to demonstrate how often people can easily lose their property (which the caller recounted during interview). This had a positive effect on the caller, who upon hearing this example stated 'that makes me feel a little better. I'm not the only one that loses things'.

Rapport between callers and call-handlers would also be established through partially or unrelated conversations held during calls. Topics varied widely, and were introduced by either the caller or the call-handler. Callers often welcomed these conversations and appeared to appreciate the informality and friendliness that call-handlers displayed by engaging with them in this way. However, increasing the duration of a call through the inclusion of informal and often unrelated conversation meant that the call-handler was available to handle fewer calls during a shift. For example, one call-handler (CH5) chatted to an elderly female caller (C65) about her own grandmother, and about a period of cold weather, adding roughly one minute (approximately 20%) to the call duration. The caller reported a positive experience of contacting the police, explaining that the empathy and informality displayed by the call-handler was a cause of this. Although this approach to call-handling and generating rapport with callers could have a negative influence upon the extent to which the quantitative performance indicators used in the police call centre were met, it appeared to have a positive impact upon this caller's assessment of customer service.

The empathy, understanding, interest, sensitivity, politeness and willingness to engage in small talk displayed by call-handlers were commonly seen by members of the public in this sample as the most memorable elements of their call to the police. Those in this sample were almost all positive about the contact that they experienced with the police during their non-emergency call, and only five callers stated that they found the call-handler who dealt with their call to have been other than helpful (n = 70). Explanations

for what, specifically, made callers consider call-handlers to have been helpful often centred more on the tone of voice, sensitivity and language used by a call-handler than a specific act of assistance or the provision of information. For example, the following caller (C16) was asked during interview 'did you find the call-handler helpful?', and responded:

> Yeah they were very nice, very um, you know, they listened, and were completely non-judgemental, you know, just took details … quite chatty, quite, you know, friendly, you know, in a way, just sounded like you were chatting to anybody really, but not unprofessional with it, just easy to talk to.

Many other caller accounts of the service provided during calls to the police comprised of detail concerning the manner in which the call-handler delivered the service, rather than a description of the service itself. Caller 23, who described their call-handler (CH5) as helpful, noted the 'empathy' and 'sympathy' the call-handler had shown towards them as the most memorable feature of the phone call. A third caller (C40) explained that the call-handler they spoke to (CH3) had been helpful as they were 'nice', 'genuine', 'reassuring' and 'calming', rather than as a result of any particular steps the call-handler had taken or informative statements that they had made. A fourth caller (C110), when asked whether the call-handler that they had spoken to (CH7) had been helpful, stated that 'yes, he was really nice'. When asked 'is there anything in particular you remember him saying?' the caller replied 'not really, just everything, he was really pleasant'. The manner in which call-handlers dealt with calls proved consistently to be the most memorable and helpful component from a call to the police for members of the public.

Conclusion

The way in which the police behave influences public judgements of and willingness to cooperate with the police and thereby impacts upon the effectiveness of policing. A telephone call is the most common form of contact between the public and the police, yet there is little research which examines how this service is provided, the experiences of users of this service, and how contact with the police specifically through this channel can influence judgements of this institution. These are questions that this article has sought to address in relation to the non-emergency call-handling service provided by a single police Constabulary in England, and the experiences of 70 members of the public who used this service.

The importance of how the public are treated by the police was evident from the accounts of both members of the former and employees of the latter. When asked about their non-emergency call, this sample of members of the public seemed primarily concerned with the manner in which they were treated by the police and were positive about their call following the receipt of a polite, caring, understanding and empathetic service. The delivery of a service that encapsulates these characteristics was regarded by Constabulary employees as the most important aspect of police call centre work, and providing assistance to members of the public through what was commonly perceived as a high-quality, worthwhile service was described by call-handlers as the most rewarding and satisfying element of their work. Having a call answered in under 40 seconds, the principal indicator for holistic call centre performance used by senior management, and a target which was commonly reported to be a struggle to achieve for call-handlers, did not appear to be a particularly important aspect of a call for the callers in this sample. Indeed, there was evidence which suggested that callers in the sample had to wait for longer than this for their calls to be answered, and this did not appear to influence judgements of the call-handling service. When considered alongside the importance placed on treatment by the sample, these two conclusions are consistent with the procedural legitimacy notion

that if the police treat people well (inter-personally) they are likely to respond positively even if the substance of the service is adverse to their interests or is slow in coming. The links between fair and respectful police treatment and positive public judgements have been recognised by the police as relevant to many aspects of their work. For example, the impact of the use of police 'stop and search' powers on public judgements of police legitimacy and procedural fairness has been acknowledged recently by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (2013b). Nonetheless, there are factors which can affect the extent to which the police can provide the type of service that the public appear to value, both in this Constabulary's non-emergency call centre and more widely.

There was clearly a tension in the police call centre between quality (providing an empathetic, caring customer service and recording crimes in the level of detail necessary so that they are likely to be investigated) and quantity (meeting the bureaucratic desire for speed). Increasing the speed and quantity at which this service is provided is likely to reduce a call-handler's ability to provide a truly personalised service. It is doubtful that employing quantitative performance targets and recording achievement against these targets will provide the police with meaningful performance data or increase police ability to deliver the elements of service which appear to be most valued by the public. Indeed, the two targets in place in the police call centre, both quantitative performance indicators concerned with the speed at which the service was delivered, were somewhat arbitrary. There was evidence that call-handlers would modify the way in which they worked in response to bureaucratic requirements to meet these quantitative indicators, with callers suffering (in silence) as a result. Moreover, whilst certain call-handling techniques, such as taking time to provide reassurance to callers during calls, are detrimental to the quantitative performance indicators and the senior management drive for efficiency, they can increase the quality of the service as judged by a caller. It is probable, therefore, that meaningful efficiency is achieved by focusing on quality over quantity. Quantitative targets express a calculative, rational mentality and are ill-suited to measuring and supporting the kind of emotional engagement that callers value.

Given the issues associated with the use of quantitative performance targets in police call-handling and the importance placed by callers on the treatment received from call-handlers, a priority for the police when providing such services is to focus on behaving in a manner which will be assessed as high quality by those who contact them. A challenge to efforts to provide such a service has been caused by recent reductions in police funding from government, which, in turn, has resulted in police Constabularies cutting the numbers they employ. Although the police have made a public commitment to protecting their 'frontline', defined as 'those who are in everyday contact with the public and who directly intervene to keep people safe and enforce the law' (HMIC 2011, p. 18), the need to cut posts is currently being met by reducing 'business support roles' (HMIC 2013a, p. 17). An important message from this study is that police call-handlers are an invaluable part of the police frontline, and that the emotional labour that they undertake contributes to positive public judgements of the police and effective police operation.

This study is not without limitation, and the findings presented here should be considered in the light of this. The fact that this study is exploratory and qualitative in nature means that a larger-scale survey is needed to test statistically the relationship between particular forms of call-handling, public satisfaction with call-handling and more generalised confidence and trust in the police. It is also important to acknowledge that the calls discussed here concern non-emergency issues, and that a separate study would be required to explore the handling of emergency calls and how this impacts upon public judgements of the police. Furthermore, the study is of one English Constabulary only. Practices, systems and culture may be different elsewhere, which, in turn, could evoke different reactions from the public. Finally, the focus of this article is on the response of the public to call-handling rather than how call-handling influences police responses or

how the two combined shape broader public judgements of the police (this author plans to address the latter questions through future publication). However, the findings presented here are important in their own right as they demonstrate the value of emotional engagement by police call-handlers when in contact with the public over the telephone.

Notes

1. A matter was defined as non-emergency when the Constabulary did not deem it sufficiently serious to require an immediate response. Calls concerning non-emergency issues, if made to the '999' emergency telephone number would be transferred to the Constabulary's non-emergency call centre and handled in the same manner as those made directly via the non-emergency number. Call-handlers in the non-emergency call centre would occasionally receive calls from the public which the Constabulary regarded as 'emergency'. Upon identifying a matter as an emergency, a non-emergency call-handler would promptly transfer the call to the Constabulary's emergency call centre, a separate operation that deals solely with '999' emergency calls (which are not considered by this research).
2. The other 20 calls were enquiries that did not require the completion of a crime report.
3. Where a research participant is cited a single letter (to illustrate their participant group) followed by a unique number is included so that readers can distinguish between respondents. The letters used in these reference codes are 'C' for callers and 'CH' for call-handlers.
4. There were 145 callers invited to take part in this study.
5. The Constabulary did not store data on the length of hold periods for individual calls, so the actual length of waiting periods could not be verified.

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