Linking Professionalism, Learning and Wellbeing in the Context of Rape Investigation: Early Findings from Project Bluestone

Emma Williams1 · Jennifer Norman1 · Rachel Ward1 · Richard Harding1

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Abstract

Drawing on data from Project Bluestone in Avon and Somerset Constabulary in 2021, this paper argues for a more nuanced approach to understanding the relationship between the organizational support given to officers via access to specialist learning, the service delivered to victims and survivors of rape and serious sexual offences, and officer wellbeing. To promote legitimacy within the workplace organizations, have a responsibility to enable their staff with the personal resources they need to fulfil their role (Birch et al. in Police Pract Res 18:26–36, 2017). Considering this in the context of policing, by applying organizational justice theory this piece argues that limited access to effective learning in the RASSO field can impact on personal feelings of competence and officer wellbeing within the workplace. The research found that the lack of formal learning resulted in practitioners learning from their own and their peers’ experiences and errors with limited time for critical reflection. Moving forward, the authors argue for a commitment to the input of specialist expert knowledge in the area of RASSO with time allocated for officers to apply and critically evaluate such learning in a practical context.

Keywords Wellbeing · Learning and development · Professionalism · Organizational justice · Rape · Serious sexual offences · Policing

Introduction

The ideology of professionalism within organizations is a topic of ongoing scholarly debate (Dingwall, 1976; Evetts, 2013). Notions of professionalism link to narratives about organizational legitimacy, trusted and autonomous decision-making, competence, and self-identifying as a professional (Evetts, 2011). Dingwall (1976) argues that a body of knowledge is central to the achievement of a professional workplace, however, there is contention between where that knowledge is derived from and what knowledge matters. This is an area that has been discussed at length in policing literature (see Lumsden, 2017; Wood, 2018 for more discussion). Sociological literature on professions has linked trust, competence, discretion, and professionalism (Evetts, 2009). In policing, this would equate to a blended learning approach where formal learning intersects with the experience of practitioners. Once the knowledge, skill, and competence are acquired, they can be applied practically to complex situations through critical reflection professional judgement and discretion (Wood, 2018).

Valuing and cultivating learning and knowledge is critical for organizational development and service improvement (Nonaka et al., 2001). Enabling police practitioners to access learning resources and continuous professional development (CPD) is crucial for improved levels of professional value and personal credibility (Norman & Fleming, 2021). However, support for employees to undertake CPD is sporadic and often dependent on individual line management to sponsor (Norman & Williams, 2017). In the context of policing for those involved with the investigation of complex crime types, having the time and organizational allowance to access the specialist, expert knowledge required to deliver professional effective investigations is imperative. This is further problematised in the context of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) by several factors. Increasing demand, increased complexity of victim needs (Charman & Williams, 2021), austerity, a shortage of detectives nationally (Williams et al., 2021), reduced experience within investigation teams to both conduct investigations and mentor new investigators and, the dissolution of specialist units to
investigate RASSO (Rumney et al., 2021) all contribute to the ongoing challenge of attrition in this area.

Both within academia (Hohl & Stanko, 2015; Kelly & Lovett, 2009) and the policy arena (Angiolini, 2015; Home Office, 2021; Stern, 2010) there has been considerable work undertaken to explore the problem of attrition in RASSO at the police stage of the criminal justice process. Often such reviews point to the need for an increased learning input for officers in this space to improve the quality of investigations and provision of victim care. Specialist knowledge is vital for understanding the complexity of RASSO (Rumney et al., 2021). The specific victim and trauma typologies, and offender psychologies and further how these factors link to attrition should be central to an investigation strategy. However, the relationship between the officer’s perceptions of their competence, confidence, and capability and how these factors link to wellbeing, remains unexplored in a policing context. This is also central to a successful investigation. In the education sector, research has found that a key contributor of job burnout relates to the incongruence between the demands of work and available personal resources that professionals are equipped with to cope with the workload (Maslach, 2003; Maslach et al., 2001). In this context, professionals with greater personal resources and competence are found to be more likely to successfully overcome their professional challenges and avoid burn out (Dicke et al., 2014, 2015), presenting a further gap that requires exploration within a policing context. Drawing on early findings from Project Bluestone1 (Pillar 4) in Avon and Somerset Police, this article argues for a more nuanced approach to understanding the relationship between organizational support around officer learning, the service delivered to victims and survivors, and officer wellbeing. Applying the organizational justice literature to policing, Bradford and Quinton (2014) suggest that officers’ perceptions of organizational justice in their relationships with managers are linked to their engagement with organizational priorities and to ‘organizational citizenship behaviours’, which might enhance their willingness to engage with members of the public in a positive way (Myhill & Bradford, 2013). Through the lens of organizational justice theory, this paper seeks to develop a more nuanced understanding of the organizations’ responsibility to effectively equip officers to undertake their roles. Drawing on empirical evidence the example of the provision of effective and more specialist learning in the RASSO field is examined and it is argued that a lack of professional development can impact feelings of competence and officer welfare within the workplace and, furthermore, outcomes in RASSO investigations.

Professionalism, Learning, and Organizational Support

The enhancement of an individual’s professional identity through personal development is central to wellbeing (Waddock & Townsend, 2000). An inability to access development processes within an occupational setting problematises this concept and has implications on employees’ sense of competence, confidence, and professional identity. Relatedly, Birch et al. (2017) argue that feelings of inclusivity and empowerment within the workplace and via both colleagues and supervisors can result in positive perceptions of the organization.

Greenberg and Cropanzano (2001), identify three dimensions of OJ: Distributive justice concerned with perceptions of fairness of organizational outcomes; Procedural justice which considers the fairness of the process through which outcomes are achieved; and Interactional justice concerning the fairness of the interactions between different areas within the organization, for example senior leaders and front-line staff. Furthermore, Colquitt et al (2001) argue that organizational justice can influence outcomes through attitudes and behaviours and evidence has found that people who are satisfied with their job both achieve more and have better psychological and physical health (Mottarella et al., 2005). Organizational justice recognizes the requirement of inclusive participation and the organizational ability to empower people to deliver their roles in a professional way. Nilsson and Townsend (2014) refer to this as social inclusivity where all employees are empowered to enhance themselves within the workplace. Central to this notion is the ability to access the learning and development required to build esteem and professional capacity. Despite the issues with what is credible knowledge in policing (Williams, 2019), significant personal value is placed on the knowledge and skills acquired through learning, regardless of rank. The individual benefits of engaging with learning and CPD includes the

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1 Operation Soteria Bluestone is a UK Home Office-funded programme designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in England and Wales. It is a unique project which is underpinned by rigorous social science. With multi-disciplined academics located in multiple universities, mixed qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to a five pil- larred approach to organizational change with police forces, uplifting the capability of more specialist police decision-making in RASSO cases. The research informs policing practice as well as government policy and is set to inform a national change. This research informed pillars pinpoint specific areas for improvement which will form part of the new framework for investigating RASSO: (1) suspect-focused investigations; (2) disrupting repeat offenders; (3) victim engagement as procedural justice; (4) promoting better learning, development, and wellbeing for police officers; and (5) using data more effectively in RASSO investigations. The pathfinder project started in 2021, based in Avon and Somerset Constabulary. Designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, the pillar leads include Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams.
application of specialist knowledge, improved confidence to manage work roles, credibility, particularly when engaging with external parties, and an increased sense of professionalism (Norman & Fleming, 2021; Williams et al., 2019). Indeed, in the education sector research links teachers’ sense of professional competence and self-efficacy to professional knowledge (Lauermann & König, 2016). The learning climate within policing is well documented particularly in relation to the roles of tacit and codified knowledge (Williams & Cockcroft, 2019). Structural issues that exist within organizations can combine with culture to play a wider role in shaping assumptions about what knowledge is important (De Long & Fahey, 2000). The additional benefits to learning practices being embedded into policing include an increased ability to think critically (Hallenberg & Cockcroft, 2017) and the ability to engage in more reflective work practices (Wood, 2018). Critically, a value of learning through reflection relates to personal wellbeing (Christopher, 2015).

Specialist Knowledge in a RASSO Context

Investigating RASSO is complex. Victims of these serious offences are entitled to an ‘enhanced service’ as detailed in the Victims’ Code of Practice (GOV.UK, 2021). Victims are often vulnerable, and can present with mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems, severe and complex trauma, and allegations that can involve difficult interpersonal relationships which makes the investigation complicated. This means that RASSO victims are far removed from the notion of an ideal victim (Horvath et al., 2011; Stanko & Williams, 2009).

Investigating such complex crimes effectively requires specialized and highly skilled investigators (Rumney et al., 2021) who have completed appropriate learning and development opportunities that provide an understanding of the complexities of RASSO and the related trauma. However, through working regularly with victims of RASSO, officers are routinely exposed to vicarious trauma, which may be exacerbated by the pressures of huge workloads, systemic and procedural challenges and the responsibility felt for achieving justice for victims. This can have an adverse effect on officer wellbeing, indeed, as Birch et al., (2017, p. 26) contend, “psychological illness is the main cause of medical conditions suffered by police officers, a common pattern found globally within the profession”. Supporting the wellbeing of those engaged in rape investigations is vital in the interests of both organizational justice and victim outcomes. Organizational justice is a crucial part of this and entails empowerment and support within the workplace (Birch et al., 2017). Having positive working relationships, a sense of inclusion, equality of opportunity, fair treatment, and opportunities to access learning and CPD all help to counter the development of compassion fatigue and burnout that is the result of ineffective coping strategies (Anshell et al., 2013). For Birch et al. (2017), policing can be understood by looking at both wellbeing and organizational justice; specifically, through the existence of positive and close working relationships with colleagues and a sense of making a contribution. Whilst colleagues may have close and positive working relationships, the ability to do their jobs effectively and professionally through the provision of sufficient learning, development, and the acquisition of specialist knowledge is essential to the maintenance of wellbeing and individual professionalism.

Method

This paper presents early results from Project Bluestone (Pillar 4) conducted in Avon and Somerset Police in 2021. The research aimed to qualitatively explore learning, development, and wellbeing for those officers and staff involved in managing or investigating RASSO cases. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 19 participants and eight additional interviews with strategic leads for RASSO, Learning and Development, and training. These included the ranks of Superintendents, Detective Inspectors (DI), Detective Sergeants (DS), Detective Constables (DC), Front-line Response Officers (FRO)2 and Police Investigators who were involved in investigating or managing RASSO. This paper draws predominantly on the focus groups with practitioners investigating RASSO. The group interviews focussed on exploring participants’ perceptions of their role, their experiences of their training and provision of continuous professional development, and their views on the organizational support for their welfare and wellbeing. The recorded focus groups were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed using NVivo.3 The authors used an open coding framework to organize the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which enabled the identification of the top-level themes or conceptual categories (Punch, 1998) arising. Two researchers analysed the data to ensure independent inter-rater reliability. The analysis indicated that the provision of and access to learning and development are related to perceptions of individual competence which links to wellbeing, emphasizing the importance of organizational support in all these areas. The next section outlines the key themes found within this analysis.4

2 FROs are response officers with the additional task of being the initial police contact with victims of rape.

3 NVivo is a qualitative software package that assists in the management and analysis of research data.

4 The research team have since developed a learning and development and wellbeing survey which captures the findings of the qualitative work and aims to validate the assumptions made from the analysis. The schedule incorporated a validated learning and development
Findings

The interviews with first response officers and investigating officers offer insights into their experiences and perceptions of the training they had received. Three main themes emerged from the interview data and are set out below.¹

Omnicompetence Versus Specialism in Investigator Roles

RASSO investigation is not a specific specialism within the organizational structure of Avon and Somerset Police and yet the investigation of RASSO requires specialist knowledge (Rumney et al., 2021). It differs from the investigation of other crimes as it involves an assessment of consent, often involving those who are known to each other and individuals who present complex vulnerabilities when they report the offence to the police (Hohl & Stanko, 2015). Currently, within the RASSO context, there is a reliance on omnicompetence, with officers and investigators operating as ‘investigative generalists’ being expected to deal with a range of investigations of differing types and complexities. Therefore, the specialist knowledge and skills required to understand, engage, and undertake this complex area of police work are not addressed in organizational learning provision, approach, or ethos, and are largely lacking for and amongst practitioners. As Evetts (2013) suggests professions and professionals often encounter workloads associated with complex uncertainties and risk. It is through the provision of expert knowledge that individuals are enabled to effectively deal with such ambiguity. Indeed, this is what empowers the workforce to be professional, ask critical questions and reflect on their practice. These two quotes evidence this and the impact it has on officers:

...With the way things are at the moment, the shortage of staff we’ve got ... we’re basically expected to be a specialist in everything... (DS)

...The fact you’ve lost specialisation amongst dedicated teams is very bad. I mean, not only have you removed the opportunity for people who actually have a particular passion for this kind of work to go and that, which they would probably feel happier about. You’re then also chucking people in who might not be as passionate or as considerate towards sexual offences as say, they would if they liked burglaries or robberies, that makes them miserable. Because now they have this massive RASSO job and they don’t care, they don’t want to do it, it’s not in their avenue of interest...” (DS)

Generic procedural and practical training in this area was supplemented by experiential learning from personal or peer sources, learning often being derived from what went wrong. Stanko and Hohl (2018) argue that in policing, professional development often remains internal within policing where officers are trained by ex-police officers whose delivery can be unscrutinised and invisible. This can result in a reliance on internal police knowledge and organizational logic about what constitutes real rape. The lack of expert knowledge resulted in a generalist application of knowledge at a practical level which fails to understand the complexity of rape investigations. The risk of applying experiential knowledge is highlighted here in these quotes:

...You apply your own learned experience from your evidential test, your public interest test as you would do with any other case; knowing your basic points to prove and the nuances of an investigation from your basic training. Whilst we have specialist investigators who may pick up specialist skills along the way, at supervising level if you hadn’t actually done that, then it’s very little traction to pick up... (DI)

...I’ve quite recently done the force’s DI course, and rape’s not on there. We had lots of other specialisms coming and speaking to us: we had domestic abuse for example for a couple of hours, we had intelligence, we had covert. But no rape. So although we are taught those basics of doing any complex investigation there is no specialism within those three weeks around rape... (DI)

Whilst this lack of specialism partly results from a function of the force’s overall size and high levels of workloads given the national challenges in recruiting and retaining detectives (qualified investigators). This meant any investigating officer across the teams could deal with a RASSO case, rather than there being a dedicated specialist RASSO team. Sackmann (1991) argues that socially created cultural cognitions are intrinsic to what constitutes recipe knowledge in organizations and when practitioners are offered limited alternatives this can be perceived as cognitively legitimate to practitioners as they attempt to deal with such complex situations. A lack of qualified assessors to support trainee detective’s practice learning and achievement of formal investigative certification exacerbated this as they had no opportunity to blend any theoretical learning with their practice. The

Footnote 4 (continued)

¹ For an overview of the themes/findings arising from the 27 interviews please see Appendix.

component (Tones & Pillay, 2008) incorporating six factors (learning climate, individual goal engagement, disengagement, organisational constraints, individual goal selection and work tasks). A wellbeing measure was derived from a licensed copy (23rd November 2021) of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) that consists of three separate measures of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP) and personal accomplishment (PA) eight items scored on a Likert-scale ranging from Never [0] to Every Day [6] (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).
practiced learning and portfolio completion requirement was not seen to be intrinsically linked to an officer’s role by practitioners and was therefore often perceived to be a waste of time, in an already pressurized role.

... to be frank, I’ve not completed any of the portfolio or anything like that because I genuinely thought it was a joke. It was one of those where I didn’t realise that actually, you want me to - not continued development - but to prove my worth in this work when the course wasn’t fit for purpose anyway... (DC)

Unfortunately, the perceived lack of worth related to the limited training offered to officers meant that officers rarely had the opportunity or inclination to apply the limited specialist learning they had received in any meaningful way. Furthermore, the gap in quality training linked to their perceptions about the value placed on learning by the organization itself.

The Perceived Value of Learning in RASSO Investigations

The research revealed situations where inexperienced officers were involved in complex RASSO investigations with limited or no formal learning, mentoring, or support. Currently, the capability to resource RASSO cases relies on numbers of officers rather than an overarching strategy that takes better account of the officer’s experience, capability, and competence to undertake this complex role. All officers involved in the investigation of RASSO are required to undertake the College of Policing’s Specialist Sexual Assault Investigation Development Programme (SSAIDP).

At the time of the research, only four officers had completed both the course and the associated portfolio. Additionally, many officers working in investigating roles had not completed the PIP2 course. It should be noted that access to the SSAIDP course is predicated upon having completed both the PIP2 course and the subsequent 12-month (maximum) work-based assessment of competence portfolio required to be certified as a detective under College of Policing policy. Thus, access to the specific RASSO training was determined by access to courses rather than a functional requirement.

...I’ve got somebody that I’m tutoring today that did their course [PIP2] in June, and they’ve already been allocated a RASSO job. That’s how strapped we are at the moment. I think it’s irrelevant whether you’ve got that extra training or not... (DC)

Like the investigators, the FROs who are often the first police resources to engage RASSO victims, considered their training to be limited. It was seen as being basic and only focussed on technical information about the use of early evidence kits. The training showcases the FRO booklet, which provides the instructions for officers to follow when they encounter a victim of RASSO was perceived as useful but prescriptive. They felt that the FRO training, as a standalone input, was insufficient. FROs felt that the training they had received could be part of a wider remit of training that further contextualizes rape and sexual assault.

...we go through the FRO booklet which basically, said—it’s quite a simple procedure. You go through the questions in the booklet. It [the training] was literally just a couple of hours, get given the early evidence kit, get to open it see what’s in there. Get told there are instructions in there to follow. It’s very much: this is the procedure, here are the instructions, this is what you’ll have to do. And you just follow it, and that’s it. There isn’t really much else on it... (FRO)

...I think the training itself is really poor. I love the FRO book by the way. The actual training package is half a day, and you go through the FRO book, a bit of awareness and the early evidence kit. When we used to do the chaperone training it was 2–3 days long then bolted onto that was a 2-week ABE course. It was just miles better, you felt so much more equipped, you’d have half a day with a forensic scientist, an expert in the field explained to you why you should be doing things the way you should. The CPD days have been really good and there have been some inputs on that, but I think there needs to be more upfront to equip, especially really junior officers who deal with really serious crime, they need more training initially, so they know what they’re doing... (FRO)

Given the limited numbers of officers who had completed the SSAIDP course in Avon and Somerset it is problematic to capture general experiences of the course. However, of those who had completed the course, there were negative perceptions. This quote from a DC that worked in the main office said:

...I think the trouble with the training we received from it, just being very frank and honest, it’s not fit for purpose, it was a really poor course. And it was really poor because it gave absolutely no practical indication on how to investigate sexual assault and serious offences. It gave no kind of further inputs to how you deal with your victims or about trauma specialising or

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6 The PIP programme (developed by the UK College of Policing, the professional body for policing in England and Wales) provides an incremental development pathway that is intended to provide a consistent programme of registration, examination, training, workplace assessment and certification to set national standards at each level of an investigators career development. Achievement of PIP is supported by continuous professional development. For more detail see Professionalising investigation programme (PIP)—College of Policing (2021).
anything like that. There was absolutely nothing. I felt like it was a tick box exercise as a course, which was what I found really disappointing.... It was, I think, laughable, this course. It had absolutely nothing which I thought was new information that was truly useful. The things that I would like to know would be far more around that kind of engagement of victims, of actually the practicality of having an input around indecent images, things like that... (DC)

Despite the negative perceptions of the training, officers were keen to undertake specialist learning and felt that it was relevant to their role. This relevancy is critical as Hohl and Stanko (2015) argue, rape presents officers with variables that cannot fall within the normative assumptions about prescribed remedies for the police. Some officers were frustrated about the criteria needed to access the SSAIDP and felt excluded from a development opportunity. Feelings of frustration were further compounded as officers who were not formally accredited as a DC were being allocated RASSO investigations and therefore not considered eligible for the specialist RASSO training. As Bradford and Quinton (2014) suggest when police officers feel fairly treated by their organization, they have a stronger sense of personal legitimacy and competence. They suggest these factors may facilitate positive policing behaviours which is central to the investigation of a RASSO case. Officers questioned the extent to which the organizational valued learning and the importance of correctly equipping their officers to be effective in their roles to make improvements for victims of RASSO. For example:

...there’s definitely the question of value – “why aren’t I allowed to go on the course?” But it also works other ways and people have successfully gone through the process. Stigma isn’t the right word, but the feedback can be, ‘I’m doing the work on a daily basis so why can’t I achieve this accreditation?’ It’s fair to say... (RASSO trainer)

This has serious implications on the perceived worth placed on empowering officers fairly in this complex area of police work and giving them the skills, resources and confidence to investigate RASSO effectively.

The Desire Versus the Reality of Building Capability Through Upskilling and CPD

Individual professional development plans were not in place with the officers interviewed for this study, which appeared indicative of the wider organizational learning approach. Therefore, individual and role appropriate training requirements were not identified consistently or prioritized. To legitimize a sense of professionalism in the workforce, organizations have a responsibility to empower their staff with the resources they need to fulfill their role (Birch et al., 2017). This clearly linked to officers’ sense of competence when dealing with victims of rape and sexual crime. One FRO felt that the lack of development in this area compounded police officers’ lack of confidence in their role as first responders to rape victims. As this FRO states:

...I know on my team a lot of my colleagues haven’t really been to a FRO job since their training and I think it’s the lack of experience that just gives people a massive lack in confidence. It’s the type of thing because you have your training and you’re not then doing it over and over again, you don’t pick up ways to try and do the job. Most people hate having to deal with it, and it tends to be the same people on the team that are putting their hand up and offering to go to the jobs... (FRO)

Consequently, those who have received the limited FRO training are often called repeatedly to cases. This disproportionate allocation and exposure to RASSO reporting is likely to impact on the effected officer’s wellbeing. Moreover, FROs felt that there was a reluctance amongst officers to volunteer as FROs due to the demonstrable lack of support offered and the subsequent impact of their colleagues’ welfare.

...I think you kind of have to get to breaking point for it to be realised, if I’m honest. Otherwise, it just keeps… it gets put on your shoulders time and time again and you know, you want to do it because you know you can do a good job and you’re confident doing it, but then you’re also like, there should be other people on the team that are feeling that way that can do it as well. Then I think they see you getting hammered with it and think ‘oh I don’t want to do that’ so then it kind of, never gets better... (FRO)

The challenges noted by FROs and investigating officers about the access to role specific learning were replicated amongst their supervisors. There was no provision of training support for DIs involved in RASSO cases. Support in this area is key given their role in supervising investigations, applying the evidential tests, considering what is in the public interest, thinking about CPS decisions and reviewing team decision-making. This quote from a DI clearly highlights this:

...There is no teaching, no training and I think there could be, maybe a better input on what is expected of you as an OIC. But you literally just have to do or die... (DI)

The perceived lack of value placed on organizational learning conflicted with the requirements of the officers
interviewed. CPD days, where available, were positively received by the participants, yet there was personal conflict for them about whether to prioritize learning events at the risk of falling behind on their overwhelming caseloads. Indeed, there was evidence of officers missing out on learning in order to provide resilience around the increasing demand of their cases and protecting their colleagues.

...I think it’s irrelevant whether you’ve got that extra training or not. At the moment I think on our team we’ve only got two DCs so everything in my tray is RASSO... (DC)

A significant learning gap exists for officers who both respond to and investigate RASSO. There is aspiration from the organization to make CPD a core part of an officer’s development and to ensure a certain amount is undertaken in a twelve-month period. However, the apparent tensions presented with CPD offers, particularly the time allowed for formal or self-directed learning working directly against high workloads meant that learning became discretionary, rather than central aspect of CPD.

...At the moment it’s just a matter of making sure somebody is investigating; whether they are somebody that likes it, whether they’re passionate about it, whether they’ve got training is an aside. It’s somebody that’s got the capacity, their workload isn’t already up to that magic number and can take it on... (DI).

The emerging findings from this study indicate significant gaps in specialist training for RASSO investigators and FROs arising from the lack of provision, access to, and uptake of relevant learning and CPD options. This shows a clear conflict for officers who want to improve their knowledge, map it to their experience to deliver a better service to victims and at the same time, balance their casework. The impact this is likely to have on officers’ welfare should not be underestimated. As Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) argue, occupational burnout occurs where a lack of resources at work is coupled with high demands. In addition, professional discretion implies being trusted, being committed, and morally involved in one’s work (Evets, 2009). However, organizations need to provide their workforce with the knowledge and skills required to do this safely (Birch et al., 2017) or it leaves a reliance on peer-to-peer and experiential learning which might tend to perpetuate poor understanding and procedural approaches to RASSO investigation.

Concluding Remarks

Engagement with work develops if the resources in a workplace and employee’s personal resources are sufficient. If resources are low and demands are high, however, emotional exhaustion and burnout can occur. Therefore, the findings from this research offer further insights into the relationship between organizational justice, the enabling of capability and the delivery of professional police investigations in the context of RASSO. An individual sense of professional credibility stretches beyond an occupational set of standardized behaviours or values and extends into personal expertise, judgement, and self-legitimacy. It also supports an approach to deliver a quality of service and of professional performance which is aligned with the interests of the individual customers by avoiding prescriptive and generic responses. This is central in a complex RASSO case (Hohl & Stanko, 2015).

The connection between officer competence and confidence, the provision and ability to access learning to support their development and officer wellbeing is a thread that is central to the findings of this research. Whilst officers and staff engaged in the management and investigation of RASSO cases are exposed to vicarious sources of trauma through their work with victims, they are additionally exposed to varying degrees of trauma through organizational systems and processes as well as a lack of access to theoretical and functional knowledge and learning. Whilst this latter source of trauma, derived from the organization, appears to have limited recognition within policing, it is one that police organizations should take steps to improve not only to enhance officer wellbeing, but ultimately to increase the effectiveness of RASSO investigations and outcomes for victims. It views professionalism more as a value system where workers operate with moral legitimacy (Sklansky, 1995) and a commitment to do the right thing As Sklansky (2008) argues, the internal structures of police organizations are important as they should provide the conditions for officers to deliver democratic and procedurally fair policing styles. He goes on to add that internal democracy results in a more confident workforce who subsequently support internal change.

In addition, in the absence of formal learning sources and opportunities practitioners are, largely of necessity, learning from their own and peers’ trial and error experiences with little time for reflection or evaluation of their decisions. This approach to learning is unlikely to address culturally entrenched practice and belief systems around such contextually critical areas as rape myths, victim typologies and deservedness, and investigative approaches. Moving forward there needs to be a commitment to and recognition of the need for specialist expert knowledge in this area of policing aligned with the time allowance for officers to engage, apply, reflect, and critically evaluate such learning in practice. This reflects the research base around RASSO crimes and the link between attrition, victim vulnerabilities, and dealing with the trauma presented by victims and their own needs as officers (Stanko & Williams, 2009). All these components are
key to understanding and delivering a supportive and effective investigation for victims. Indeed, organizations have a responsibility to their workforce and the public to instil competence and confidence and enable professionalism in this complex field. The policing environment needs to value and nurture the notion of being a professional officer through an iterative and continuous learning journey that equips officers and enables their ongoing development.

## Appendix

| Participants | Type | Participant (n) | Overview of participant perceptions & observations |
|--------------|------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| CID RASSO Investigators | Focus group | 6 | Investigators |
| Psychological Support Lead | Interview | 1 | Long term challenge to recruiting into investigative roles recognized |
| FirstResponders | Focus group | 4 | Inexperienced officers involved in complex RASSO investigations with limited or no formal learning, mentoring, or development support provided – reliance on number of officers not officer capability |
| Investigation and professional development unit (investigator training) | Interview | 2 | Reliance on omnicompetence rather than Specialism for investigating RASSO |
| L & D lead | Interview | 1 | Challenges recruiting and retaining trained investigators |
| Wellbeing leads | Interview | 2 | |
| Strategic lead for RASSO | Interview | 1 | Majority of investigators lack detective (PIP2) and specialist RASSO investigative training (Specialist Sexual assault Investigation Development programme (SSAIDP)) |
| Strategic lead for L&D | Interview | 1 | |

| Participants | Type | Participant (n) | Overview of participant perceptions & observations |
|--------------|------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| BluestoneRASSO Investigators | Focus group | 5 | Limited numbers have completed First Responding Officer’s Course which leads to overuse of those trained to respond to initial RASSO reports |
| Detective inspectors (DI) | FG | 4 | Newly recruited investigators may lack previous general policing experience as well as specific training to manage complex RASSO investigations |
| | | | Newly recruited investigators allocated to RASSO investigation to manage resourcing gaps, in some cases before receiving investigative training |
| | | | There is an expectation that more experienced officers in RASSO investigative environments will mentor less experienced investigators, but RASSO investigative teams are currently under resourced |
| | | | Ideally RASSO investigators should be trained detectives or equivalently skilled but in deficit so required to deploy other resources to ARSSO investigations |
Participants | Type | Participant (n) | Overview of participant perceptions & observations
---|---|---|---
Challenges with officers without investigative training and lack of investigator experience recognized at senior level
RASSO investigations increasingly complex to manage due to factors such as digital evidence
Recognizes impact of under resourcing on RASSO investigators in post and their desire to remain there
Recognizes challenges of delivering good outcomes to RASSO victims and impact of not being able to do so on investigators who want to do their best for RASSO victims
Lack of experience and capability of investigators which inevitably impacts on victim outcomes
In process of introducing new training management system to support strategic and tactical training management
Experienced investigators consider newly appointed civilian investigators are being allocated to RASSO investigative roles without adequate training

Participants | Type | Participant (n) | Overview of participant perceptions & observations
---|---|---|---
Previously RASSO investigation appointment was by competitive selection, now due to challenges in recruitment and retention there is a perception that people are being placed in post without the requisite levels of experience, specialist knowledge and aptitude for the role
There is a perception that RASSO investigative units are relatively inexperienced, under resourced and that investigators hold excessive and unmanageable caseloads
Supervisors
Often forgo own psychological evaluation opportunities to allow team members to attend as opportunities limited
As leaders highly reliant on skills of their teams to deliver effect but those skills often lacking
Immediate activities directed at responding to/managing perceived high harm incidents take precedent over historic or existing investigations
Often lack specific RASSO technical knowledge around case file build to properly supervise/advice subordinates

Supervisors
| Participants | Type | Participant (n) | Overview of participant perceptions & observations |
|--------------|------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|              |      | Highlight      | Chronic lack of FRO availability requiring untrained officers to respond or investigations to come directly to secondary investigators. DI’s hold investigative caseload to relieve pressure on sergeants and constables, impacts on ability to supervise and lead teams. The main goal is achieving the charging threshold, once this has been achieved cases are rarely revisited from a supervisory perspective due to workload and capacity issues amongst supervisors. DI’s often work considerably beyond their contracted hours and workload often overspills into home and family life. |
|              |      | Training       | Perception of lack of value placed on formal learning by organization. Investigators keen to access training. Primary investigators only receive basic procedural and practice formal training. Reliant on Peer-to-Peer learning to develop understanding and practice of complex RASSO investigations. |
|              |      | Lack of specialistist training to undertake complex RASSO investigations. What went wrong often most salient learning. Training opportunities limited. Officers perceive training as poor quality and of limited value in real world use. Officers lack capacity to attend training even where offered due to high case-loads and lack of resourcing. College of Policing Policy of requiring completion of PIP 2 prior to access SSAIDP limits access to RASSO specific training. Very limited/ if any continuous professional development opportunities exist for RASSO investigators. Limited to no additional training provided for supervisory ranks to manage/ supervise secondary RASSO investigations. Lack of trained assessors to support formal investigator development and accreditation of investigators and RASSO specialisms. |
| Participants | Type | Participant (n) | Overview of participant perceptions & observations |
|--------------|------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| First Response Officer (FRO) | | | receive basic procedural and practice formal training in relation to responding to RASSO cases—Primarily focused on correct completion of reporting booklet. No additional training provided for Supervisory ranks to manage primary RASSO investigations. A&S undergoing significant uplift in police investigators due to national recruitment exercise and internal decision-making—this is straining the capacity to support delivery of courses and mentoring to students. PIP 1 training is generic investigation training, contains limited RASSO related content. There is often a conflict between managing live investigations and completing training portfolios for PIP2 and SSAIDP courses. The conflict arises because of limited capacity and resource availability. Wellbeing systems and processes relatively new. |
| Systemic issues with resourcing in training and investigations recognized at senior level. A&S have very limited capability to undertake learning impact assessment outside of recruit degree entry programmes. RASSO investigators have mixed experience of the training provision, the majority have not had access to RASSO specific training although some have. Civilian investigators and non-detective officer investigators (those without PIP 2) report they do not have access to specialist RASSO investigative training (SSAIDP) despite working on such cases. It is only available to warranted detective constables under College of Policing guidelines. New focus on reflective practice in learning recently introduced. Investigators recognize the need to keep up with changes to practice, procedure and legislation but report that CPD opportunities are highly limited and constrained by their capacity to engage them. |
Participants Type Participant (n) Overview of participant perceptions & observations

**Welfare**
Psychological support only provided to certain risk assessed roles—RASSO investigators included, FROs excluded
Should be mandatory yearly referral but unable to sustain on current resourcing
Current lack of joined up systems for monitoring welfare referral, engagement and follow up
Use Trauma Risk Incident Management (TRiM) Protocol for incident related trauma management (See: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/35492/0392-12attachment2of2.pdf for more information)
Strategic ownership of welfare recently created in organization
Organization has welfare systems and processes to support investigators
Reluctance of some officers to engage welfare systems due to cultural stigma recognized

Participants Type Participant (n) Overview of participant perceptions & observations

Despite being required to undergo psychological assessment/support investigator participants report that it is lacking
Welfare support is largely dependent on individual line manager inclination/interest

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**Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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