

Researching neurodiversity in policing

By John De-Hayes

“Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.” (Walker, 2021)

How are policing organisations in England and Wales approaching the issue of neurodiversity within their workforces? The aim of this piece is to explore best practice and assess the impact that force and government policy might have on the experiences of neurodivergent police officers, particularly those at the start of their career.

In my experience, there seems to have been a lot of work done on the visible differences that impact on police recruitment, retention and progression, but relatively little has been done to look at hidden differences. Race, gender and physical differences are generally easy to spot and therefore make it easier for people to be “labelled”. To some extent, religion and sexuality might be more visible or at least easy to categorise, but how does policing deal with the challenges of the neurodiverse within their ranks?

As a former police officer, with a total of 25 years of service in Leicestershire Police and more recently West Midlands Police (WMP), I have been fortunate to work with many people, with a wide range of backgrounds and characteristics. Both force areas are recognised for the diversity of the communities within them and I have met officers who can trace their origins from all over the world. Some of our colleagues have experienced discrimination, abuse, stigmatisation and isolation, both from within and outside their force, based solely on their visible differences.

But how do people with invisible differences fare? Maybe we should start by briefly examining the sort of “differences” that I’m referring to? Perhaps the simplest way to explain neurodiversity is to think of it as an overarching description of a range of conditions including Autism, Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Clouder *et al.*, 2020).

In my role as a university lecturer, the most common neurodivergence I encounter is Dyslexia, which is perhaps not surprising when according to Kirby and Welch (2016), approximately 10% of the adult population are suspected to have this condition. As policing is supposedly a reflection of society, it is not unreasonable to assume that a similar percentage of police officers are operating with Dyslexia. Macdonald and Cosgrove (2019) undertook research in a force in northern England, where almost 600 participants responded to an online survey. This represented just over 12% of the overall workforce. The results suggested, based on the small sample group, that more

than 5% of the workforce were experiencing difficulties with their literary skills or had been diagnosed with Dyslexia. It is difficult to draw conclusions based on such a small sample size in one police force, but if those results are reflected across policing, there will be a significant number of colleagues in need of additional support.

It is likely that we may never know how many police officers are neurodivergent. This lack of understanding can be for several reasons. According to the National Police Autism Association (NPAA) (2016) some officers refuse to disclose their condition, due to concerns about being stigmatised. This fear is perhaps justified, based on the findings of the Policing Research Unit at Durham University, who discovered that police officers who identified with a neurodiversity were faced with higher levels of incivility from their colleagues (Graham *et al.*, 2020). The data shows that around a quarter of respondents reported that they were regularly spoken to in a condescending manner, interrupted or ignored by their colleagues. Perhaps the findings of Macdonald and Cosgrove (2019), were skewed by a fear of disclosure, despite the surveys being anonymous? Whatever the case maybe, this presents a challenge for police managers in terms of providing support, because unless they know the true extent of neurodiversity in their force, how can they ensure the correct resources are in place?

Some of the fear of being stigmatised might be removed by making police officers and the public more aware of the challenges that neurodiverse officers face, but also by increasing awareness of the additional skills and knowledge that “difference” can bring. Social media is a force for good (sometimes) and there are several Twitter accounts that are maintained by police officers with neurodivergent conditions. Examples include

- <https://twitter.com/JBDyslexic>
- https://twitter.com/dyslexic_cop

I will exercise a note of caution here, as the *bona fides* of these accounts have not been established, so I can only assume that they are genuine police officers.

Other officers perhaps don't even know that they have a neurodivergence. Dr. Andy Hill, a former police officer and now a lecturer in Policing at the University of Akureyri in the North of Iceland, wrote his doctoral thesis charting his own realisation that he was dyslexic (Hill, 2013). Dr Hill only realised his condition after a meeting with a student police officer who disclosed her own dyslexia. This struck a chord with me, as shortly after my promotion to sergeant in WMP, I became involved in the case of one of my officers who was struggling to complete the paperwork necessary to show his 'competence'. The potential consequence for failure to complete the paperwork was dismissal, so a lot rested on him getting it done. Only when someone from what was then called “Personnel” met with the officer was it suggested that he might have Dyslexia. Tests showed this to be the case and reasonable adjustments were made, enabling the officer to continue his career.

Reflecting further on the degree of support neurodiverse colleagues have historically received, there is a consideration that some force policies have perhaps been indirectly discriminating against neurodivergent applicants for the job. The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) had a standard operating procedure (Metropolitan

Police Service, 2012) that required any potential candidate with Dyslexia to obtain a report from an independent consultant at the applicant's own expense. This might have been enough to deter a potentially good applicant, but it also runs the risk of people deciding not to disclose their condition in the hope that it does not get recognised during the assessment process. The MPS published a new Diversity and Inclusion strategy (Metropolitan Police Service, 2017b) which was linked to their Inclusion, Diversity and Equality policy (Metropolitan Police Service, 2017a) neither of which made any specific reference to neurodiversity. However, there seems to be a more inclusive view of learning needs, based on a published Freedom of Information request (Metropolitan Police Service, 2022) that suggests more support is now available, in terms of diagnosis and welfare organisations. In certain circumstances, the MPS will pay for an assessment for officers who believe they have Dyslexia, although there still appears to be limited support for other neuro-diverse conditions. It is important to understand how the old policies might have adversely affected recruits and serving officers in the past, so I have contacted the MPS Disability Support Association (DSA) to explore the impact these policies have had on recruitment and retention.

One question for consideration is whether officers who suspect they have a neurodivergence should have to have a diagnosis to receive support. This topic came up in a conversation I had recently and it caused me to reflect on the other protected characteristics. For instance, does a gay officer need to prove that they are gay to access the support networks? Is there a certificate to prove that someone is of a certain ethnic origin to allow them to feel included? Why should someone with a neurodiversity have to go through a process to validate their difference? Surely, we should accept that if someone says that they process things differently, they are probably right. Rather than assign reasonable adjustments to an individual based on their "label", why not assume that some staff might need extra support and just have it available as and when required?

The College of Policing (2021a, p. 28) recognises the West Midlands Police on being awarded second place in the 2020 Top 50 UK Employers List based on their inclusive practices around neurodiversity examples of which include staff support networks and awareness sessions (Inclusive Companies, 2020), but is this reflected across policing more broadly? In order to answer this question, I am embarking on a research project to understand the experiences of student police officers as they start their journey into policing. From my observations and conversations with students, there seems to be more of an understanding of neurodiversity in policing, but progress needs to be supported with an evidence base. I have an opportunity to gather qualitative data from perhaps the largest body of policing students in the country. I can compare the experiences of neurodiverse and neurotypical student officers, to identify the good practice that exists and make informed recommendations for improvements. This project will undoubtedly inform and improve my own teaching practice, but on a wider scale, will provide opportunities for police managers to draw on the results and consider whether current policies and procedures are effective.

Student police officers on the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) and Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP) courses (College of Policing, 2021b) undertake a modular study scheme, interspersed with workplace experience, which in some ways is similar to a teacher training programme. There has been some research and discourse around the experiences of neurodiverse student teachers (Morgan and

Burn, 2000; Riddick, 2003; Thorpe and Burns, 2016; Lawrence, 2019; Murray, 2019; Jacobs *et al.*, 2021; Wood and Happé, 2021), enough to make a reasonable comparison. There is also research about the experiences of neurodiverse nursing (White, 2007; Child and Langford, 2011; Ridley, 2011; White and Heslop, 2012; Evans, 2014; McPheat, 2014) and paramedic (Lavender, 2017) students. There are definitive points of reference regarding neurodivergent adult learners, the research of which may be relevant to accredited PEQF programmes and I can identify some good practice to feed into our teaching programmes.

White and Heslop (2012) undertook a comparative study of teaching, nursing and policing students, however, this research is now over ten years old, so methods of training delivery have changed radically in all three professions. In addition, the authors did not examine the diverse needs of students on any of the programmes, leaving a gap in knowledge that I aim to fill. Working at a University with large cohorts in all three of these programmes will enable me to continue my research and build an evidence-base that will help inform measures to support student, officers and colleagues across the broader police network. Good teaching practice should engage and develop all learners and there is a danger in placing too much focus on one particular group, to the detriment of others. However, given the increasing number of neurodivergent students, it is right to explore what they need and expect from the university as a provider of inclusive education and from the police, as an inclusive employer.

Having spoken with several people who work to support neurodiverse police officers, this research project seeks to bridge the gap between existing generic studies on neurodiversity and current practices in police recruitment, teaching and operational support. Rather than seeing neurodiversity as a challenge, it is time to embrace the cultural and functional benefits that an alternative way of thinking can bring into policing. By highlighting the experiences of our newest recruits, this research will inform policymakers and lead to a more inclusive approach to a mainly invisible difference.

[Tweets by JBDyslexic](#)

[Tweets by dyslexic_cop](#)

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