Performing Talent: Gendered and Politicised Talent Management Practice in a Policing Context

Janet Handley

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

Contemporary critiques of talent management highlight a limited focus on those excluded from talent pools, insufficient attention to gendered implications, and inadequate consideration of organisational context. This thesis addresses these omissions through a feminist study of talent management practice within a large UK police force.

Drawing on documentary and thematic analysis of thirty-six loosely structured interviews, findings demonstrate the gendered nature of talent management and confirm the significant role of organisational context in shaping understandings of talent and talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). The policing context permeated formal talent management documentation, practice, and documentation lacunae, producing both explicit (documented) and implicit forms of gendering. Talent management practice became infused with an idealised, unencumbered, physically strong male worker (Acker, 1990; 1992), capable of extreme-hours working, reflecting deeply embedded gendered mental models, discourse, subjectivities, and practices.

This thesis problematises the simplistic application of the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991) as a theoretical foundation for talent management, highlighting its dark side and the unanticipated and often undesirable consequences of such approaches. These include gendered practices and differential impacts on both those included within talent pools and those excluded. Talent management practice was found to be politicised, with a novel finding identifying the capacity of elite talent to deploy political tactics for personal advantage. Critically, talent management was shown to perform talent rather than merely identify it, rendering talent pool inclusion self-reinforcing.

Individuals navigated work–home conflict arising from talent expectations through three coping strategies: Accommodating and Adapting (meeting extreme work demands by adjusting work or non-work arrangements); Working Hard and Having it All (accepting the prevailing gender order and intensifying effort across work *and* non-work domains); and Adopting a Gender-Blind Perspective (either ignoring gendered dynamics altogether or attributing them to women themselves, without consideration of wider structural factors).

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List of Abbreviations

BAWP	British Association of Women Police Officers / British Association for Women in Policing
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
FTP	Fast Track Programme
GEN X	Generation X
GEN Y	Generation Y
GEN Z	Generation Z
GTM	Global Talent Management
HRM	Human Resource Management
MNE	Multinational Enterprise
NPM	New Public Management
OCB	Organisational Citizenship Behaviour
SET	Social Exchange Theory
SPOC	Single Point of Contact
TM	Talent Management
TSS	Talent Support Scheme

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis aims to understand how talent management is translated into practice within a large UK police force. Through this research and analysis it seeks to develop an understanding of how 'talent' and talent management are implemented and made sense of, and how and to what extent talent management practice is gendered, politicised and performed.

In the context of enduring employer challenges in the recruitment, development, and retention of skilled labour (Hogarth and McCafrtney, 2024) and unprecedented social, technological and social change particularly post Covid-19 (Kravariti et al., 2022; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2025a) talent management remains a priority for senior management (Collings et al., 2022). Emergent UK 'anti-woke' social attitudes that gender equality is now a problem that is solved (Ryan, 2024; Vinnicombe et al., 2024) is in sharp juxtaposition to recent exposition of entrenched misogyny and masculinisation (Casey Review, 2023), enduring underrepresentation of women in senior roles (HeforShe, 2024; Home Office, 2025b) and continued horizontal job segregation within UK policing (Laverick, 2023). UK police officer resignations are at record levels (Home Office, 2025b), creating impetus for strategies to support change and to improve talent development and support.

There are growing calls, however, to critically consider unanticipated or unintended consequences of talent management itself (Swailes, 2020; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022), including potential gendered practice (Makarem et al., 2019). This thesis informs critical debate and theorization of talent management, specifically its dark side (Handley, 2014), and the implications of this for organisational and Human Resource Management (HRM) strategy.

This chapter introduces talent management (what is understood by the term and the challenges talent management proponents suggest it helps to address), gender and the policing (research) context.[1]

1.2 The war for talent

[1] The meaning and understanding of talent itself is explored in depth in Chapter 2, with a broadly accepted notion of talent being linked to natural skills or abilities, and individual potential for high performance, being adopted in this introductory chapter for simplicity.

Proponents of a corporate talent management approach argue that the ‘war for talent’ has been waged consistently since its first use in 1998 by Chambers et al. (1998) (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Scullion and Collings, 2011; Collings et al., 2017).

Despite a disrupted global economy – in which, it might be argued, there would potentially be an excess supply rather than a labour shortage, with pressures on the costs of production and inflationary trends – competition for highly skilled labour has been consistently reported (Beamond et al., 2016). This is particularly the case within the UK which is faced with reduced labour force participation rates and Brexit-related shortages, in addition to the wider economic pressures faced by other countries (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Purported reasons for this sustained competition for talent include changing demographics (an older workforce, fewer new entrants to the labour market, thus greater scarcity of new ‘talent’ and ongoing attempts to retain existing talent (Office for National Statistics, 2022)), a global business and talent marketplace with associated mobility (Farndale et al., 2010; Office for National Statistics, 2022) and evolving employee values. It is argued that the latter, for example, are changing as Generation X (Gen X) and Baby Boomers leave the workplace and Generation Y(Gen Y)s desire a high quality of life, are less concerned with a strong work focus, have less organisational loyalty and want a better balance between (socially responsible) work and home than their predecessors (Collings et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). This in turn creates challenges for organisations attempting to attract, retain and develop (particularly very senior) talented employees, when work is no longer the prime focus for many individuals. Knowledge workers are deemed increasingly central to developing advanced knowledge economies (Chew and Zainal, 2024), yet there is an allegedly growing paucity of those appropriately qualified to fill senior or professional positions. Indeed, around the time of the primary data collection for this study, CIPD (2012a) predicted escalating skills shortages in the short-term in the UK, with a subsequent report (CIPD, 2012b) identifying the strategic imperative of talent management for filling managerial, professional and technical posts, with particular pressure on specialist and technical skills.

Labour market pressures intensified post-data collection, particularly following Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, with accelerated pace of change and shifts in the location of paid work (Collings et al., 2022; George et al., 2022; Kravariti et al., 2022; Sumption et al., 2022). Indeed, the call for effective talent management has intensified in recent years. The global Covid-19 pandemic

arguably stimulated a step-change in working from home practices, even in non-traditional areas such as tele-healthcare, with an associated shift to virtual (rather than in-person) networks affecting working practices and available skills (Vaiman et al., 2021). There have been simultaneous changes to the UK political landscape, notably Brexit for the context of this study, with its associated impact on the movement of workers (Hogarth and McCartney, 2024). This has further coincided with a global move towards nationalism, trade wars and what might be termed deglobalization (Farndale et al., 2021). Such developments had implications for the management and motivation of increasingly distanced employees, some of whom were highly skilled and with high bargaining power, whilst others became increasingly disadvantaged and distant (Vaiman et al., 2021) with talent attraction, development and retention remaining crucial to organisational performance (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020).

The CIPD report on skills shortages in 2024, several years post-Brexit and post-pandemic, highlighted sustained employer difficulty recruiting skilled talent, notably for the UK public sector and senior and highly skilled roles (Hogarth and McCartney, 2024). Most employers surveyed by the CIPD in 2024 (83%) had experienced difficulties recruiting external talent, with many re-focusing efforts on upskilling the current workforce and almost half of organisations reporting CEO prioritisation of talent management (Hogarth and McCartney, 2024). Talent development, rather than talent recruitment, is thus of growing importance; indeed, the case study organisation in this research focused primarily on internal talent development.

In this context, interest in talent management has grown significantly, with a marked increase in publications since a special issue of Journal of World Business in 2010 (see, for example, Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell et al, 2017). That notwithstanding, the bulk of talent management literature remains non-empirical, managerialist (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; Collings et al., 2017) and practitioner focused, although there is some evidence of emergent critical analysis (see, e.g., Handley, 2014; Swailes and Blackburn, 2016; Swailes, Handley and Rivers, 2017; Makarem et al., 2019; Swailes, 2020). Scholars in the field continue to call for further (notably empirical) research into various aspects of talent management, including implications of and for gender (Makarem et al., 2019).

Cognisant of research lacunae, this thesis provides a critical gendered perspective on talent management. Despite the introduction of the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Equality Act (2010) the pay gap between men and women in

the UK remains stubbornly enduring – particularly among women aged forty and above, and higher earners (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2019; ONS 2022; ONS 2024a). Women continue to earn less than men, are more likely to work part-time or be under-employed and to be concentrated in lower status 'feminised' occupations (Fawcett Society, 2022; ONS, 2024a). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality, with women bearing the brunt of additional childcare when schools and nurseries were closed – many of whom were doing so whilst undertaking their own paid work at home. Women became increasingly vulnerable to both domestic violence and to the pandemic itself due to their predominance in caring and front line (exposed) professions, and greater propensity to be located in sectors subject to earnings reductions or job losses (Smith et al., 2021; Parry, 2024; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2024).

Women in the UK are now better educated than ever before, but according to both the last Sex and Power report pre-primary data collection (2013) and the most recent Fawcett Society Sex and Power report (2022), Britain continues to be male dominated in key political, industrial and commercial positions, with women remaining underrepresented in senior positions (Vinnicombe et al., 2024). Post-twenties, women continue to fall behind men in the workplace and, for many, this becomes a gap that is never closed with a tendency to become stuck in the 'marzipan layer' in the middle of organisations (Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 2011). Women who do manage to achieve senior roles are more likely to be appointed to failing organisations, deemed as 'glass cliff' (highly precarious) positions, compared to men, whose careers are assisted by 'glass elevators' (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; 2007).

However, the gender pay gap has become more nuanced over the last decade, varying by age and occupation. The largest pay gap is found between full-time employees aged 40 and over, and within professional and higher paid occupations (ONS, 2024a). The median gross hourly earnings (excluding overtime) pay gap for full-time employees is 9.1% for those aged 40-49, for example, over double the figure of 4.4% for employees aged 30-39 (ONS, 2024a). Such differentials notwithstanding, the gender pay gap has continued to decrease gradually, standing at 13.1% for *all* employees in 2024 (ONS, 2024a), although women still comprise most part-time workers. In part, this seems attributable to a greater caring burden shouldered by older women, in addition to returners being more likely to work part-time (for which group the hourly pay gap is wider) and to re-enter organisations into less senior roles.

Such a persistent gender pay and employment gap warrants further research and, indeed, has been specifically highlighted with respect to talent management within both multinational enterprise (MNE) senior talent teams,

and UK-based talent management (Farndale et al., 2010; Tatli et al., 2013; Festing et al., 2014, 2015; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Makarem et al. 2019). Extant literature continues to raise questions around equality and diversity implications of talent management practice. Kalman and Frost (2016), for example, argue the business case for equality and diversity. Sheehan and Anderson (2015), similarly, conclude that talent management research adopts a 'gender neutral or gender blind approach' (Mavin, 2015, cited in Sheehan and Anderson, 2015, p. 351) and both they and Makarem et al. (2019) call for further research to understand the role of gender bias and to add a critical perspective to previous work. Festing et al.'s (2014, 2015) empirical papers on the German media industry further highlight significant potential for gender bias. This thesis aims to fill this identified research gap through an exploration of talent management through a gender lens.

In addition to gender as a potential lens, there are growing calls for empirical research into those not included in the talent pool, with most employee-centred research to date focusing on the included minority and generally positive outcomes (see De Boeck et al.'s (2018) literature review). Although a small number of empirical inquiries considering the excluded can be found (CIPD, 2010; Ford et al., 2010a; 2010b; Handley, 2014; Swailes and Blackburn, 2016; Sumelius et al., 2020; Tyskbo and Wickhamn, 2022), this is an area requiring further investigation. This study aims to address this gap, focusing on both those included and those not included in the talent pool of a large public sector employer in the North of England.

Nascent talent management literature tends to assume a managerialist and unitarist lens, focusing on improving organisational outcomes such as profit or retention in organisations that are filled with employees who share universal aims (see, for example, Dundon and Rafferty, 2018). There has been a notable absence of critical work in the area, despite emerging evidence of a Bravermanesque focus on the extraction of surplus value and the short-run. There are growing calls for a critical perspective in the field (for example, Ingram and Allen, 2019; Makarem et al., 2019), which this thesis adopts. This study highlights the dark side of talent management (Handley, 2014; Swailes, Handley and Rivers, 2017), addressing Swailes' (2013; 2020) call for appreciation of the ethical implications of – particularly exclusive – talent management.

Other identified research gaps include consideration of the specific context within which talent management is practiced (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). Where context *has* been included within research parameters, this has largely been from a global and functionalist

perspective (see, for example, Glaister et al., 2021), with calls for focus on talent management within the public sector (McDonnell et al., 2017). This inquiry aims to focus on a particular context, UK policing, within one public sector case study organisation in the North of England. This explicit consideration of context addresses previous lack of rich contextual awareness in empirical research (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024).

Prior research has identified a misogynistic culture within UK police forces (Zempi, 2020; Casey Review, 2023), highlighting considerable potential for gender bias. As talent and talent management are given meaning by social actors in particular contexts (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020) the policing research context, and its potential impact on how talent management is implemented, is particularly noteworthy. Moreover, the subjectivist, interpretivist, approach adopted in this study offers an opportunity to consider the *processes* through which this particular context may affect talent management meaning and practice.

In summary, this study addresses research gaps in the areas of: gender, those not included in the talent pool and micro-level consideration of employee experiences (both included and excluded), a critical and non-unitarist perspective, and a detailed case study focusing on a large public sector organisation, cognisant of the relevance of context.

1.3 The context: Policing

This study is conducted within a UK policing context; specifically, a large police force in the North of England. At the time of data collection (2015-2016) UK policing had been subject to austerity measures for almost a decade, following the 2008 global financial crisis. Central Government spending on policing decreased 16% between 2009/10 and 2018/2019, with forces relying increasingly on the local council policing contribution (raised through council tax) and reserves (Institute for Government, 2019). Full-time equivalent police numbers fell by 14% between 2010 and 2019, with growing reliance on volunteers (Community Police Officers) to bridge the gap.

However, post-primary data collection, 2019 marked the inception of the ‘Police Uplift Programme’, a policy initiative aimed at recruiting an additional 20,000 police officers by March 2023. Police officer recruitment increased consistently 2019-2023, though less rapidly in 2024 (Home Office, 2024a). Interestingly, this period also witnessed a noticeable increase in police officer leavers, creating challenges for tacit organisational knowledge and succession, as 35% of all

police officers had under 5 years' service in 2024, compared to just 14% in 2016 (Home Office, 2024a).

Demands on policing have arguably increased during the same period: crimes have become more complex (for example, human trafficking and internet-based crime), often requiring cross-agency collaboration and communication. The police have also had a growing role to play in tackling mental health, being seen as the 'go-to' service 24/7 when other services – such as mental health provision within the NHS – had simultaneously suffered from austerity cuts (Institute for Government, 2019; Home Office, 2024a).

The composition of police officers, however, has shifted from frontline (93.4% in 2015 to 90.4% in 2024) to frontline support (from 3.6% in 2015 to 4.4% in 2024) and business support (5.1% in 2024 compared to 3.0% in 2015) (Home Office, 2024a). In this context it is hardly surprising that police in the case study Force (hereafter referred to as Shire Police or Shire) report low morale and dissatisfaction with pay, and would not recommend the force to others, with 10% of the 2019 survey respondents (n=298, a response rate of 6%) reporting an 'intention to leave' policing (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2019). Work Life Balance discourse is potentially shifting to reflect this new policing context, with greater focus on the individual amid pressure on policing HR to balance economic and employer demands (Lewis et al., 2017; Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025).

Women comprised 44.9% of the total Shire workforce, with a median and mean gender pay gap of 19.3% and 12% respectively in the year ending March 2019 (Shire Police 2020). Females were more likely to be found lower down the organisational and pay hierarchy and Shire Police's 2019 Pay and Morale survey identified a need to improve gender diversity, particularly in specialist and senior / middle management roles (Shire Police, 2020).

At the point of data collection Shire faced limited resources in an austerity context, in addition to an already evident gender gap. Moreover, despite an increase in female police officers across England and Wales since 2015 (from 28.2% nationally in 2015 to 35.4% in 2024), women still account for the majority of police staff (63%) and lower levels of police officers (Home Office, 2024a), suggesting continued predominance in stereotypically 'women's work'. This research is, therefore, positioned in that challenging organisational and individual context.

1.4 Research Aims

This thesis seeks to address an identified gender and public sector research gap through an exploration of potential gendering of talent management. This research focuses on the understanding of talent and talent management within a large UK police force. Through this context-rich knowledge it seeks to develop an understanding of how workplace practices are circulated and experienced, the implications of this for the (re)production of gender and what this means for organisational and HRM strategy.

The specific research aims of this thesis are:

1. To examine how talent and talent management are understood and translated into practice within the context of a large UK police force.
2. Through a feminist lens, to understand how, and to what extent, talent management practice is gendered, politicised and performed.
3. To inform critical debate and theorization of talent management, specifically the dark side of talent management.
4. To consider the implications of talent management practice for organisational and HRM strategy.

1.5 Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 conceptualises talent and talent management, and apprises nascent knowledge about talent management practice and evaluation thereof in terms of potential effects and negative consequences (the ‘dark side’ of talent management). A significant potential, dark side, effect of talent management practice is the reproduction of gender and hegemonic masculinity in term of leadership talent, thus prior research and knowledge of gender, gendered organisations and gender and management are explored in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of the policing context, as the case study organisation is a large police force in the North of England. The methodological approach adopted for this thesis is considered in Chapter 5, followed by a detailed exploration of talent management within a specific UK policing context (Shire Police) and individual coping strategies (Chapter 6), political processes and talent management (Chapter 7) and finally the gendering of talent management (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 provides a summary and final discussion of findings and Chapter 10 details the contributions of this thesis, along with recommendations for further research and practice.

Chapter 2 Talent Management

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of three literature review chapters and focuses on current understanding of talent management, its practice, and its consequences. The chapter begins with an exploration of the meaning of talent, followed by an appreciation of talent management definitions, extant knowledge of talent management practices, and discussion of current debates and developments. These include aspects that have informed the focus of this thesis, such as increased awareness of the need to research public sector contexts and the potential relevance of gender. Research highlighting the effects of talent management on those included in the talent pool and, to a much lesser extent, the excluded, is then highlighted. The final substantive sections of this chapter draw upon the concept of a potential 'dark side' to talent management and contemporary developments post-data collection. The current chapter is then followed by a chapter focusing on gender and a chapter outlining literature relating to UK policing, which provides the context for this thesis.

2.2 What is talent?

Our understanding and practice of talent management is fundamentally linked to an understanding of the notion of talent. Yet, as De Vos and Dries (2013) concluded in their empirical paper and Vardi and Collings (2023) noted in their review paper a decade later, definitions of talent continue to be problematic and, indeed, noticeable by their absence from mainstream literature. Where talent *is* the focus of academic publications, it tends to either be simplistically as star performers - the small percentage of employees deemed to have high potential (see, for example, contributions to Collings et al., 2017) - or as part of the inclusivity / exclusivity debate (see below).

Understandings of talent vary over time and context. Tansley (2011) and Gallardo-Gallardo et al.'s (2013) conceptual papers detail the evolving interpretation of 'talent', from something originally referred to as a 'monetary unit' (Tansley, 2011, p. 267) in a biblical context to something relating to special aptitudes around the turn of the 17th Century, the latter of which is the underpinning for interpretations within HRM. Current approaches to defining talent within a talent management context can be traced to the original McKinsey & Co. research (Michaels et al., 2001). Michaels et al. (2001) defined

talent as ‘intrinsic gifts, skills, knowledge … character and drive … ability to learn and grow’ (Michaels et al., 2001, p. xii, cited in: McDonnell and Collings, 2011, p. 57). Iles (2013) similarly highlights – and differentiates – ‘natural ability’ from ‘mastery’ (p. 301), the latter being *developed* talent and reflecting Michaels et al.’s (2001) ability to learn and grow. Following Gagne (2004), Iles (2013) suggests that innate ability (potential to be talent) is only transformed into talent through development and learning, a point reinforced by Vardi and Collings’ (2023) conclusion that both input a*nd* output are essential – that is, it is necessary to have both the requisite skills and also for these to be translated into performance.

This concept of individual ability to *become* talent encapsulates the above notion of talent as ‘innate’ – as reflected in Tansley’s (2013) work above and implicit in what she refers to as a ‘human capital’ (p. 267). Such an interpretation also reflects the potential for ambiguity in the use of the term, with patently subjective and opaque aspects to talent articulation, such as ‘character’ and ‘judgement’. One might question, for example, who will assess such abilities and against which criteria? Moreover, as the normative reference point for (particularly leadership) talent is masculine (see, for example, Cockburn, 1991; Berg et al., 2012; Wilson, 2013; Festing et al., 2014; Festing et al., 2015), this may well become a gendered process, disadvantaging female talent. That is, talent – if vaguely interpreted as human capital – may well be socially constructed in line with hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Makarem et al., 2019), with those not fitting such a normative connotation (for example, long working hours commitment, perceived rationality and objectivity as opposed to emotionally intelligent and inclusive) becoming disadvantaged and less likely to be seen as talent.

There is some evidence of nascent leadership talent literature and practice incorporating feminine characteristics, such as emotional intelligence (see, for example, COP talent indicators (Shire Police, 2014)), alongside masculine constructs such as long working hours commitment. This blend of masculine and feminine criteria suggests a potential for less exclusively masculine or feminine practice. However, an assumption that amending the list of talent descriptors has a marked impact on talent selection and construction may be misleading, since what are perceived as feminine characteristics tend to be undervalued in Western cultures (Metcalfe et al., 2020). Moreover, what are perceived as masculine or feminine talent selection criteria and characteristics are shared by both men and women. What is arguably more significant is the process through which talent is selected in an exclusive programme and the

continued impact of political processes (Zesik, 2020), leaving considerable scope for continued gendering of talent management practice.

In addition to gendered interpretations, talent understandings and beliefs in the innateness or developability of talent, are increasingly recognised as culturally and context-dependent (McDonnell and Wiblen, 2021). Nascent research has highlighted variations in talent definitions and practice in the context of, for example, Omanization[1] and emerging markets (Glaister et al, 2021). Within Chinese culture, Wang et al. (2022) have highlighted the role of underlying philosophies about intangible talent value and the significance of societal or group underpinnings of talent, proposing an alternative notion of relational talent value in the context of a significant state role (the Chinese Communist Party). How talent is understood and practiced, therefore, is affected by context and the institutional environment – at macro, meso and micro levels (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020).

An enduring distinction in the talent management (TM) literature is that between what Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013) term 'talent as object' and 'talent as subject', the former referring to the skills or abilities / attributes within the individual, the latter alluding to the person who possesses such skills or abilities. The subject perspective tends to be associated with an elitist view of talent for Gallardo-Gallardo (2014), with talent being either current high performers or those with high potential. The notion of talent as object alludes either to: the conception of talent as innate, as in Tansley's (2011) innate giftedness; skills and abilities that are developed through practice (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013, p. 293); talent as a function of employee motivation; or an outcome of a good fit between employee and organisation or role or team (Oldroyd et al., 2015). Swailes (2020) similarly differentiates notions of talent as the individual (Gallardo-Gallardo et al.'s (2013) talent as subject) and talent as something that the individual possesses (Gallardo-Gallardo et al.'s (2013) talent as object), concluding that most would accept at least partial innateness of talent amid general consensus that talented people have (or are seen to have) at least some above average skills and abilities which make it possible for them to achieve higher levels of performance. Talent is thus reiterated as both high performance (implicit in Gagne's (2004) definition) *and* high potential in most current interpretations (Swailes, 2020).

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[1] Omanization is the term used to describe the Omani government policy of recruiting and developing local (as opposed to expatriate) labour. Organisations have a set target for local recruitment (90%), with the express aim of reducing reliance on overseas workers (Glaister et al., 2021).

Talent understandings adopted within organisations have an impact on TM practice. Meyers and van Woerkom (2014), for example, offer a typology or what they term four ‘talent philosophies’ which highlight the implications of talent interpretation for talent management practice. The suggestion is that talent can be categorised using two dimensions: stability/developability and inclusivity/exclusivity. If talent is interpreted as being capable of being developed, then activities such as particular experiences (e.g. special projects) would be worthwhile whereas a notion of talent as stable would suggest that greater emphasis should be placed on the acquisition and retention of talent. Inclusive approaches indicate that everyone possesses (some) talent, which should be developed across the board; an exclusive perspective would reinforce approaches that focus simply on the select few (see below for further elaboration of the inclusive / exclusive tension).

Organisational talent tends to be interpreted as specific to the organisation, focused on the individual and also dynamic and subject to change or development. McDonnell and Collings (2011), for example, comment on the significance of strategic talent fit, citing Ulrich’s (2006) call for a mixture of competence but also organisational commitment, the latter referring to contribution to the firm’s strategic objectives. Collings et al. (2019) similarly suggest that organisations require vertical alignment between HQ intentions and subsidiary implementation at the level of the individual. Thus, what matters to organisational outcomes such as competitive advantage and performance is the strategic fit between individual talent and organisational or management requirements.

The notion of strategic fit requires alignment between the individual and what the organisation deems appropriate for goal achievement, conducive to a rational organisational perspective. The rational organisation would select and / or develop talent wherever it originates, and with a mix of requisite skills fitting a post-pandemic world and associated challenges. In the post-Covid-19 world, this includes greater emphasis on effective collaboration and communication (Vaiman et al., 2021), for example, typically seen as more feminine qualities. However, as noted above - and as explored further in Chapter 3 – greater inclusion of feminine characteristics in talent descriptors does not mean gender equality in practice. Social processes and flawed decision-making have been linked to sub-optimal TM processes and outcomes, not only for the organisation, but also for the individual, with continued gender inequality and greater access to power and ‘talented’ positions for non-marginalised groups (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Makarem et al., 2019; Metcalfe et al., 2020; Zesik, 2020).

Building on the relevance of strategic fit to organisational context, Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) identify four categories on the basis of the concepts of talent as object or subject, an inclusive / exclusive approach to talent management (see the following section) and strategically significant roles. Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) argue that organizational context is central to who and what is seen as talent (through, for example, what are seen as strategically important roles), reflecting an emergent awareness of a need for a contingency perspective to talent definition. This is reflected in the current CIPD definition of talent:

> *"Talent refers to individuals who can make a significant difference to organisational performance, either through their immediate contribution or by reaching their potential." (CIPD, 2024)*

Whilst retaining an element of exclusivity as in McDonnell and Colling's (2011) approach, this definition is sufficiently broad to facilitate contingent interpretations depending on the organisation, industry and key organisational priorities at a particular point in time, all of which are deemed relevant contextual factors. This partially explains the elusive nature of an all-embracing conceptualisation, since what is required to make a significant difference is highly likely to be organisation-specific and context is relevant to high performance. Groysberg et al. (2008) found that not all roles are equally portable and that not all stars transfer exceptional performance to a new organisational setting, with factors such as the surrounding team critical to success. However, extant literature has highlighted certain conditions that might be conducive to skill transfer across settings (Vardi and Collings, 2023), for example, where an entire team move organisations it may be possible to transfer performance.

The notion of a contingency approach to understanding talent is increasingly prevalent in empirical and conceptual work from around 2014. Hayfaa et al.'s (2017) case study of one of the Big Four accounting firms in France, for example, identified multiple understandings of talent, with talent definitions ultimately reflecting the specific organisational and industrial context. Although an ability to attract clients was the most prevalent underlying talent concept in their study, Hayfaa et al. (2017) concluded that it may not be possible to arrive at a universal talent definition, given the fundamental underpinning of context to what talent means.

As Meyers and van Woerkom's (2014) conceptual paper articulates, there is a fundamental link between the working definition of talent and how talent management is translated into practice, an aspect reiterated by Thunnissen and Boselie (2024) in their research into talent management in Higher Education

(HE). Talent interpretation is seen as the basis for cognitive representations and thus for the way in which TM is implemented within HE, with evidenced impact of changes to the HE landscape on the understanding of talent, TM practice and employee and organisational outcomes. Yet, as highlighted above, Thunnissen and Boselie (2024) found that a working definition of talent remains typically absent from academic publications.

Despite emergent awareness of the relevance of context and one or two notable exceptions (Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024, for example), there remains a general paucity of research that goes beyond context at a national level (with much early research conducted within multinational firms) or, in some case studies such as Hayfaa et al. (2017), organisational level (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; Tyskbo, 2019). This is in the face of evidence that the organisation and subsidiary / unit level has a material bearing on understandings of what talent means (Collings et al., 2018; Tyskbo, 2019; Garavan et al., 2021), with growing calls to factor context into future research (see, for example, Thunnissen and Van Arensbergen, 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). This thesis focuses on a particular organisational context (policing) and the relevance of such for understandings of talent. Context-awareness will facilitate rich understanding of the relevance of macro, meso and micro contextual factors to potentially varying understandings of talent. Interpretations of macro, meso and micro context are somewhat fluid in empirical work, but might be understood here as moving from broad influences on TM practice to a narrower focus: macro context referring to wider external, cultural or sectoral (e.g. UK policing) environmental factors, such as police funding, policy or Covid-19, but potentially also the organizational level where sub-units are researched; meso context implying organizational but also division or team – that space between external forces and the individual; and micro context focusing on either departmental or individual level. Researching one specific Police Force through an exploratory, feminist, lens provides the opportunity to develop an appreciation of the relevance of plural talent interpretations and how an extreme gendered organizational context (Casey Review, 2023) may influence such.

In addition to context, nascent research considers possible pluralist understandings of talent even within the same organisation (Tyskbo, 2019; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). For example, Thunnissen and Van Arensbergen (2015), in their empirical paper looking at academic departments, concluded that the employees' experiences and positions must be considered central to how they interpret talent, thus consideration must be given to *whose* interpretation of talent prevails. Sonnenberg et al. (2014), following their

quantitative survey of 2660 (largely (69%) male) respondents from 21 organisations across Europe, further highlight this problematic, since there is potential for variation between actors such as HR/ line managers and also employees. Congruence between individual and organisational labelling of (person) talent was seen to have significant implications for the psychological contract. Where there was little fit between the two Sonnenberg et al. (2014) argued, from a managerialist perspective focusing on outcomes that are of organisational value, that resources would potentially be wasted.

Such emergent evidence notwithstanding, the vast majority of talent management publications continue to reflect the unitarist and managerialist stance outlined above (McDonnell et al., 2017), with an underlying premise of a shared understanding of what is meant by talent and that such talent will benefit the organisation in terms of metrics including labour turnover or profit. Hence Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) call for empirical work that considers the plural and multi-faceted understandings of talent within an organisation, which this study will address, with its focus on talent interpretations among both those included in the talent pool and the excluded. Similarly, Nijs et al., (2022) highlight potential inclusion of peer evaluations in talent identification, based on quantitative analysis of graduate ratings during a business simulation exercise. Decision-tree analysis in their study of 238 graduates highlighted high peer evaluation of a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) background, with some evidence of this permeating all talent domains. Although this was a very small-scale study, including only graduates and in an artificial setting, it highlights the relevance of personal bias (such as preference for a STEM background) to how talent is understood and the potential impact of personal bias on talent meanings and TM practice. Such bias may, in turn, directly affect organisational outcomes where interpretations are not synonymous with (organisationally) intended talent understandings. There may also be an indirect impact of organisational drift from intended TM practice, with consequential implications for employee (and indirectly organisational and societal) outcomes (Boselie et al., 2021). Moreover, Nijs et al.'s (2022) research reinforces Wiblen and McDonnell's (2020) call for richer understanding of what talent means to multiple actors in a micro-context, raising questions about *who* should be involved in talent identification. Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) further highlight the need to consider the meaning of language used to define talent, since not all actors may have the same interpretation of the words used in talent documentation and discourse.

It is clear that the prevailing notion in nascent talent management literature is one where talent (whether current or potential) is something that an individual

(typically in or to be promoted into pivotal organisational positions) possesses, with key skills that can be relatively easily manipulated to improve organisational performance (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020) – either through development or selection. Indeed, this is the espoused objective of talent management dating back to McKinsey & Co.'s (Michaels et al., 2001) preferred solution to the skills shortage. Such an interpretation underlies an exclusive approach (see below), which many argue is (by definition) the essence of talent management. However, more recent calls have been made for inclusivity and responsible talent management (Swailes, 2020), which relies on an alternative understanding of talent as something possessed by everybody, and which can be developed. Yet empirical work to date suggests that inclusive practice is not typical (Swailes, 2020), even within public sector organisations that might be expected to offer an inclusive interpretation and approach (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). Recent debate around understandings of talent also includes growing awareness of the team (the social environment) within which talent is located (Swailes, 2020). Indeed, Swailes (2020) argues that luck or chance – being in the right place at the right time or having the skill to capitalise on an opportunity – may actually have a more marked impact on individual performance than pure skill or ability over the course of a career. This further reinforces calls for inclusion of context in talent management research and in-depth, qualitative, consideration of what talent means and how it is understood.

In practice, different organisations will involve varying actors in the talent definition and selection process, with implications for who and what is seen as talent. Within a unitarist and managerialist context, this will typically be line managers and HR. However, lack of awareness of alternative understandings may jeopardise pursuit of organizational objectives if employees perceive a breach of the psychological contract or what King (2018) terms the talent deal. Thunnissen and Boselie (2024), for example, cite the link between academic staff turnover and the gap between intended TM and that which is perceived and responded to by the workforce.

However, it is important to note that there is a remarkable dearth of research into the experience of such 'talent' and much less into the experience of those not labelled as talented (Metcalfe et al., 2020). This is a crucial gap for critical scholars who might question the diversity and ethical implications of largely overlooking the employee (see for example Swailes (2013; 2020)). Moreover, even those pursuing a managerialist imperative would be wise to avoid simplistic assumptions of talent status and labels being associated with positive effects, even for those so labelled. A small number of studies have emerged, notably, over the last decade, that highlight potential negative consequences of

talent status and talent management for employees, for example King (2018) in a UK context, Sumelius et al. in a Finnish context (2020) and De Boeck et al.'s (2018) review paper. This, in turn, then creates considerable scope for widening the intended-actual TM practice gap (see Boselie et al.'s (2021) intended-actual practice/outcome model), with associated implications for not only the employee but also organisational level outcomes as highlighted in Garavan et al.'s (2021) overview of TM practice tensions within MNEs. However, only a small handful of studies to date have explicitly considered the impact of TM on those excluded from talent pools.

In conclusion, although there is no universally agreed upon meaning or understanding of the term talent the predominant perspective is a managerialist and unitarist one and there is general consensus that talent is something to do with (to a degree) both natural skills or abilities and the potential for higher performance (Swailes 2020). However, in contrast to a binary perspective, it may be possible to adopt a more nuanced understanding of talent. Vardi and Collings (2023), for example, offer a paradox perspective that is more appreciative of pluralist talent understandings and the talent definition tensions highlighted in this section – inclusive/exclusive, innate/acquired, subject/object, input/output, transferable/context-specific. This thesis sits within such a pluralist appreciation and addresses the limited focus on the employee impact in nascent literature, through an in-depth focus on the individual employee. In a context of limited scholarly precision over the meaning of talent (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024), this research considers the *employee's* understanding of talent. There is growing appreciation of the need to consider context at various levels – notably national and organisational / sub-unit, but with some awareness of the need to consider the alignment between organisational intentions and the understanding of the individual. This study focuses on the meaning of talent in one public sector organisational context, and at the level of the manager, the included and the excluded individual, explicitly considering how talent and talent management are understood, talked about and practiced.

2.2.1 A definition of talent management

Having explored the meaning of talent in the previous section, the meaning of talent management itself is now considered. Despite growing interest in talent management, there is a continuing paucity of robust theoretical and empirical work in the field (Thunnissen et al., 2013), though empirical studies have been seen to escalate post-2011 (Gallardo-Gallardo et al. 2015; McDonnell et al., 2017; Collings et al., 2022). Moreover, as Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2015)

indicate, current empirical research tends to be limited by inconsistency of framework, method and approach and a tendency for earlier publications to be aimed at - and derived from - a practitioner base, with associated limitations.

Definitional and methodological problems in the field might be traced to its origins in the work of Chambers et al. (1998), of McKinsey consultancy, which focused on executive talent and a call for organisations to develop a 'talent mindset' on the basis of research in just 77 organisations - with limited support from prior research. There was no attempt at that stage to ever define talent or talent management, rather a call for organisations to focus on reward schemes, recruitment, retention and development, in addition to divestment of poor performers. Ford and Harding (2013) identify four significant limitations of Chambers et al.'s (1998) seminal paper and Michaels et al.'s 2001 subsequent McKinsey publication: a misleading original research question (who would *not* agree that having the best staff was desirable?); inadequate consideration of the meaning of the word 'talent' and its implementation; few details of methodology, particularly in the original paper; and weak presentation of findings, with limited illustrative thematic text.

Further critical appraisal of what is widely referred to as the talent management foundational text suggests limited or no attention to the characteristics of who might be deemed to be talented, particularly relating to management talent (Makarem et al., 2019). Of particular relevance here, this vacuum creates space for a normative notion of such talent as unequivocally male and masculine (see, for example, Ingram and Allen, 2019 and Makarem et al., 2019). Talent management literature has been critiqued for confusion between outcomes, processes and decision alternatives (Lewis and Heckman, 2006), resulting in inconsistent conceptualisations and definitions. Many publications (both conceptual and empirical) have highlighted this problem of limited agreement on the meaning and definition of the term talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) and associated problems for theoretical development of the field (Vaiman et al, 2012). Such definitional ambiguity led Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016) to conclude that there is continued lack of agreement over talent management's theoretical background, definition and its scope.

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify two definitions that repeatedly appear in the literature, the first from Collings and Mellahi (2009), who define talent management as:

> *"…the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a*

> *differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization." (Collings and Mellahi, 2009, p.305)*

The above definition is most typically adopted in papers assuming a functionalist role of talent management, an unproblematic understanding of what talent means and an exclusive approach to ensure organisational competitive advantage. This definition underlies much of the Global Talent Management (GTM) literature and is the most globally accepted definition (Collings et al., 2017).

The definition proffered by CIPD (2012c) is frequently cited in papers originating in Europe and is the broad conceptualisation adopted here:

> *"Talent management is the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention and deployment of those individuals who are of particular value to an organisation, either in view of their 'high potential' for the future or because they are fulfilling business/operation-critical roles." (CIPD, 2012c)*

The above definition from CIPD usefully highlights some of the typical HRM activities that might form part of an integrated talent management approach, yet even this is itself problematic, highlighting two challenges for talent management theorising and practice: 1. Is talent management actually substantively different to HRM? 2. Is talent management exclusive (as implicit in both Collings and Mellahi's (2009) and CIPD's (2012c) definition through reference to 'high potential' people in 'business / operation–critical' positions) or inclusive of roles and / or people? Indeed, these two fundamental questions are intrinsically linked, with several commentators arguing that talent management *must* be exclusive precisely in order to substantively differentiate it from HRM. This differentiation is considered in the following section of this chapter, along with further investigation into the translation of talent management into practice – particularly the associated inclusive / exclusive tension.

2.3 Talent management practice

This section explores current talent management problematics of differentiation from HRM, inclusivity / exclusivity (and how this is particularly pertinent to a public sector case study organisation), the relevance of macro, meso and micro context, and talent management theoretical underpinning.

2.3.1 TM or HRM

As noted above, there are enduring tensions within HRM literature, one of which is the TM / HRM differentiation. In the decade or so following popularisation of TM there was considerable debate around the extent to which talent

management is actually a ‘new’ human resource management (HRM) practice at all. Some would argue that this is simply ‘old wine in new bottles’ or HRM re-packaged – a bundle of the kind of activities referred to in the CIPD definition above. Indeed, some commentators suggested that talent management actually *is* the new HRM, with core HRM activities (Torrington et al., 2011). Such an approach highlights a conception of talent management being nothing new, but simply a more rapid or systematic approach to standard HRM practices such as workforce and succession planning.

In contrast, Lewis and Heckman (2006) propose a strategic and contingency approach in their review paper, identifying talent as ‘valuable, rare, hard to imitate’. A similar preference for the exclusive approach to talent management is highlighted in Collings and Mellahi’s (2009) input / output model, suggesting an indirect link between TM and organisational performance, via motivation, commitment and extra-role behaviour. Collings and Mellahi’s (2009) notion of extra-role behaviour is seen to be demonstrated by ‘A’ players and to lead to a range of high commitment attitudes and activities such as tolerance of sub-optimal working conditions and greater concern for organisational success. In fact, any such relationship might actually have an entirely opposite directional cause and effect – i.e. those who are more committed might be more likely to be labelled ‘A’ players – or to be linked to some extraneous third variable. Factors such as luck or team-level effects may have at least as large an impact on organisational performance, although evidence in this respect is limited (Pfeffer, 2001; Groysberg et al., 2004; Oldroyd et al., 2015; Swailes, 2020). This notwithstanding, Lewis and Heckman’s (2006) and Collings and Mellahi’s (2009) papers advance the conceptualisation of talent management as distinct from HRM through this notion of exclusivity and strategic, pivotal, roles.

This centrality of exclusivity to talent management differentiation is further discussed below, since it is one of the enduring tensions in the field.

2.3.2 Inclusive / Exclusive tension

In one of the earlier empirical studies of talent management Iles et al. (2010) purport that exclusivity is deemed to be the essence of talent management by senior multinational enterprise (MNE) managers. That is, for these managers, HRM is inclusive and talent management exclusive. Iles et al. (2010) further differentiate exclusivity of people from exclusivity of positions, with selection of either the talented few people for focused development or selection of high performers in strategically important roles (akin to Collings and Mellahi's (2009) strategic perspective). A useful notion introduced by Iles et al. (2010) is that of social capital, highlighting the significance of factors other than individual talent and including the broader context of organisational capital. This latter might include factors such as teams, cultures, divisions of labour, leadership and networks and mirrors Groysberg's (2004; 2006; 2008) work on star performers, referred to above.

As noted in Section 2.3.1, there is a tendency to depict exclusive talent management as being 'true' talent management, since the dominant underlying premise of talent is itself seen to involve a degree of selection. However, more recent work does depart from this simplistic dichotomy and there is evidence of growing calls for cognisance of equality and diversity considerations. Kalman and Frost (2016), for example, make the business case for diversity and Swailes et al.'s (2014) and Swailes' (2020) conceptual papers posit what they term fully inclusive or responsible talent management (RTM).

Incorporating both context (itself a recent research focus, see below) and inclusivity, Swailes et al. (2014) argue that inclusive talent management may be better suited to the UK public sector, given the public sector political context and typical notions of collectivism and bureaucratisation. Large public sector organisations, in particular, are seen to warrant more inclusive systems simply from a practical perspective, since it is almost impossible to fill all key positions with A players in a very large organisation. However, for inclusive talent management to be feasible an alternative understanding of both talent and what inclusive practice might look like is proposed, whereby talent is deemed to be something that *everyone* has, and the inclusive organisation is one that effectively places people in jobs fitting such talents. This demonstrates the crucial link between talent understandings (see Section 2.2 above) and talent management practice, a rationale underpinning this study in its aims to understand both what talent means to employees and their understanding and experience of practice within the one public sector organisation. Swailes et al.'s

(2014) paper has further implications for the nature of appraisal, supervision and competence frameworks within the inclusive organisation, which Swailes et al. suggest must enable individuals to flourish, to be flexibly moved into appropriate roles and to achieve their maximum potential. Kravariti and Johnson (2020) argued that talent conceptions in UK public sector organisations (such as Shire) are more likely to reflect a notion of service to the public good, although their review paper noted the continuing paucity of talent management research and publications relating to the public sector. However, in contrast to Swailes et al. (2014) and Kravariti and Johnson (2020), both of whom suggest that organisational ownership may well be relevant to the nature of both talent and practice, Meyers et al.'s (2020) empirical paper concluded that there is *no* clear relationship between ownership and inclusivity of talent management approach, with organisational size being a more significant consideration. They suggest that this may be because public sector organisations are no longer 'soft' and that exclusive approaches might be more prevalent for senior (higher value) employees irrespective of organisation ownership.

Despite a very small number of exceptions such as Swailes et al. (2014) and Kalman and Frost (2016), the inherent exclusive / inclusive conflict remains apparent in what Daubner-Siva et al. (2017) term the inclusion/exclusion paradox. Organisations – particularly in the public sector – generally have been seen to typically promote equality, diversity and inclusivity, yet the prevailing notion of star employees is one of the white male, reinforced through practice (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017), with subjective talent identification in an organisational context of profit maximisation and short-term gains. There is thus continuing disagreement about both the extent to which the workforce should be differentiated and also the basis of such (object or subject), although context is recognised as significant to our understanding of talent and is further considered below.

The inclusive/exclusive tension refers back not only to definitional difficulties, but also Iles et al.'s (2010) notion of social capital. Farndale et al. (2010) reiterate this emphasis on organisational capital when referring to *global* talent management (a very specific subset of the wider debate). They highlight the relevance of four types of capital for effective *global* talent: cognitive capital ('effective mental models'); social capital ('necessary connections' - particularly relevant for those in boundary-spanning roles); 'political capital' (legitimacy); and 'human capital' (defined as relevant competencies – deemed as an ability to work cross-culturally in the case of global talent management). Their case in support of the significance of global talent management (i.e. talent management across national boundaries, as in any multi-national enterprise or MNE) reflects

the perceived paucity of individuals with the requisite talent and what is collectively referred to as ‘complex capital’. The notion of capital is a useful progression, highlighting the intangible aspect of talent. This is particularly relevant to the implications of practice for gender, since intangibility of the talent concept provides considerable scope for its gendering and masculinisation. This was highlighted in Makarem et al.’s (2019) research, depicting masculinist imagery and gendered discourse that was facilitated by mystification of talent and what they termed magical, loose, descriptions of the concept.

A more recent typology, with some limited empirical support, is proffered by Meyers et al. (2020) and incorporates the inclusive/exclusive divide outlined above in addition to understandings of talent as developable / fixed. Meyers et al. (2020) propose that talent management approaches can be characterised as either inclusive developable (as in Swailes et al.’s (2014) conceptualisation), exclusive developable, inclusive fixed or exclusive fixed. Meyers et al.’s (2020) quantitative inquiry provides some evidence of the four distinct approaches through the clustering of responses from senior managers and HR directors, but this is a limited study with just over 300 self-reports from a specific set of senior managers. Moreover, as Meyers et al. (2020) acknowledge, organisations may adopt different approaches for subsets of employees, with a more exclusive approach for senior staff and a more inclusive practice for staff at lower levels in the hierarchy. Indeed, this is reflected in Wiblen and McDonnell ‘s (2020) typology which focuses on *employees’* understandings and considers more than one level of staff, thus adding to calls for plurality of understandings of talent and talent management practice.

In summary of this section on talent management practice, it is possible to identify two forms: an inclusive approach, possibly more relevant to the public sector (see, for example, Ford et al., 2010a; 2010b; Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2016; Glaister et al., 2021); and an exclusive approach, either exclusive in terms of position and / or exclusive in terms of people. The inclusive / exclusive tension has potential implications for equality and diversity which may be particularly problematic in a public sector context, with a potential clash between notions of professional public service and fairness as opposed to marketisation and selectivity. The push towards public sector management will be further considered in Chapter 4, and the role of context in Section 2.3.3 below.

2.3.3 Context

Nascent talent management literature offers partial resolution of the inclusive/exclusive tension through the inclusion of context. As research in the

field has developed, researchers have noted the significance of national, sectoral, organizational and departmental culture or unique. Wiblen and McDonnell (2020) (see above) argue that organizational context is central to who and what is seen as talent and thus talent management implementation, reinforcing calls to include context and develop a contingency perspective dating back to the 2010s.

Ford et al. (2010b) for example, based on their empirical work in the UK public sector, advocated approaches to talent management programmes that were cognisant of organisational 'culture, market and circumstances'. Interestingly, this appreciation of context offers partial explanation for potential masculinization of talent considered in Chapter 3. Where an organisational or departmental context is itself misogynistic and hyper-masculinised, it might be expected that understandings of talent will also be masculine in line with organizational or departmental culture.

The notion of contingent and context-aware approaches has witnessed particular emphasis with respect to MNEs. Collings et al. (2019), for example, adopt a contingency perspective in their conceptual paper, suggesting that organisations must firstly focus on *dynamic* capabilities in this volatile and uncertain world. Of additional note here is Collings et al.'s (2019) consideration of the potential lack of fit between MNE strategy and subsidiary actions, with scope for local interpretation and lack of fit with intended practice. Thunnissen et al. (2016) and Harsch and Festing (2019) in their empirical papers similarly call for consideration of local factors and a context-appreciative perspective. Thunnissen et al.'s (2016) qualitative study of academic departments further identified a need to consider institutional, organisational, and individual contexts if we are to truly understand talent management practise, particularly the interpretation of talent. This is reiterated in Harsch and Festing's (2020) qualitative study of senior HR managers in the German context, which endorses the notion of dynamic capabilities in a complex environment, requiring a contingency-based approach. Of note is Harsch and Festing's (2020) typology, which suggests that what they term an individualised and inclusive talent management approach is a better fit to flatter organisations where employees have considerable autonomy. In contrast, what Harsch and Festing (2020) term a sophisticated approach – i.e. an exclusive approach that is flexible and focuses on agility and dynamic capabilities – is a better fit with organisations where agility is central to success. Harsch and Festing's (2020) perspective is a useful exemplar of recent attempts to relate talent management approach and practice to the organisational environment, i.e. a contingency perspective.

This context-appropriate approach is also evident in, for example, Glaister et al.'s (2021) research, with a conclusion that national (in this case emerging economy) context influenced both how talent management is practiced and also the organisational implications of such. The relevance of context for talent understandings was similarly explored in Tyskbo's (2019) qualitative study of both central headquarters and a subsidiary of a large Swedish organisation. The meaning and understanding of talent was found to be context contingent, and Tyskbo concluded that actors have rationality that is bounded by 'institutional embeddedness' (p. 25) – that is, the dominant logic in the local institution e.g. Headquarters or subsidiary. The dominant organisational or sub-unit culture can thereby affect practice.

The relevance of context to talent management is highlighted by more recent focus on the micro context, with growing numbers of papers focusing on the departmental and even individual level (see, e.g. Asplund, 2020), particularly post-2017 (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Thunnissen and Van Arensbergen (2015), for example, identified variations in talent meanings at the level of the specific academic department in their survey-based study of Dutch universities. Garavan et al.'s (2021) mixed methods study within nine MNCs identified tensions at what they termed the micro (I.e. subsidiary or implementation) level, with emergent performance paradoxes. These included, for example, the identification of talent and whether potential or past performance should be central to talent selection. Cultural and institutional context was significant to how talent management was implemented, with some managers highlighting a possibility of high performance in a team context, but without individual potential. Managers responded to these tensions with an emergent mix of defensive and also proactive behaviours, exposing the gap between espoused and practiced talent management, contingent on context.

A small number of empirical papers have considered the meso and micro context within the professional or public sector. Asplund's (2020) quantitative inquiry of teachers in Sweden, for example, highlighted the implications of professional, public sector, context for employee reactions to talent management in terms of organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB). They concluded that professional identification moderated the relationship between talent identification and OCB, although the study was based only on self-reports and correlation of survey variables. In practice, this means that the impact on employee motivations and OCB may not be as marked for those professionals who are already strongly committed to their organisation and their role. Hayfaa et al.'s (2017) micro-context qualitative study of one of the Big Four accounting firms in France, focusing on talent retention, further suggests not only

organisationally specific definitions of talent, but also the significance of a professional context. In particular, Hayfaa et al. (2017) concluded that autonomy and having challenging work in the context of positive working relationships was of importance to the professionals in their case organisation. In a manner reminiscent of Swailes et al.'s (2014) notion of fully inclusive talent management, Hayfaa et al. (2017) also suggest that there may be generational differences in what is valued (younger workers wanting more inclusive and participative work, with flexible work arrangements) but also that a highly skilled, professional organisational context might warrant greater focus on work-life balance and career development. Their remit for future research points to empirical studies outside the US context that is cognisant of organisational culture, specifically professional organisational cultures. Of course, such context-awareness may either threaten or strengthen equality and diversity aspects. Where this is practiced within a misogynistic work culture and masculinised profession, awareness of the organisational and professional context may facilitate efforts to avoid hyper-masculinisation of the talent concept and associated practice. However, where the masculinised context is not considered, it is likely that masculinity itself will be an underlying thread of talent management practice.

Despite this recent growth in emphasis on the need for a contingency perspective, Gallardo-Gallardo et al.'s (2020) introduction to a special issue on the implications of context suggests that extant literature is limited in its conceptualisation of the talent management process, outcomes and its usefulness to organisations. This lacuna is linked to greater emphasis on context in current research. Thunnissen and Boselie (2024), for example, focus on sectoral and historical institutional forces impacting European higher education organisations, specifically relating talent management to the particular (higher education) context. This thesis focuses on a large UK public sector organisation, Shire Police, with organisational and talent management context woven into analysis of findings, thus adding to knowledge of the implications of context.

The following section offers an overview of the theoretical underpinning of talent management and the contribution of this thesis to talent management conceptualization.

2.3.4 Theoretical underpinning

There are several continuing debates or paradoxes within talent management, including the very nature of talent itself (discussed in Section 2.2 above, as highlighted in Vardi and Collings' (2023) review) and the need for further

research into the role of context and appreciation of pluralist underpinnings of such (considered in Section 2.3.3) (McDonnell and Wiblen, 2021). There are growing calls for the field to embrace the tensions between for example, inclusive / exclusive TM, potential for plurality of talent understandings and how TM might be evaluated (the input / output tension) (Vardi and Collings, 2023).

An enduring criticism of the field is the lack of a clear theoretical base, leading to claims that it remains under-theorised and phenomenon-driven (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2015) outline four main conceptual talent management frameworks: Resource Based View (RBV), International Human Resource Management (IHRM), Institutional Theory of the Firm and what they term 'Employee Assessment'. IHRM and Institutional Theory of the Firm are arguably more relevant to Global Talent Management theorizing, with a focus on global TM practice and the impact of national culture and associated tensions on TM. Nascent research considering the impact of culture is developing, however (see, for example, Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020), as context is increasingly interpreted as macro, meso and micro, with growing awareness of the impact of not only national, but also sectoral, regional, and even firm-specific, contextual variables (see, for example, King and Vaiman, 2019; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). This role of context and culture is highlighted in the previous section.

The significance of culture and context notwithstanding, many would argue that the main conceptual underpinning for TM is the Resource Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) and the premise that differentiated TM architecture and practice enhances the firm’s strategic capability. The underlying assumption is that human capital resources are rare, valuable and inimitable (Barney, 1991) and that organisations should focus on HiPos (High Performing, High Potentials) or stars / A-players, particularly those in strategically significant positions with greater potential organizational impact. However, one critique of this underpinning is that the RBV imperative adopts a managerialist and unitarist lens (Metcalfe et al., 2020; McDonnell and Wiblen, 2021), ignoring alternative voices and experiences, notably the employee voice. This is further considered under Section 2.4, which highlights the contribution of this thesis to the critical talent management conversation through exploration of the politicization of TM practice and the limitations of assuming unitarist understandings and experiences.

Consideration of specifically employee experiences of TM within this thesis relates to the fourth conceptual framework proffered by Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2015), that of ‘Employee Assessment’. This embraces the impact of TM on the employee – an aspect of TM that has received far less attention than the

unitarist, managerialist perspective, but which was brought to the fore by De Boeck et al.'s (2018) review of extant work (see Section 2.4.1 below). Explication of the employee experience in TM practice facilitates unpacking of the TM value chain 'black box', the gap between intended, implemented and experienced TM, or what Boselie et al. (2021) refer to as TM outcomes (employee wellbeing, organizational wellbeing and societal wellbeing). This thesis extends theorization of the employee voice and experience, highlighting the politicised practice of TM within a specific organizational context and unpacking some of the experiences of both those included within talent pools and also the excluded. This, in turn, adds to critical discourse on TM, placing centre stage the processes and context within which intended TM strategy creates outcomes through perceived practice, an aspect considered only in passing, if at all, in mainstream TM or Global TM literature. It is argued here that individual and organizational outcomes can only be achieved via the process of employee understanding and perception of TM, what it means to them, and how it impacts their emotions, motivation and behaviours. As such, this research is critical of the RBV premise, since a simplistic acceptance of TM and the RBV underpinning assumes that organisations can select, develop and deploy the highest value, highest potential, employees in critical roles. Yet that is ignorant of the impact of individual, political and power processes, whereby talent becomes about who or what is seen and selected as talent in a politicised organisation, not necessarily those with the greatest ability or potential. Thus, the *processes* through which the individual becomes seen as talent is relevant, rather than presumed added value as within the RBV perspective. However, consideration of such processes has been limited in extant literature. Moreover, this research explicitly considers the excluded employee (see Section 2.4.1 below), developing the 'dark side' theorization of TM (Handley, 2014; Swailes et al., 2020) – explication of TM's unintentional and often undesirable consequences.

Given the absence of an unambiguous theoretical underpinning, TM lends itself to analysis through varying theoretical lenses. From the mid-2010s onwards there has been a growing call to incorporate not only a critical voice but also the relevance of gender into employee assessment (Metcalfe et al., 2020). In addition to a critical and employee perspective, this thesis further develops TM theorization through the adoption of a gender lens, specifically Acker's (1990; 1992) gendered organisation. This thesis highlights the centrality of both the inequality of gender and gendered structural inequalities to considerations of employee experience and the translation of TM into practice. Moreover, it is argued here that employees experience TM as gendered actors, within an

organisation and TM rhetoric that is itself gendered. Gender is seen as an ongoing process, produced and reproduced through the interaction between the individual employee and the gendered organisation. This is interwoven with gendered discourses, subjectivities, and political behaviours, notably within a misogynistic policing cultural context (Casey, 2023), which is the context for this study. Power and inequalities are consequently considered central to the development of a nuanced understanding of who, what and how talent is and is performed. It is argued that TM discourses and individual identities become interwoven to (re) produce and sustain hegemonic, typically masculinised, talent. This extends the critical voice of TM and further unpacks the black box of the processes through which TM generates (dark side) consequences, not necessarily as intended through a unitarist, managerialist, rational notion of TM. Through the adoption of a gendered lens, the theoretical contribution of this thesis is the unpacking of the gendered processes through which TM is translated into practice. Gender is thus explicitly woven into TM conceptualization and analysis.

This thesis further contributes to TM theorization through development of the dark side of TM (see Section 2.4.2 below), with explicit theorization of the relevance of power and politics[2] to the employee experience. Through exploring talent management's dark side, this thesis draws attention to unanticipated and often undesirable consequences, for the individual, the organisation and ultimately equality, diversity and society as a whole. Focus on the dark side of TM adds further nuance to the critical voice and highlights the limitations of a simplistic RBV conceptualisation of TM as adding organizational value. Such wider considerations of a gendered organisation, employee reactions, power, politics, bounded rationality and flawed human decision makers all serve to limit any potential link between intended TM and enhanced organizational performance and value.

Critical analysis of TM is considered in greater detail in the following section.

2.4 Talent management: A critical perspective

[2] Organisational politics is understood here to be 'informal influence attempts' and includes tactics such as mentoring, networking and self-promotion (Doldor et al., 2013, p. 415).

This section focuses on a more nuanced critique of talent management, its associated debates and problematics that guided the research focus for this study.

It is worth noting that several papers articulating the need to adopt a context-appreciative or contingency perspective retain a functionalist philosophical starting point, assuming talent management to be organisationally useful and serving organisational needs (see, for example, Collings et al., 2019). Nascent work retains a managerialist perspective, whereby the success or otherwise of talent management programmes is judged by organisational metrics (such as firm performance, see Glaister et al., 2021) rather than alternatives such as individual wellbeing. Recent turns have, however, included notions of dynamic capability (Harsch and Festing, 2020) and the psychological contract into measures of enhancing firm performance (Holland and Scullion, 2021), thus highlighting extended criticality even where a functionalist approach is adopted.

Arguably the most significant development in talent management publications is the application of a critical lens to the field and the turn towards querying the managerialist perspective, particularly noting the implications of such for equality and diversity. Swailes et al. (2014), for example, propose that fully inclusive talent management cannot be underpinned by managerialism; in its place, a focus on individual wellbeing (to replace organisational outcomes) and the quality of working life is proposed. Devins and Gold's (2014) conceptual paper similarly makes a case for a sustainable approach that is both inclusive and cognisant of informal development processes, although this in itself could become divisive and lead to two systems: a formal, exclusive, one for high-flyers and a more informal, inclusive, system for everyone else.

In particular, debate from the mid-2010s has developed around the relevance of diversity and inclusivity (Swailes et al., 2014; Daubner-Siva et al., 2017 – discussed below), with appeals for diversity to be incorporated within talent management models and practice. A managerialist, pro-market and exclusive approach (Holland and Scullion, 2021) is critiqued as an impoverishment (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018), with calls for greater consideration of equality to benefit not only individual employees but also, longer term, the organisation. Dundon and Rafferty (2018) explicitly note a general ignorance of what is termed here the dark side of talent management, including implications for stress, dignity at work, employee voice and emotional labour. Notably, they suggest that the very language of talent management is itself constitutive of a particular workplace culture that emphasises hyper-competitive work intensification and is blind to talent that falls outside the norm of those happy to pursue a long working hours approach to work that is seen as intensified. They

suggest that those who are unable to follow this model will not be recognised as talent – for example, women (due to the unequal division of domestic labour) and older workers with care responsibilities. Of course, the latter are also more likely to be (older) women.

A marketized and hyper-financialised approach (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018) also sits well with a unitarist philosophical underpinning. As previously noted, critical conceptual papers over the latter part of the 2010s made the case for an alternative pluralist talent stance, reinforced by empirical work evidencing differences in aims and practice between head office and subsidiary and even sub-unit (Thunnissen and Van Arensbergen, 2015; Hayfaa et al., 2019). Indeed, a pluralist underpinning, whereby the existence of multiple aims and understandings are recognised, is helpful to an appreciation of differential experiences at the individual level. Pluralist foundations further support empirical work suggesting a difference between planned and actual outcomes (Sumelius et al., 2020 - further considered in Section 2.4.1; Boselie et al., 2021), and the potential for gendered talent understandings.

In a policing context, Oldroyd et al. (2015) use the phrase ‘talenting’ to refer to a process of ‘collective endeavour’, referring to mutuality and collective action required for talent to be operationalised in a large public sector organisation. Based on their case study investigation of talent management development within Shire, Oldroyd et al. (2015) explored the process of value creation through three, 2-hour, storytelling workshops with interested participants. In line with, for example, Thunnissen et al. (2013) and Tyskbo (2019) Oldroyd et al. critique the predominant unitarist philosophy and argue that ‘talenting’ highlights the plurality of interests and preferences that co-exist within an organisational context. This follows Groysberg et al.’s (2004; 2006; 2008) research into high-performing stars in the US, which highlighted the importance of organisational factors (such as systems, processes, previous industry experience, reputation, and notably social capital and surrounding team) for star performance. Many of the stars in their study underperformed when they moved organisation. The conclusion, therefore, is that talent management’s focus on individuals might actually miss the point of work that typically requires input from several individuals or teams, i.e. ‘collective endeavour’. Oldroyd et al.’s (2015) research highlights the need for further research on the *process* of talent management, as proposed in this thesis.

Variation in definition and approach, combined with limited empirical research, creates significant space for local interpretation and application and suggests that practitioners may well be attempting to provide solutions with little clarity of what they are solving. Of relevance to this study, such ambiguity might create

space for informal rules of engagement and associated roles of mentors and networks in being identified as talent - with associated gender implications - a point that is explored below and in Chapter 3. Moreover, as highlighted by Dundon and Rafferty (2018), the translation into practice of talent management – however defined – may have a series of effects or outcomes, the employee aspect of which is considered in the following section.

2.4.1 Talent Management: Effects on the employee

There has been an increase in research considering the employee in talent management post-2016 (Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024), which is around the time of data collection for this thesis. This notwithstanding, there have been few large-scale studies of those affected by talent management – either those within a talent pool, those not within the pool or, indeed, those responsible for implementation. There is a notable paucity of empirical research in SMEs, not-for-profit or public organisations, with little knowledge about the translation into practice of talent management, particularly the perspectives of different actors (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016).

In terms of the UK public sector, research by the CIPD (2010) remains probably the most substantive in-depth study to date and considered both included and excluded senior managers across both the public and private sector. In the context of enduring limited research into the excluded, this study continues to make a valuable contribution to the field, with 302 returned online questionnaires - 268 from those currently engaged in a talent management programme and 33 from individuals who were not so enrolled and a small number of follow-up thematic interviews. Tentative findings reinforce Daubner-Siva et al.'s (2017) Pygmalion-Golem effect (see below for explanation), suggesting that inclusion in the talent pool is positively linked to organisational engagement, with qualitative data suggesting that the direction of causation is from inclusion to engagement. Respondents who were included in the talent pool indicated that this was perceived as a 'vote of confidence' and beneficial to their future careers, whilst the excluded reported lower motivation and self-confidence levels, most notably when they had applied and not been accepted for a selective talent pool. There was also support for Ford et al.'s (2010a) notion of the selected feeling some concern about limited opportunities at the end of the process, highlighting hitherto overlooked negative experiences for those labelled as talent.

At the time of the primary data collection for this thesis, and in a similar context to Shire Police, Swailes and Blackburn's (2016) questionnaire-based study of a large UK public sector organisation compared responses from those included in

one of the three talent pools within the organisation to those from a matched sample of employees not so included. Of interest here, they call for further research similarly focusing on employee experiences in a single case study (such as Shire), since such is seen to exclude other factors that may come into play and influence outcomes. The research design of this thesis focuses on one case study organisation, also in the public sector, but with a different research philosophy and method, thus potentially adding greater depth and richness to knowledge in the field. Swailes and Blackburn's (2016) case organisation used a very structured approach to talent management, with three potential talent pools, clearly defined criteria and processes and the use of a 9-box grid for employee categorisation on the basis of potential and performance. Although there were no statistically significant differences between 'in-group' and control group responses to items such as support for personal development and support from HR, any statistically significant differences that did appear – on items such as line manager support and access to work-based development opportunities - were more positive for 'talent', with more positive feelings generally across all scale items, reinforcing the notion of a Pygmalion effect (see below). Interestingly, Swailes and Blackburn (2016) suggest that further research needs to be conducted on the *process* of becoming talented and being perceived as such, which this thesis explores.

The policing context for this study might also be informed by prior research into professional contexts, such as Asplund's (2020) questionnaire-based survey of 598 teachers employed by a large public-sector organisation in Sweden, referred to above. Asplund's case organisation employed 1256 full-time teachers across approximately 60 primary and secondary schools and had recently introduced a formalised talent management system, with annual ratings of current and future performance used to identify those with potential to progress further. Talent status was found to be linked to higher felt obligation and OCB; however, this relationship was moderated by professional identification. Those respondents who reported self-identification with the teaching profession tended *not* to have higher felt obligation to the organisation. The proposed explanation for this survey finding is that professional identification may have a ceiling effect, whereby professionals are already more committed to their work thus rendering talent identification less potent. However, this conclusion was only based on correlation and self-reports and it is possible that the direction of causation was in the opposite direction; i.e. that higher OCB made it more likely that individuals would be identified as talent. Hayfaa et al. (2017) similarly concluded that talent management within a professional (teaching) context should flex in line with the importance of various

HRM polices for specific employees. This thesis specifically explores understandings of talent and talent management within a policing context, for the included and the excluded, which will develop knowledge of whether and exactly how commitment and talent status might be interwoven.

This picture of complex reactions to talent status (among both the included and the excluded) is reinforced by Sumelius et al.'s research (2020), which is one of the very small number of empirical studies in addition to CIPD (2010) focusing both on those included in the talent pool and the excluded. 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with an even number of male and female participants, 17 individuals identified as talent and 7 identified as B players, in a Finnish subsidiary of an American organisation. The case organisation advised those included in the talent pool of their status, but not B players. Those identified as talent reported initial feelings of pride, but also feeling that talent inclusion criteria were ambiguous and that the relationship with one's superior might be a significant factor. There was also a tendency for these individuals to feel rather uneasy about their talent status and perceived increased workload. Those excluded from the talent pool were left to assume their status through noticing subtle clues such as exclusion from an important meeting, with no official communication. These employees talked about disappointment and resentment, which was intensified by not being told of their status. Talent selection was widely criticised by the excluded and judged to be linked to non-transparent or even non-existent criteria, reducing perceived credibility of the whole talent management process. In the absence of clear communication, talent selection criteria were seen as being linked to image-building, self-promotion, who you know and most definitely not based on merit. Sumelius et al.'s (2020) conclusion was that strategic ambiguity in talent status communication may have a negative effect for both the included and the excluded in the long-run. There may have been some short-term positive effects for the included from an organisational perspective, although ultimately these were transformed into questions about the psychological contract and what King (2016a) calls the 'talent deal'. The excluded felt particularly aggrieved and both groups wanted more explicit information about selection and inclusion criteria, with an overriding perception that self-promotion and line managers had a significant impact on who was and was not included. This resonates with the findings from Thunnissen's (2016) research in Dutch universities, highlighting the role of line management in creating unexpected consequences.

Of particular interest is Sumelius et al.'s (2020) conclusion that it is perception of practice, rather than practice itself, that influences employee attitudes and behaviour. This is similar to conceptual papers from O'Connor and Crowley-

Henry (2019) and Keddie (2023), and Dries and Kase's (2023) vignette-based empirical data, which highlight the need to understand perceived fairness and distributive justice when researching employee reactions. Moreover, the very notion of talent status is itself seen as a dilemma for organisations – whether and how to communicate such status.

Interestingly, Tyskbo and Wikhamn (2022) differentiated between talent status and talent practice, using talent status as their criterion in a qualitative study of three large Swedish organisations. They conducted 24 interviews with those identified as talent within these organisations, including interviews with HR managers among the 24. Although interviews were conducted at a single point in time, Tyskbo and Wikhamn's analysis identified a processual reaction to talent status, with positive employee reactions in the short-term tending to become negative after around 7-12 months. Initial increases in talent group and organisational identification dropped due to what was termed talent emptiness (i.e. a lack of real change following identification as talent) and talent indeterminacy (where events, expected on the basis of talent status, do not materialise at all or not quickly enough, given the individual's timeframe). HR managers in this study expressed awareness of the dangers inherent in individual knowledge of their status as talent, with the risk that expectations would be increased but not met. Tyskbo and Wikhamn (2022) call for further research into the evolution of employee reactions to talent management, which is a useful addition to the field, but only included those designated as talent within their design. This thesis adds to the very limited research into the effects on those excluded.

As a summary of prior research into the effects of talent status and talent practice, De Boeck et al. (2018) provide a useful review-based update on the potential effects of talent management on the individual in terms of affective, cognitive and behavioural reactions. De Boeck et al.'s (2018) review suggests that qualitative studies are more useful for revealing negative reactions (since quantitative empirical studies generally have not factored this into design stages); this is a useful justification for the current study and methodological approach adopted – see Chapter 5. There is also a suggestion that perceived procedural fairness and secrecy / transparency may moderate effects on the in/excluded, echoing Sumelius' (2020), Dries and Kase's (2023) and Keddie's (2023) conclusions. For De Boeck et al. (2018), most literature still assumes a positive effect of talent management (for example, organisational/career commitment, engagement, job satisfaction) for those included in the talent pool. In terms of negative talent reactions, De Boeck et al. (2018) identify stress, the possibility of burnout, insecurity and issues with sense of self at work. They also

point out that positive and negative affective outcomes among talent are not mutually exclusive.

Of particular note is De Boeck et al.'s (2018) conclusion that they were unable to find one study that specifically focused on those excluded from talent pools. From a managerialist, organisationally focused, perspective they conclude that organisations may be considering a move to inclusive talent management based on little or no evidence of negative consequences outside the talent pool. This thesis directly addresses this identified lacuna through its focus on both those included *and* those excluded from the talent pool within Shire.

As highlighted above and noted by, for example, Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2016) and Dundon and Rafferty (2018), extant literature tends to adopt a managerialist stance - concerned with improving organisational performance and largely from a unitarist perspective, with little in the way of either critical debate or concern with those exposed to talent management programmes. However, studies that do consider individual consequences of talent management and talent status have much to offer financial and market driven perspectives. For example, Björkman et al.'s (2013) web-based survey of 769 managers and professionals across 9 Nordic MNEs identified statistically significant variation in attitudes to a range of dimensions (e.g. commitment to increased personal performance, to developing personal competencies for the benefit of the organisation and to strategic priorities) when comparing those identified as talent and those not so identified – the former having more favourable (organisationally) attitudes. Daubner-Siva et al.'s (2017) conceptual paper similarly notes potential for unanticipated consequences to emerge from talent identification – the Pygmalion-Golem effect. The Pygmalion effect refers to the positive influence of others' (particularly line managers') expectations on those included within a talent pool. Such positive effects might include attitudinal (for example increased organisational commitment), motivational (demonstrated through, for example, additional extra-role behaviour) and performance outcomes. In turn, this is expected to improve overall organisational performance. However, there are also potentially negative outcomes for those not included within the talent pool, creating the Golem effect. Daubner-Siva et al. (2017) suggest that motivation, attitudes and performance of the excluded may decrease as the lower expectations of others (notably line managers) impacts those not labelled as talent. Of course, such consequences for the excluded may be reinforced through other processes, such as a change to the psychological contract (King, 2018). From a unitarist and managerialist perspective, this leads Björkman et al. (2013) and Sumelius

et al. (2020) to conclude that it is not necessarily beneficial for the organisation to make it clear exactly who has and has not been identified as talent.

Table 2.1 below summarises the main findings from current empirical, academic (rather than practitioner) research into talent management (excluding global talent management studies) that has focused on either the experience of being included in the talent pool and/or that of those not so included, rather than the views of line managers or HR practitioners. This table offers a contribution to the field through a comprehensive review of nascent research, updating De Boeck et al.'s (2018) paper and offering further detail in some areas omitted by that review. Table 2.1 offers new and updated analysis of the complex web of possible consequences for the employee affected by talent management.

As highlighted in Table 2.1, the potential for a negative impact on both 'included' and 'excluded' groups is increasingly apparent, though no studies to date have used an in-depth, socio-biographic approach to understanding this process, a gap that this thesis addresses. Given such potentially negative consequences arising from talent management practice, there is considerable scope for a 'dark' side to talent management, explored in section 2.4.2 below.

Table 2.1 The experience of being 'talent': summary of research to date.

AUTHOR (empirical or conceptual)	**Included in TM**	**Excluded from TM**
Asplund 2019 (empirical)	Increased Org Citizenship Behaviour via increased felt obligation. BUT – moderated by professional identification (those with high professional identification might potentially have a 'ceiling effect', as they are already committed to putting in high effort etc.	Not studied
Björkman et al., 2013 (empirical)	Lower turnover intention More commitment to organisation *Increased acceptance of higher performance demands*	
CIPD 2010 (empirical)	Engagement Secrecy/lack of transparency Only senior managers	Lower motivation Lower self-confidence
Daubner-Siva et al. 2017 (conceptual)	Pygmalion effect	Golem effect
De Boeck et al. (2018) (review)	Positive behavioural effects e.g. lower turnover, higher performance BUT possibility of burnout Positive affective outcomes e.g. commitment, engagement, job satisfaction. Positive reaction to developmental opportunities Stress, need to be flexible and perform (citing Dries and Peppermans, 2008)	
Ehrnrooth et al. (2018) (empirical)	If aware of status, expectations of organisation increase and may potentially become complacent or arrogant	
Ford et al., 2010a (empirical)	Limited opportunities	Insecurity Reduced performance
Ford et al., 2010b (empirical)	Disengage if not challenging projects	Fell less able, value-less and expendable
Gelens et al. 2014 (empirical)	Higher perceived distributive justice *Higher job satisfaction and work effort*	

Hayfaa et al. 2017 (empirical)	Professional service firms (professional context) may need to focus on work-life balance and flexibility. Possible generational differences in values and expectations.	
Huang and Tansley, 2013 (empirical)	Dehumanised Exploitation More work Pressure to be mobile *HQ/Subsidiary conflicts* *BUT feeling special*	
Khoreva et al., 2017 (empirical).	Using Social Exchange Theory (SET) found that HiPos are more likely to be committed to organisation if see TM practices as effective. Women more so than men – possibly because they feel their talent not visible and not valued. Thus, a perceived investment in their development is received more positively.	
King 2016a (conceptual)	Psychological contract moderates; individuals in the talent pool are likely to see this as support from organisation, thus better fulfilment of organisational contract and more effort / commitment from individual	
Meyers 2020 (conceptual)	Role of employee in shaping access to talent status and / or practice. Mediating effect of employee 'proactivity' on employee reactions to talent management: if TM fits employee's values / interests / proactive seeking of status, more likely to be positive reactions.	
O'Connor and Crowley-Henry 2019 (conceptual)	Higher levels of engagement	Lower levels of engagement for those who want to be in talent pool and perceive process to be unfair
Pfeffer 2001 (conceptual)	Elitism, focus on individual and not teams	
Powell et al., 2012 (empirical)	Juggling work-life balance Line manager enables selection Mentoring imp	Glass ceiling
	Need to fit prevailing norms	
Sumelius et al., 2020) (empirical)	Initial pride But longer term some perceived potential for having to do more work / increased workload.	Resentment at not being told of status as non-talent in context of organisational ambiguity

	Some concern over what organisation might expect and what King (2016a) calls 'talent deal'.	Want more explicit criteria on how to be included in talent pool
Swailes et al., 2013 (conceptual)	Access to strategic language	Dehumanised Denied agency
Swailes, 2014 (conceptual)	Fully inclusive TM better for employee wellbeing	
Swailes and Blackburn, 2016 (empirical)	More positive about future prospects Positive about supportive others (e.g. line managers) Lack of fairness/access to development for others (non-talent)	Lower feelings of support – or unfair – feeling lower value to organisation and self-doubt about own abilities. Feelings of unfairness and limited transparency in process
Tansley and Tietze. 2013. (empirical)	Internalisation of organisational norms and values (in order to remain and progress as talent) Flexibility essential for continued talent status. Stress through ambiguity and a need to perform at each level. Work-home conflict	N/A
Thunnissen, 2016 (empirical)	Uncertainty about careers = dissatisfaction Perceived difference in opinion and therefore 'not fair'	
Tyskbo and Wikhamn 2022 (empirical)	Short-term reactions were positive e.g. excitement, feeling of being appreciated, increased organisational identification. Linked to status of being talent. Expected more opportunities but also expected having to do more. (They link this to King's (2016a) 'talent deal'.) Longer-term reactions tended to be more negative e.g.: unfulfilled perceived promises leading to frustration. They specifically list frustration,	

	disappointment and uncertainty. Tyskbo and Wikhamn term this talent emptiness (lack of real change following talent status) and talent indeterminacy (slowness of change, given individual timeframe). E.g. disappointed that promotion did not materialise or did not happen quickly enough. Longer-term employee impacts are seen as linked to unmet expectations.	
Wikhamn et al. (2020) (empirical)	Increased discretionary effort and commitment to supervisor and organisation.	

Author's own table derived from literature review. Aspects in italics are updates based on De Boeck, Meyers and Dries' (2018) review.

2.4.2 The dark side of talent management

Talent management literature has tended to ignore what has been termed in this thesis the dark side of talent management: the unanticipated and often undesirable (for the individual, organisation and/or society) practices and outcomes. This lacuna creates significant scope for empirical work into what Sheehan and Anderson (2015) term the 'Shadow Side', with a potential for negative consequences not only for the individual, but also for equality, diversity and social inclusion.

This dark side of talent management (Handley, 2014; Swailes, Handley and Rivers, 2017) includes individual effects noted in section 2.4.1 above, potentially intensified where there is a lack of transparency of process (Sumelius, 2020; Keddie, 2023). The notion of more opaque processes being particularly problematic for organisations is emphasised in, for example, Keddie's (2023) conceptual analysis of procedural justice within an Australian policing setting, which posits a key moderating role of perceived interpersonal, informational, procedural and distributive organisational justice. More open and transparent processes are seen to be far less likely to generate reduced employee engagement among those not included in the talent pool, since such are more likely to be perceived as fair even where the individual outcome might not be as desired. (However, even when efforts are made to ensure openness and transparency, Keddie (2023) concluded that HR practices are rarely gender neutral in their execution)

It is possible to categorise two specific problematics in terms of the dark side of talent management: talent identification and dehumanisation (Swailes, 2013). Talent identification is flawed, not least because of its usual linkage to performance appraisal and associated political, impression management and interpersonal liking bias (for an elaboration of problems inherent to performance appraisal, see, for example, Longenecker, 1997). Indeed, McDonnell et al. (2010) refer to the use of subjective measures in talent identification creating a process of 'cloning' of current leaders, who tend to favour those most like themselves and / or those candidates whose recent successes are more visible to them.

Secondly, reiterating the negative individual effects noted in section 2.4.1 above, there is potential 'dehumanisation' of both those identified as talent and those not so identified, reinforcing Sumelius et al.'s (2020) position on the impact of talent management on both in-group and out-group individuals. The out-group (non-talented) are potentially dehumanised, since the manner in which they are treated is said to deny individual agency (Swailes, 2013). Indeed, as outlined above, those not identified as talent do not have the same access to a range of developmental opportunities and it can be expected that their relative disadvantage becomes cumulative. Ford et al. (2010b) concluded, on the basis of their investigation in the UK NHS, that those overlooked in the talent management process may internalise their non-talent status, and feel less capable, similar to Daubner-Siva et al.'s (2017) Golem effect. However, those *included* in the talent pool can also be dehumanised as they are open to exploitation (Huang and Tansley, 2013; Swailes, 2013; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022), with additional duties and greater pressure to be mobile.

Several commentators posit that the exclusive, strategic approach – the most differentiated or targeted implementation – is particularly fraught with unanticipated and negative consequences. Research has highlighted an over-emphasis on the individual and increasing power differentials (De Boeck et al., 2018) along with the potential for negative consequences for employee attachment among both the included and the excluded over time (Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022). Indeed, both Pfeffer (2001) and Huang and Tansley (2013) note that talent management can damage an organisation's health if there is no established legitimacy for an exclusive approach, due to such unexpected and undesirable consequences. Pfeffer (2001) specifically highlights negative implications of excessive focus on the individual (not teams), growth in internal competition, a tendency to glorify the potential of outside talent, an elitist attitude and the very strong possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy – i.e. those labelled 'non-talent' receive fewer resources, training, mentoring etc. and thus

achieve less, similar to Daubner-Siva's (2017) Golem effect. Moreover, Swailes (2013) notes that an exclusive approach is linked to exposure and use of particular strategic language by the talented, who consequently find it easier to be perceived as having talent, *irrespective* of actual performance, or a Pygmalion effect (Daubner-Siva, 2017).

Recent critical perspectives suggest that talent management's hyper-individualised and marketized philosophical underpinning (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018) inevitably creates a situation rife with potentially negative implications, particularly for employees who are themselves unable to adhere to an organisational norm characterised by aggressive, individualised, competition and a long working hours culture. Financialisation, or the adoption of market and financial imperatives within the context of owner-driven capitalism, is seen to create an environment supporting control, Bravermanesque extraction of surplus value and a focus on the short-run. In this wider context of marketisation and a political, economic and institutional resurgence of individualism (at least in the UK and US), individualist policy and practice is legitimised (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018).

In addition to potential managerialism and marketized underpinnings, the dark side of talent management might further emerge out of, for example, political behaviour when translating policy into practice (Swailes, 2016). Swailes and Blackburn's (2016) paper is the only one to explicitly refer to individual politicization of the talent management process, indicating that part of the frustration of those not identified as talent is a notion of inequity due to not self-promoting as effectively as others. This is in contrast to those who may be able to use political behaviour to their own advantage.

There is limited support for political practice in early TM research. Mellahi and Collings' (2010) review papers and Huang and Tansley's (2013) case study, for example, highlighted the tendency towards a silo mentality in global MNEs, where subsidiary managers prioritise parochial self-interest and subsidiary performance rather than promoting their best talent to the centre. Mellahi and Collings' (2010) framework posits two explanatory concepts for this process: agency and bounded rationality. The former relates to a notion of subsidiaries as agents of the parent (or headquarter) organisation, with a skewed distribution of knowledge and also geographical distance facilitating agents' masking of star performers and prioritisation of the local (i.e. agency) as opposed to global organisational performance due to a vested self-interest in the former. It is suggested that agency or subsidiary managers will underplay the performance of their best talent and offer others for central development instead, rather than risk losing local talent with a consequential drop in subsidiary performance.

Mellahi and Collings' (2010) use of bounded rationality follows Simon (1983) and suggests that headquarter staff satisfice or accept a 'good enough' solution when searching for global talent. Given limited resource – including limited cognitive processing ability – there is a finite search for talent on the basis of readily available information and heuristics. Managers of subsidiaries are thus easily able to 'hide' better performing staff, reinforced by social and geographical distance. Subsidiary staff are more remote both geographically and socially (due to cultural differences) and it is suggested that those who are at a greater distance tend to interact less frequently with head office staff and are thus less likely to be noticed and recruited to the centre. This means that the parent organisation or headquarters will potentially miss out on the best talent. It is argued here that this political aspect creates considerable opportunity for the gendering of talent and talent management, not least because women tend to have more limited access to powerful organisational networks (Acker, 1990; Acker,1992; Acker, 2012; Williams, 2013).

The language used in the talent management process has also been criticised in a small number of academic papers. In a rare poststructuralist exploration in the NHS Ford and Harding (2013) concluded that even senior management – termed the 'C-Suite' – can succumb to or subvert talent management practice, either by acceptance *through changing the dominant discourse* or resistance through apparent compliance. Neither, of course, meant that anything substantive had changed – at most, only the language used. However, their conclusion was that language change can in turn bring into being that which is being talked about, thus having clear implications for translation into practice. The very language of TM is itself constitutive of a particular workplace culture that emphasises hyper-competitive work intensification and is blind to talent that falls outside the remit of a long working hours normative model. Dundon and Rafferty (2018) argue that those who are unable to follow this model will not be recognised as talent. Of course, workers with caring responsibilities are most likely to find the hyper-competitive culture one in which it is difficult to excel (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018); as women (especially older women) still bear the burden of such responsibilities (McMunn et al., 2020) it is likely that talent management programmes will be experienced differently by men and women. Makarem et al.'s (2019) empirical paper similarly highlights the masculinist and gendered nature of discourse and imagery and suggests a hidden gender bias in talent management language and practice. (See Chapter 3 for further discussion of gender and talent management.)

This critical analysis is similar to Ingram and Allen's (2019) analysis of talent recruitment literature. Using a discourse analytic methodology and a

Bourdeieusian lens (notably the notions of social magic and institutional habitus), Ingram and Allen (2019) consider the pre-employment practices of employers to be ways of ensuring that social exclusion is maintained and equality precluded. Through carefully constructed notions such as ‘Googliness’ and ‘the true you’, organisational ambiguity creates space for classed notions of the ideal graduate and talent. In this tacit manner social exclusion is sustained, privilege perpetuated and classed and gendered notions of talent are thus potentially constructed and sustained (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Makarem et al., 2019).

The philosophical underpinning to this thesis is that talent meanings need to be understood as socially constructed and negotiated and that it is essential to look beyond words if we are to attain a deep and contextualised understanding of talent management practice. Organisational talent management is influenced by macro, meso and micro contextual factors. These include national political and cultural macro-level conditions (King and Vaiman, 2019) that impact, for example, the relevance of specific talent recruitment or retention strategies, and industry-level meso influencers on the significance of particular skills and practices (Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). At a local or micro-level, however, there is considerable scope for negotiation and plurality of meanings (Garavan et al., 2021), with calls for greater contextual and tension- or paradox-aware understandings (Keddie, 2023; Vardi and Collings, 2023). It is specifically at the local micro level that alternative understandings and meanings of talent itself are socially constructed, and talent management translated into practice (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020).

In addition to the impact of talent management on the individual labelled as talent or not so labelled, it is essential to note that such individuals might themselves act politically. Indeed, Meyers’ (2020) conceptual paper considers the role of those individuals identified as talent in proactively capitalising on talent management schemes. Their paper highlights the need to consider how employees are themselves ‘proactive’ and part of what is termed in this thesis the *doing* of talent, which may then mediate the effect of talent status and talent practice on employee attitudes. This thesis explores employees’ active role in the doing of talent, both as managers involved in selection and translation into practice, and also as those labelled as talent or not so designated. The dark side of talent management thus includes not only unanticipated and/or undesirable consequences but also deliberate political actions of employees. This might be a further constraint on alleged or intended rational impartiality of practice if managers do not intend to select talent based on political skill.

2.4.3 Talent management: Contemporary issues

Primary data collection for this study took place during 2015/2016, for reasons further explicated in Chapter 10. An implication of the gap between data collection and thesis submission was significant social, technological and political change in the intervening years. These are summarized here as Covid-19, technological disruption, and social and political change, along with potential implications for talent management not explicitly considered during data collection.

1. Covid-19

2020 marked global awareness of Covid-19 and the introduction of lockdowns along with other pandemic control measures, including a huge shift to working from home, with all but essential workers being compelled to do so (Collings et al., 2021; Kravariti et al., 2022). The disruptive nature of Covid-19 thus rapidly accelerated the pace of change in how and where people worked. As all employees increasingly became teleworkers, this in turn changed understandings of effective leadership; prior data was no longer indicative of what might work in the future and leaders had to become digital technology masters while leading workers they no longer saw face to face.

Increased remote working afforded opportunities to access a more widely dispersed geographical talent pool, but also potential for a group of increasingly disadvantaged home workers who lacked the skills and market position to benefit from privileged teleworker status (Vaiman et al., 2021). Organisations also faced growing difficulties with succession planning and traditional forms of development.

Interestingly, in 2025, although organisations are recognizing some of the connectivity disadvantages of teleworking, most continue to value hybrid working for some or all workers where possible (CIPD, 2025a).

2. Technological disruption and social change

We are now in the midst of Industry 5.0 (Chew and Zainal, 2024), with greater possibility for, and emphasis on, collaboration and AI in what is loosely termed the platform economy. There are growing numbers of e- or gig-workers (Vaiman et al., 2021) and an arguably faster pace of technological change, in part spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. This creates TM challenges as it becomes more difficult to know what skills might be required in even the short-term, let alone a longer-term focus. Not only are requisite skills more difficult to forecast in the Industry 5.0 world, but available technology of the future may also not

even be conceivable today, reinforcing the need for dynamic skills and contextual awareness among those labelled as talent.

3. Social and political shifts

Social attitudes and values have shifted in line with disruptive forces noted above, with greater employee preference for work-life balance and flexible working (Collings et al., 2022). Paradoxically, there has also been a global shift towards reduced physical labour mobility as a result of, for example, Brexit in the UK. Globally, this is mirrored in what has been termed deglobalisation and restricted talent flows (Farndale et al., 2021), encapusulated in policies such as Omanization (Glaister et al., 2021) and recent shifts in American immmigration and deportation policy (Yousif, 2025).

The above shifts and forces for change have implications for talent management not considered at the onset of this study. However, they may have profound implications for practice. The very notion of skill or talent, for example, is arguably more fluid and flexible now as the nature of jobs has shifted. There is also greater uncertainty for organizational planning, with increased emphasis on managing paradoxes, dynamic capabilities and shifting pluralities of interests. There is scope for more powerful (talented) individuals in a technology-facilitated global world, but also potential for a greater divide between the talented and those excluded from star status. Collings et al. (2021), for example, note the very different experiences of those who can work from home and those for whom this is not a possibility. There are also gender implications of such shifts, considered further in Chapter 3, but essentially extending difficulties faced by predominantly women who combine homeworking with homecaring (Collings et al., 2021).

Implications of the above developments for thesis conclusions will be further considered in Chapters 3, 9 and 10.

2.5 Conclusion

To summarise, talent management as an academic field continues to suffer from lack of agreement about workable definitions. There are similar gaps in our understanding of talent, notably how different organisational actors may have varying understandings of what talent means .

What is termed here *the dark side* of talent management further highlights how research to date has tended to be unitarist (Thunnissen, 2016), with a notable dearth of work considering the impact on the individual (De Boeck et al., 2018). Those few prior empirical studies that *have* considered the impact on the individual highlight how talent management may have several unanticipated and

undesirable consequences for those excluded from the talent pool, but also for the talented and ultimately for overall organisational performance.

As suggested in Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen's (2016) review, there are additional lacunae around research within public sector organisations (see also McDonnell et al., 2017), organisations that are operating within just one country, and the effect of talent management on society. There are also growing appeals for further research into how talent management is done in practice (rather than conceptual or literature reviews), especially outside the US (Hayfaa et al., 2017) and cognisant of context (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). More recent research has highlighted the need for critical inquiry, particularly the gendered underpinning of talent management (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Makarem et al., 2019; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). This thesis centres on the *practice* of talent management in a specific context, a public sector organisation in the North of England, addressing calls for in-depth case studies and process models, through its empirical work within Shire. This case study specifically focuses on the implications of a gender lens for talent management construction and practice in addition to adding to limited extant research into the experience of individuals, particularly those excluded from talent pools.

In conclusion, despite a growth in talent management publications and empirical papers, calls for further research into its translation into practice, implications for gender(ing) and the individual perspective are a significant and enduring justification for this thesis. As a central aim of this study is to explore how talent management is translated into practice and the implications of such for the (re)production of gender, Chapter 3 considers extant literature on women and work, prior to focusing on gender and talent management.

Chapter 3 Gendered Organisations and Gender and Talent Management

3.1 Introduction

Having outlined nascent literature on talent and talent management in Chapter 2, this chapter focuses on relevant concepts, debates and research into gender, work and organisations that are relevant to a gendered exploration of talent management.

Following explication of the employment locations of men and women (vertical and horizontal segregation and pay differentials) the (patriarchal) gendered order - both within and external to the organisation - is considered.

Calls for research into potential gender implications of talent management have grown consistently since the late ‘noughties, albeit in the context of a continuing relative paucity of empirical work. The second part of this chapter thus considers extant literature that specifically informs the gender and talent management debate.

Finally, given the time interval between data collection and thesis submission, the chapter concludes with explication of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated structural and societal shifts for gender, work and organisations.

3.2 Gender

3.2.1 Men and women at work: pay and employment

Women continue to be disadvantaged at work (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012; Calas and Smircich, 2006; Vinnicombe et al., 2024), with horizontal and vertical segregation of jobs, a persistent gender pay gap and enduring notions of part-time work as women’s work (Wilson, 2013; ONS, 2024a). Women in Britain are now marginally more likely to hold a first degree than men (Hillman and Brooks, 2025) – though not at Oxbridge, where men continue to dominate (Veenstra-Ashmore, 2024) - but this parity does not fully translate to the workplace, where women continue to be disadvantaged.

Although the pay gap has narrowed and now stands at 7% for full-time employees (ONS 2024a), women continue to be paid less than men. Moreover, women account for the majority of part-time employees - 85% of men work full-time, compared to only 61% of women - and more women than men are under-employed (working in a part-time capacity where full-time is desired).

The overall pay gap figure masks significant differences between both age cohorts and occupational groups, being larger for full-time employees aged 40 or over and also for higher earners. For employees aged 50-59, in addition to those in higher earning categories, the pay gap actually increased 2023-2024 and, among the top 10% of earners, stood at 15.5% - more than double the overall full-time median gender pay gap (ONS, 2024a). In contrast, younger workers are experiencing a much lower gender pay gap; for men and women aged 22-29, the pay gap has reduced from 2.5% in 2023 to 1.3% in 2024 (ONS, 2024a).

At the most senior (executive or Boardroom) level in organisations, there is some evidence of greater representation of women, with an increase in the numbers of women on FTSE (Financial Times Stock Exchange) 100 (the top FTSE 100 firms) Boards. Indeed, in line with BAWP British Association of Women Police Officers (BAWP) (2006; 2014)[4] targets and Lord Davies' (2014; 2015) Review of women on Boards, the FTSE Women Leaders Review 2025 recommended a revised target of a minimum of 40% percent representation of women on Boards of FTSE 350 (the top 350 FTSE) firms. This exceeds the 35% figure that is widely accepted as essential for removing a 'minority' status and embedding equality (Brown and Woolfenden, 2011; Laverick and Cain, 2014).

The percentage of female directors has grown from 12.5% in 2010 to 21% at the time of primary data collection in 2015 (Lord Davies, 2015) and to 42.4% in 2024 (Vinnicombe et al., 2024). However, this masks continued disparity, with women being far outnumbered among executive directors (EDs), who are organisational employees and have a say in the day-to-day running and management of the organisation; women account for just 11.8% of EDs, with only 42 women in this position in 2024 (Vinnicombe et al., 2024). Non-executive directors (NEDs) are not organisational employees and only provide independent advice and guidance; it is here that the largest gains in female representation have been made, with women now accounting for 49.3% of FTSE 100 NEDs. Consequently, despite this near-parity overall, female EDs remain a significant minority at 20% of FTSE 100 firms (Vinnicombe et al., 2024). Moreover, as we move down from the top 100 to the top 250 FTSE firms, female executive director representation remains stubbornly around 12%,

[4] British Association of Women Police Officers was subsequently replaced with British Association for Women in Policing, both with the acronym BAWP.

(Vinnicombe et al., 2024), though with similar inroads into total Boardroom representation (combined ED *and* NED).

As highlighted above, despite *some* equality gains in Boardrooms, women are still less likely to be employed in a managerial or executive director capacity and men continue to dominate UK Boards (Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 2015; Vinnicombe et al., 2024). Moreover, a greater reported proportion of women on Boards may be more attributable to tokenism than a fundamental shift in prevailing norms, with evidence that female directors are far more likely to be dismissed once their period of tenure approaches nine years (the point at which they lose their classification as 'independent') (Main and Gregory-Smith, 2017).

It is within this gendered milieu that talent management is practiced. In this persistent context of women's relative disadvantage in the workplace this paper adopts a 'gendered organisational theory' perspective (Acker, 1990; 1992; Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Connell, 2000; Hearn and Parkin, 2001), focusing on the manner in which organisations produce and reproduce gender relations and how organisations themselves embody gendered practice and culture.

3.2.2 Gendered organisations: an overview

Acker (1990; 1992) suggested that gender inequality is integral to gendered organisations, since paid jobs have an implicit preference for men, who are seen to be unencumbered – and thus ideal – workers. Acker identified four gendered organisational processes in her seminal work, which serves as a helpful summary of the significance and interplay of the gendered order, communication and networks (see Sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4), at the level of the organisation.

The first process, gender divisions, refers to 'the gender patterning of jobs, wages, and hierarchies, power, and subordination' (Acker, 1992, p. 252) and relates to the notions of horizontal and vertical segregation. Work is horizontally and vertically segregated, with jobs categorised as 'women's / men's work' at the same level and a continuing relative paucity of women as one progresses up an organisational or professional hierarchy. Although there are some national and temporal variations in this patterning, the situation whereby women tend not to be located at the top of organisations and are usually located in 'women's work' persists.

Acker's second process refers to the role of 'symbols, images and forms of consciousness' (p.253) that replicate and perpetuate such gendering. Thus, the kind of language used in organisations often relies on a notion of masculinity,

referring to ‘lean production’, ‘corporate strategy maps’, ‘business process re-engineering’ and – as illustrated here – the ‘war for talent’. The third process is one of interactions between organisational stakeholders (employees, clients, customers, supervisor / subordinate, colleagues etc.) in a way that ensures that ‘images of gender are created and affirmed’ (p. 253) and hierarchies supporting and illustrating male dominance are produced.

Acker’s final process is ‘internal mental work’ (p. 253) and includes individual and collective actions to adhere (or otherwise) to gender-appropriate persona. Sexuality is present in all four processes as both a ‘resource’ and a ‘problem’ (p.254). Typically, bodily functions and the sexuality of women are seen as more disruptive to the organisation than those of men, with processes such as breast feeding and menstruation seen as highly suspect (Acker, 1990). Women’s sexuality is seen as particularly problematic for organisations and is linked to their relatively less privileged status, reinforced through rituals and masculine organisational culture that ensures that masculinity is celebrated (at all levels) while femininity and female sexuality is linked to the absence of power.

All four processes are seen to reproduce a gendered organisation ‘substructure’ (Acker, 1992, p. 255), including physical arrangements, rules and the relationship between work and non-work. This renders organisations inherently patriarchal and more suited to men and masculinity, rather than women. Following ‘in-depth’ interviews in the oil and gas industry Williams et al. (2012) concluded that Acker’s theory of gendered organisations continues to be relevant to work and organisations, despite interim changes including downsizing, reduction in tenure, functional flexibility and increased network organisations. They suggest that her ‘mechanisms of career ladders, job descriptions, and formal evaluations’ are replaced by the slightly nuanced notions of ‘teams, career maps, and networks’ (p. 569), but remain in place.

This is relevant to Shire Police, since both oil and gas industries are male-dominated and typically require a degree of physical fitness for manual work. Paradoxically, Williams et al. (2012) concluded that women may actually be more disadvantaged in modern ‘neoliberal’ (Williams, 2013, p. 620) organisations, since career structures are less formalised, more fluid and subject to self-promotion and individual (supervisor) recommendation. Acker herself, in a conceptual update in 2012 that incorporated intersectionality (of gender, race and class-based inequality), concluded that her original theorising remains pertinent to organisational practice. It is argued here that this gendered organisational context creates potential for gender bias in talent management practice.

3.2.3 The gendered order: Patriarchy

Gendered organisations are situated within what is considered here to be a wider patriarchal society. Patriarchy might be simply understood as a system of structures that serve to reinforce male advantage (Bradley, 2013) in a gendered world[5]. Several structural models have been developed to illustrate this and the interweaving of gendered sub-structures. Walby (1990), for example, identified the gendered regime of paid work, domestic work, culture, male violence, sexuality and the state. All six structures were seen to reinforce a gender order whereby most women were subordinate to most men, in most spheres of life. Connell (1987) identified three gendered structures: labour, power and cathexis (emotions). For Connell, as men dominated all three areas, holding the most senior jobs in industry, commerce and politics, this combined to ensure that men typically had more power than women, extending to interpersonal relationships, emotions and sexuality. Significantly, Bradley (2013) posits that both Connell and Walby argue against a deterministic stance on the gendered order, suggesting that change can and does happen over time.

For Walby, there was a key distinction between the 'public' and 'private', with a noted shift from the latter to the former in work under capitalism but also a reinforcement of women's powerlessness in both spheres. In a similar vein, Mills (1989) identified a patriarchal societal 'master rule' that women belong in the private sphere (i.e. the home) and men in the public sphere. Indeed, Lyonette and Crompton's (2015) empirical investigation depicts continuing 'doing' of gender in the domestic sphere, even in 'WASP' ('wives as senior partners, earning more than their husbands' (p. 3)) households. This master rule governs all others such that reproduction, the family, the state and

[5] There is considerable debate about the nature and meaning of term 'gender' and its differentiation from 'sex'. In line with Broadbridge and Simpson (2011) and Bradley (2013) the two are simply differentiated here on the basis of 'sex' referring to biological differences whilst 'gender' is seen as referring to 'socio-cultural constructions' (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011, p. 470) or a 'social construct' (Bradley, 2013, p. 4). It is also acknowledged that gender is fundamentally linked to notions of masculinity and femininity, but also that there is no clear binary association between female and femininity and male and masculinity. Rather, following Connell (1987; 2000) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) the position adopted here is that both men and women may adopt more or less of the behaviours typically associated with masculinity or femininity, which are on a continuum of 'plural identities', but that there is a dominant or 'hegemonic' masculinity – though fluid over time - which is fundamentally linked to patriarchy or the gendered order.

organisations (with gendered and patriarchal cultures – Wilson, 2013) all adhere to this patriarchal notion of women being more suited to the domestic realm.

This private / public distinction is significant, since women's increasing movement into public paid work has maintained and sustained their subordination, with women's continuing (public) marginalisation. Parkin and Hearn (1987) and Witz (1992), for example, articulate the patriarchal problem within the public organisational realm in terms of implicit political power (with women losing out in battles for organisational and also professional control) and Lukes' (2005) third dimension of power. Lukes' (2005) third power dimension highlights how power is most effectively exercised through ensuring that conflict never surfaces, with the powerful maintaining control over political agendas, what is and what is not considered problematic and even what is subjectively *recognised* as personal or collective interests by those subject to such power. The interdependence of patriarchal arenas can be seen through Doldor et al.'s (2013) empirical work which suggests that organisational politics continues to advantage male leaders, but also that female leaders are aware both of its career significance and gendered nature. However, political behaviour was seen as masculine behaviour by female leaders, representing a double-bind for such women for whom political behaviour is not gender-congruent.

Doldor et al.'s (2013) study highlights the need to recognise agency within any particular context in addition to the possibility of change. Indeed, the agency/structure question has been widely debated in the context of women at work (Hakim, 2006; Lewis and Simpson, 2017), with the approach in this thesis being one of a possibility for agency within wider structural constraints that are enacted through practice on a daily basis (see, for example, Bradley, 2016). The concepts considered above, therefore, are seen as useful for depicting how most realms in the UK remain male dominated. It is only within such constraints that women are able to choose – such choice itself being within a gendered order which individuals both actively perform and are simultaneously constrained by.

3.2.4 Gendered organisations: Communication, Leadership and Mentoring

There are three notable concepts central to understanding how the gendered order is sustained within organisations: communication/language, leadership and mentoring, the latter being particularly relevant to talent management (see below).

Much extant organisational behaviour literature adopts nuanced notions of gender and language. Calas and Smircich (2006), in their review paper, highlighted the gendered nature of human resource management (HRM) practices such as recruitment, selection and promotion and also the gendered nature of communication and the use of language. Spender's (1987) seminal work in this area further suggested that the English language is 'man-made' and inherently biased in favour of men, with very different connotations of male and female words used to describe ostensibly identical (gendered) concepts. Spender also suggested that men are more likely to control talk and dominate conversation, particularly in organisations. Women who attempt to adopt a more assertive, masculine style of communicating face a 'double-bind' (Coates, 2016, p. 202): they are seen as acting contra-gender and thus equally unsuitable for senior positions. Given the centrality of language to leadership (talent) practice and power (see, e.g. Ford, 2006; Talbot, 2010) it is therefore inherently difficult for women to challenge masculine organisational culture and management discourse.

As Walby (2011) elucidates, the notion here is that masculine hegemonic discourse continues to subvert women's human capital. A similar conclusion is drawn by Fotaki (2013), who suggests that masculine language is a "means of excluding women from an active subject position" (Fotaki, 2013, p. 1256). Fotaki's empirical work across 9 UK Business Schools focused on two central aspects: firstly, the "absent woman" (whereby, since discourse assumes a male standard, woman is only seen in relation to man); and secondly the "abject (maternal) body" (Fotaki, 2013, p. 1256). Fotaki's analysis of in-depth, biographic interviews of 23 female academics identified three key concepts. Firstly, she pointed to women feeling as though they were 'other' and did not belong, being notably excluded from networks and mentoring through masculine academic discourse. Women were further subject to absence of the female body; masculine discourse and male norms were demeaning to women whose very bodies and bodily functions were seen as unprofessional and problematic. Finally, women were themselves accepting of the current gendered order, perceiving themselves as different and not belonging, despite simultaneously opposing their own subordination. Fotaki (2013) concluded that these women internalise social structures, thus power relations become embodied in women themselves.

The above findings notwithstanding, it has been argued that women may have scope for challenging and even resisting gendered discourse (Billing, 2011). Gendered discourses might occur in talent management language and practice, for example, such that hegemonic masculinity is enacted *but* it might also be

possible for women to turn language to their advantage, as suggested by Baxter's (2011) ethnographic study. Following empirical investigation of senior managers in seven UK-based MNEs, Baxter concluded that successful women are themselves aware of the significance of appropriate language use. Baxter coined the phrase 'double-voiced discourse' (DvD) to refer to the strategy used by such women to engage in self-reflexive behaviour regarding their own talk and also to subsume others' discourse and interests into their own, thus maximising their own position to facilitate goal achievement.

Language practice within a talent management context may, therefore, reinforce a masculine culture and notions of talent as male. Women within this context may challenge, resist and use language as advocated by Billing (2011), but they might alternatively subject themselves to, and internalise, gendered structures, accepting subordination and otherness, not challenging the gendered culture. This is particularly relevant to women leaders, an area that has been at the centre of talent management research that tends to focus on leadership talent – those with high potential (see, for example, De Vos and Dries, 2013).

The notion of management / leadership itself, however, might be seen to be gendered, with two alternative perspectives on women in management (the phrase itself highlighting gendered connotations – we never talk of 'men in management!'). The first tends to simplistically assume that men and women lead in different ways and that effective leadership is masculine; also that some women could succeed as managers if they adopted the male norm, with more feminine qualities such as empathy and listening skills, not being valued (Ford, 2006). Current management and leadership discourse continues to centre on what has been termed macho management, rather than the post-heroic perspective (Ford, 2006), highlighting how women who do manage to accede to higher echelons continue to be perceived as deviant (and also retain prime responsibility for the 'three Cs' (cooking, cleaning and childcare – see e.g. Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015) - clearly incongruent with the typical all-hours culture of professional and managerial work. Senior women are thus faced with a double-bind, being expected to behave in a way that adheres to the masculine norm, yet being seen as deviant if their behaviour contradicts the feminine stereotype (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011). This reflects findings from Billing's (2011) qualitative study, where senior women talked of deliberately adopting a masculine (role-appropriate) approach at work, whilst others deliberately adopted what they perceived to be a feminine (gender-appropriate) approach, particularly to softer communication and employee engagement skills.

Subsequent management and leadership research has tended to highlight the advantages of what might be termed feminine or transformational leadership, with what might be presumed to be a political motive of (re) asserting the feminine, whilst still based on an assumption that men and women manage differently (Broadridge and Simpson, 2011). Alimo-Metcalfe (2010), for example, conducted a repertory grid-based investigation of male and female constructs of leadership, concluding that a stereotypical bias persists, with women's descriptions relating most closely to transformational leadership and men's to transactional. However, this notion of women as *naturally* better transformational leaders and men as *naturally* better transactional leaders still tends to largely marginalise the absence of women in senior posts and perpetuates assumed male / female difference (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011). There is an inherent assumption of female as different and a male (managerial) norm (Billing, 2011), perpetuating the notion that men and women lead and work in different ways, with accepted research reinforcing masculinised management practice and an enduring notion of man as manager (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011). This suggests that leadership and management talent may be more likely to be seen as male, with masculinised talent selection, talent development practice relying on the ideal (male) worker and the undervaluing of what might be seen as feminine characteristics and behaviours.

An alternative view is that men and women lead in ways that are very similar, with greater intra-gender differences in leadership style, for example, than inter-gender differences. Anderson and Hansson (2011) analysed leadership behaviour in the public sector based on considerations of leadership style, motivation and decision-making. They reported, on the basis of their quantitative study, that there were no significant differences between male and female leaders on any of the dimensions. Anderson and Hansson (2011) mooted two possible explanations for this finding: the context – in this case, the UK public sector – might influence appropriateness of a particular leadership style, with more successful leaders gravitating towards this irrespective of gender; alternatively, person-organisation fit might mean that individuals who choose a managerial career have potentially similar predispositions.

Both perspectives on women in management and associated research tend to adopt an unproblematic notion of leadership itself, assuming that leadership 'exists' out there and can be identified and measured (Ford, 2005). Research in the area has focused on aspects such as requisite leadership traits or behaviours, fit with situation, transformational (as opposed to transactional) and charismatic and guru theories of leadership. Ford's (2005) suggestion is that

such research has tended to be from a positivist perspective, with attempts to discover the truth - which are the most effective leadership traits or behaviours, how do these fit with contingencies / situation and how can we be better transformational leaders. A poststructuralist, critical discourse approach is adopted in Ford's paper, facilitating a critical analysis of how leadership is a performative process, to which the role of language is central since language is itself a means of control as highlighted above. Ford's analysis of NHS leadership language suggests a consonance with images of rationality and masculinity and, therefore, increased accessibility to men, with women being seen as other, in line with Billing (2011) and Fotaki (2013). Indeed, this masculinisation of leadership and, thereby, the notion of talent, is further evidenced in appearance and body work (Mavin et al., 2016; Mavin and Grandy, 2016), with senior women leaders extending their negotiation of androcentric organisational cultures to clothing and media interactions, highlighting the need for such women to constantly navigate the 'think manager, think male' discourse.

In a study of UK Higher Education Institutions, Ford (2014) found that opacity of organisational practices (such as career planning, promotion and talent management) served to reinforce the invisibility of many of these senior women. Female leaders were deemed not to fit prevailing masculine norms, reinforced by hidden patronage for others who *were* seen to fit. Simpson and Kumra (2016) similarly highlight the difficulty of getting merit to be attributed to female leaders, whose very bodies do not fit the leadership glass slipper, with a consequential 'Teflon effect' and the unstickiness of female merit, with women's merit and promotion or progression potential being unrecognised as their bodies and social identities do not fit the masculinised ideal. [6]

Mentoring within a gendered organisational context may thereby reinforce and sustain a gendered culture, with a double-bind of relative absence of other

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[6] The terms 'femininity' and 'masculinity' appear in several articles and texts, with slightly different connotations than the linked terms 'male' and 'female' (Ford, 2005). For Alvesson and Billing (1997) masculinity is associated with 'self-assertion, separation, independence, control, competition … rationality and analysis' (p. 84) and femininity is seen to be more related to 'interdependence, cooperation … emotional tone … nurturance, compassion, sensitivity [and] empathy'. Alvesson and Billing (1997) prefer femininity and masculinity to female/male as these are deemed to be 'themes in different discourses' and not 'essential categories'. This facilitates focus on intersectionalities as suggested by Acker (2012) and the manner in which men and women might themselves relate to masculine and feminine aspects of leadership or, indeed, talent management and how gendered organisations are (re)produced

females in senior roles combined with frequent difficulties with the out-of-work commitment required in such processes. In a talent management context, both Tansley and Tietze (2013) and Williams et al. (2012) highlighted how networking was fundamental to success and even employability, yet such networks remain gendered, with the more powerful networks continuing to be male. Linehan and Scullion's (2008) qualitative study of senior female managers identified specific difficulties facing females in talent management development processes, including mentoring. These women were seen to miss out on senior appointments due to a lack of mentors and effective sponsors, in addition to a lack of access to key networks compared to senior male managers. Interviewees reported difficulties in succeeding in what was seen as a man's world, reinforcing previous comments about patriarchal systems and Acker's (1990; 1992) notion of gendered organisations. This is consonant with Ibarra et al.'s (2010) conclusion, on the basis of 40 in-depth interviews with high-potentials, that women are less likely to benefit from (particularly informal) mentoring than men since their mentors tend not to be as senior and are thus far less likely to advantage women through active sponsorship and key network links. Abalkahail and Allan (2015), in their qualitative study of 16 UK and 28 Saudi women, similarly highlight the role of mentors for female managers in the UK, concluding that the integrity and commitment of such mentors (whether formal or informal) is central to any consequential benefit.

The model adopted by mentors is often detrimental to women and reinforces existing power structures, notably where the underlying premise is a gender-deficit model (Dashper, 2019; Leenders et al., 2020). Dashper's (2019) longitudinal qualitative study of a mentoring programme for the UK events industry identified sustained gender invisibility. Mentors and mentees on this female-only programme were highly reluctant to identify any discriminatory practices in their organisations and assumed that any inequality in success or position was attributable to the individual herself, not the prevailing gender order. This was irrespective of the mentor gender (3 mentors were male, 12 female; all 15 mentees were female) and applied equally to mentor and mentee. The positioning of the individual as the problem thus sustained the masculinised gender order and female mentees were seen as 'other', not fitting the masculinised norm. Gender thereby remained in the background and the prevalent discourse of success remained masculinist: inequality was attributed to the individual and was thereby invisible. Nevertheless, there was some evidence that the scheme benefitted the female mentees, notably in softer skills areas such as confidence. Moreover, mentoring schemes do have some power

to change the gender-deficit order in the context of an open and questioning culture (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014; Leenders et al., 2020).

The interconnectedness of language, leadership and mentoring within a patriarchal societal and organisational context is highlighted by Greguletz et al. (2019). Their interviews with thirty-seven senior females in German organisations identified both structural factors excluding women from professional networks (largely associated with difficulties in attending, linked to paid work-family conflict) and agency. Where these senior women were not actually affected by work-family conflict, there was either an assumption by others that this *was* the case for those women who had children, or women themselves identified concerns about masculinised networks and associated events (for example, football). Moreover, relational morality (an aversion to an instrumental use of networks) and gendered modesty (restrained confidence) heightened limited benefit from such networks. Networks and mentoring may thus influence the likelihood of women being identified as talent, and availability of mentors may affect the extent to which they can benefit from such developmental networks.

This interplay between the public and the private domains (Mills, 1989; Walby, 1990) is further considered in the following section on paid and non-paid work.

3.3 Paid Work and Non-paid Work

As implied above, women's disadvantage at work interacts with the unequal distribution of domestic tasks (Lyonette and Crompton, 2015; Mc Munn et al., 2020) to create gendered organisations where gendered talent management is likely to be practiced. Irrespective of occupation, organisational level and earnings, women bear the brunt of the domestic burden, with elusive workplace flexibility (Calas and Smircich, 2006; Wilson, 2013; Afiouni and Nakhle, 2015; Lyonette, and Crompton, 2015). Even where women are employed in what we might term pinnacle professions, such as medicine, they are far more likely than men to work less than full-time, with associated implications for career progression and pay (Vinnicombe et al., 2024). Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic may have intensified gendered differentials in paid and unpaid work, with women bearing the brunt of closed childcare facilities and schools through undertaking more additional childcare than men, and women being more likely to be displaced from paid work or to suffer a pay cut linked to occupational segregation (Smith et al., 2021). (See Section 3.5 for more detailed consideration of post-pandemic shifts.) Nonetheless, there may be some emerging alternative paid work-non-paid work/family patterns (Connolly et al., 2016). Notably, where women are the main earner in a household, or where the

man is not employed, there is evidence of more egalitarian sharing of housework; moreover, couples who have a shared egalitarian philosophy are more likely to have a more equal sharing of domestic work (Mc Munn, 2020).

Gascoigne et al. (2015) consider work-life balance in the context of 'extreme jobs', typically defined as managerial or professional and characterised by long working hours in combination with potential work intensification and expectations of 24/7 availability. Extreme jobs, as highlighted through Gascoigne et al.'s (2015) literature review, are themselves gendered. Building on Acker's (1990) gendered organisational theory, Gascoigne et al. (2015) reiterate the significance of the unencumbered male as the ideal worker, which thus underpins extreme jobs and further reinforces gender inequality. Consonant with Laverick and Cain (2014), Gascoigne et al. (2015) suggest that this is particularly pronounced in dual-extreme career couples; where both members of a couple face an expectation of unrestricted commitment to the job, something has to give. Most frequently, this is the female's job, with women in extreme job couples being far more likely to give up their full-time employment, incurring both a personal career cost and also a loss of talent for the organisation. A central element of truly gender-neutral jobs, therefore, is a design that does not equate to long working hours, even where the nature of the work itself is fast-paced and unpredictable. This has clear implications for gender (in)equality within extreme jobs such as policing.

Work-life balance literature exposes a tendency to locate the responsibility for balancing paid work and life firmly with individuals, using a discourse of personal preference, flexibility and autonomy (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016), thus deflecting attention from social institutions and the central concept that caring is something that women do and *should* do. Based on 31 semi-structured interviews of academics at an Australian university, Toffoletti and Starr (2016) considered how prevailing work-life balance discourse, embedded in social and cultural context, influenced sense-making of the women in their study and, thereby, maintained power relations. Participants in Toffoletti and Starr's research also highlighted that any difficulties with working time demands (e.g. extremely long working hours, spillover of work to non-work time and domain) were interpreted as *thei*r failings as individuals. Women were left to feel constantly guilty about not fulfilling expectations of family life, rather than criticising the organisation and wider context in which fulfilling the expectations of both paid and unpaid work is seen as women's problem. Any unfulfilled demands in either the work or home sphere were thus seen as the fault of these female academics, and not attributable to a system that sees all unpaid work as the responsibility of females (with no reduction in the expectations of the work

sphere). Hence, d*espite* flexible working policies, these women were faced with unattainable work-life balance goals and internalised gendered organisational power and discourse. The impact of such discourse was so strong that even women without young children or elderly dependents were seen to frame their experience within the same meta discourse, referring explicitly to NOT having children.

Societal expectations about women and the private sphere thus continue to disadvantage women at work, irrespective of whether or not they have caring responsibilities and in a way that is not replicated for men in paid work. Skewed distribution of non-paid work tasks further reinforces women's disadvantage in the workplace, yet within an organisational context that remains largely gender blind (Mavin, 2015).

3.4 Talent management and gender

Several studies have explicitly noted the need for talent management research that explicitly considers gender. Minbaeva and Collings (2013), for example, call for research to explore the role of 'individual factors [supported by De Vos and Dries' (2013) empirical paper], such as gender, age and national identity' in the talent management process. Links between age and talent perception are well established, with older workers often overlooked for promotion and training and offered more limited access to paid caregiving leave (OECD, 2023). Age discrimination permeates understandings of talent, with a markedly skewed distribution of training offerings and uptake by age. However, organisations are reporting increasing skills deficits and reduced access to a range of talent that may become obsolete as older workers are lost to the workplace, with consequential skill deficits (OECD, 2023).

Gender intersects with age to influence where talent is assumed to lie, though not in a linear manner. Men might be more likely to benefit from a greater potential to be self-directing over their career course, with typically linear career paths up to the point at which they become 'older workers'. In contrast, women are frequently less able to be career-agentic at certain stages in their working lives, due to greater non-paid work obligations (Böhmer and Schinnenberg, 2016; Mc Munn et al., 2020). This creates more varied careers as women move through life stages, with greater caring responsibilities either for younger and/or older family members. However, talent perceptions typically reflect women's greater non-paid work commitments as lack of paid-work commitment. Working mothers in particular are likely to be overlooked in talent selection and recruitment to senior positions, with child-bearing age women, therefore, being less likely to be included within a talent-pool (Vinnicombe et al., 2024). Older

women may be seen as more career-focused, yet this does not filter through to talent perceptions as they are more likely to have had interrupted career paths. The link between talent, age and gender further intersects with class, with working-class males being less likely to enter careers at all.

Talent management is fundamentally linked to individual opportunity for development and, therefore, the concept of careers. Women's more varied non-paid work commitments impact paid-work careers in a way that render traditional career concepts, such as boundaryless or protean careers, less relevant. Instead, Böhmer and Schinnenberg (2016) propose the notion of kaleidoscopic careers, linking gendered career paths to orientations literature and highlighting the significance of both organisational context (which may be more or less gendered or inclusive) and career capital at various life-stages. Women's attachment to paid work is likely to be more mutable than for men, with varying agentic capacity for paid work alongside non-paid work obligations. Career capital here includes not only explicit knowledge and skills, but also organisational attachment and individual contacts and networks. This is similar to Mäkelä et al.'s (2010) network position within off-line processes, discussed below, and notions of social capital incorporating access to sponsors, mentors and wider social networks (see also Iles et al., 2010 and Swailes, 2016). Women do not benefit from mentors and networks to the same extent as men (Tansley and Tietze, 2013; Handley, 2014; Swailes et al., 2017). Looking at five contextual components (cultural differences, organisational context, role stereotypes / career orientation, professional identity and differences between national labour markets), Böhmer and Schinnenberg (2016) suggest that women may lose out irrespective of the underlying talent management philosophy, since both competition-based and also sponsorship-focused systems favour men, who typically have greater career capital and extensive networks. For this thesis, notions of kaleidoscopic careers and the relevance of societal norms to talent management practice reinforce the need to explore the translation into practice of talent management through a feminist lens, thereby informing critical debate and theorisation of the field.

The very notion and understanding of talent, therefore, is highly complex and influenced by a plethora of interwoven gendered characteristics. Sustained vague connotations of talent and varied talent management processes offer considerable opportunity for gender bias (Farndale et al., 2010; Iles et al., 2010; Festing et al, 2015; Ingram and Allen, 2019). CIPD's (2010) mixed-method empirical investigation of talent management provides some support for the growing role of opacity in the talent identification process, specifically noting self-reports of increasing significance of (opaque) social networking. This

intuitive approach is clearly open to gendered interpretation and reinforcement of existing gendered stereotypes, including masculinised leadership constructs (Swailes, 2013).

Bias and opacity in the talent identification process accords with particularly stages 1 and 2 of Swailes' (2013) ethical framework (see Figure 3.1 below). 'Imagining talent', stage 1, is particularly open to notions of effective (masculine / heroic) leadership and leaders as male. Moreover, long working hours continue to be the Achilles heel of attempts to achieve equality: if women tend to bear the brunt of the domestic burden and thus find it more difficult to work long hours at the office, they are less likely to be perceived as committed and, therefore, less likely to be 'identified' as talented (stage 2). (For completeness, Stages 3 and 4 refer to the impact on those not so identified and also possible negative consequences for organisational performance). Individuals themselves carry out identity work as part of the talent management process, heightening potential for gender bias through talent construction. This is highlighted by Swailes and Blackburn (2016) who, following their empirical work in a public sector context, noted that inclusion in the talent pool influenced self-concept and identity, in addition to imagined future careers and work futures. Tansley and Tietze (2013) similarly highlighted how talent management practice was seen to influence what they refer to as 'the inside' of individuals, in addition to external factors, with those in the talent pool having to internalise organisational norms in order to progress. Rites of passage within stages of the process afforded considerable liminality and a corresponding heightened level of identity work and challenge for liminals, who ultimately accept this as an ongoing process. A logical progression from this perspective would be to further explore the construction of talent, particularly in liminal spaces where there is heightened ambiguity. An interpretivist or constructionist perspective would suggest that prior conceptualisations of talent as simply possessing innate skills and abilities that can somehow be manipulated to advance organisational performance is somewhat contestable as the individual is not merely discovered through TM, but is rather produced (Alvesson and Karreman, 2007). Moreover, scheme opacity increases the centrality of who, not what, you know and (male-dominated) networks serve to reinforce gender bias (Festing et al., 2014).

An assumed neutrality of talent management practice and processes is similarly critiqued in Ingram and Allen's (2019) critical discourse analysis of recruitment materials from two major graduate talent recruiters. Notions such as 'Googliness' and the 'personal brand of you' are sufficiently vague to enable gendered, classed, racial and able-bodied assumptions of talent to remain unchallenged under the cloak of ambiguity and social magic. Social magic in

their research was a process of obfuscation whereby the social processes that produce the individual's capacities (accent, appearance etc.) are never questioned or acknowledged, thereby being deemed irrelevant. Yet such social processes enable bias to permeate practice.

Figure 3.1 Four-stage Evaluation Framework

STAGE	Imagining Talent	Identifying Talent	Developing Talent	Evaluating Programme Impact
Example Ethics-related questions for organisations	Why is an elitist talent management programme needed? How is this articulated? To what extent do our views of talent embody virtue and eliminate gender bias? How are we distinguishing between popularity and talent?	What have we done to identify and eliminate selection bias? Does everyone get a fair opportunity to be considered?	How will employees not in the programme feel about being excluded? How much resource is being put into the programme in proportion to resources available to excluded employees?	How does the talent programme benefit employees who are excluded from it? Can the resources put into the programme be justified in economic terms?

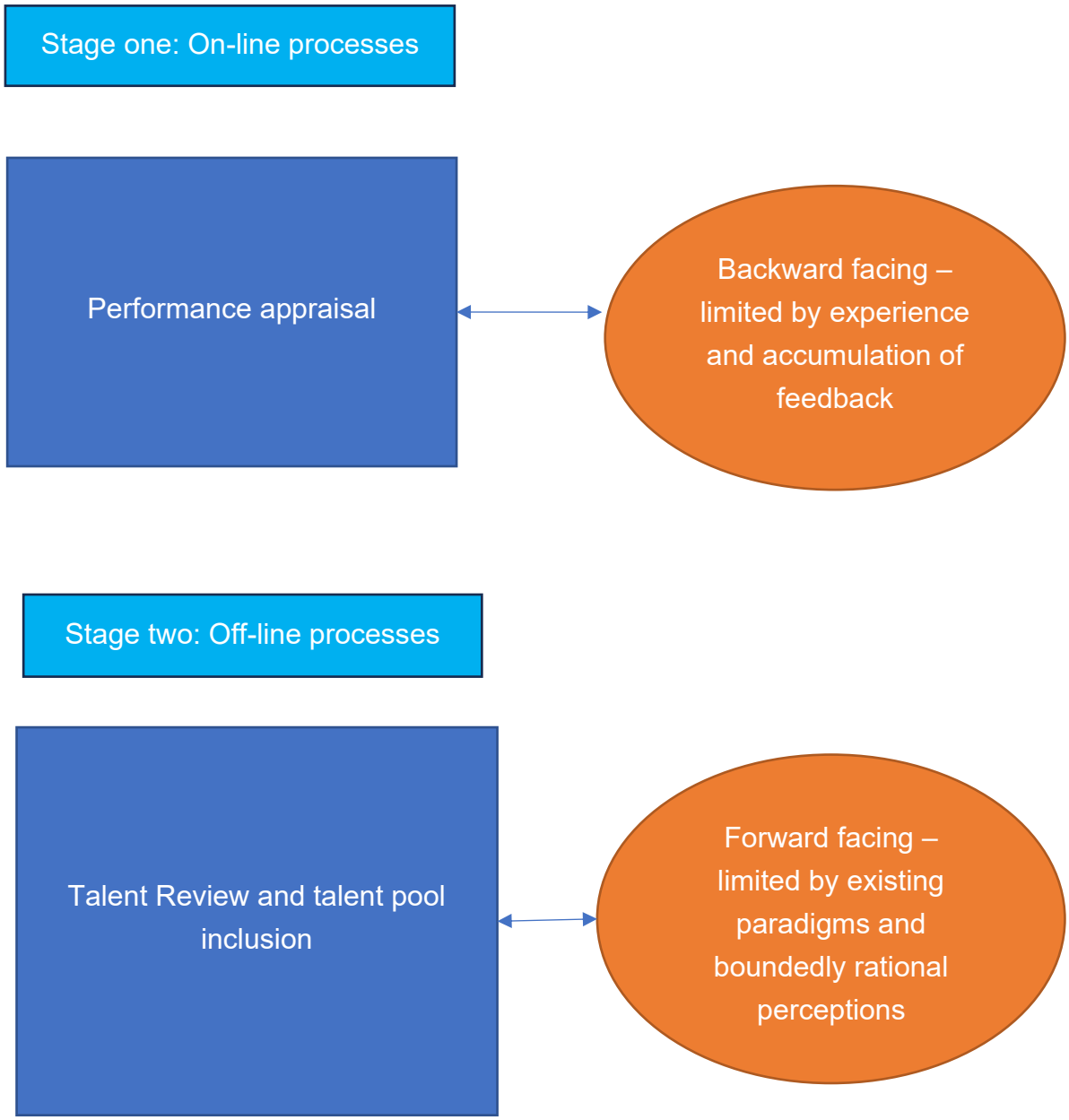
Adapted from: Swailes (2013), p. 41. (Minor adaptation to layout.)

The gendering potential of ambiguity and opacity within talent management practice is extended through women's reduced visibility, gendered language, gendered career paths and bias within performance management. Mäkelä et al.'s (2010) two-stage model of the talent identification process (see Figure 3.2 below) highlights specific opportunities for such gendering.

As illustrated, this model differentiates 'on-line' processes, limited by demonstrated and recorded prior experience and feedback and subject to the kind of difficulties with talent identification alluded to above (Swailes, 2013), and 'off-line' processes, designated as 'cognition-based' and future oriented. In Mäkelä et al.'s empirical work, this second stage typically involved head office staff who had no direct contact with potential talent and was reported to be affected by 'simplified heuristics' (p. 135), notably influenced by decision-makers' worldview and bounded rationality. On the basis of their empirical work Mäkelä et al. identified three limiting factors with respect to the second stage: cultural and institutional distance; homophily or similarity bias; and network position. Closeness (culturally and geographically) to decision-makers, cultural or linguistic similarity, and involvement in central, informal, network positions were all linked with increased propensity to include individuals in talent pools. All three factors were associated with individual visibility: those closer geographically or culturally, or with increased interaction through network engagement, were more visible and immediately mentally closer when decision-makers were selecting for the talent pool. Although this model was only supported through a single case study investigation and ignores potential exogenous bias (such as the propensity of certain cultures to be more / less trusting or to make themselves more / less visible), there are clear implications for gender and talent identification. Women are far less likely to be included in informal networks, for example, and a similarity bias might be expected to have a more detrimental impact on women who do not, as Swailes (2013) notes, comply to the masculine leadership construct.

In addition to opacity, ambiguity and individual visibility within talent management processes, language use and exposure reinforces gendering potential. Those in the talent pool become exposed to particular language, which reinforces their privileged position (Swailes, 2013). Given prior research highlighting the gendered nature of language and communication it is suggested here that it is highly likely that practice and discourse will therefore be gendered. Indeed, the very phrase 'war for talent' (Michaels et al., 2001) and associated discourse appears to rely heavily on masculine notions and imagery of war or sports metaphors (Ford and Harding, 2013).

Figure 3.2 Two-stage model of internal talent identification



Adapted from: Mäkelä et al. (2010), p. 136 (Changes to layout)

As highlighted above, the language used in talent management may be gendered, with a potentially reinforcing effect on talent construction as male (see Alvesson and Karreman's, 2007, articulation of the significance of language in meaning construction). Huang and Tansley's (2012) research further suggests that senior managers actively seek to manage many of the dilemmas inherent to talent management practice through a process termed 'rhetorical obfuscation', which is deliberate use of language to further

organisational agendas and endorse (managerially) desired behaviours. Huang and Tansley's (2012) study depicted managers' skilful use of language to reinforce talent management preferred practice, which then became 'institutionalised', whilst obfuscation ensured an unchallenged central HRM message. Given the opaque nature of this rhetorical obfuscation there is clearly significant potential for gendered notions and gendered talent management.

Language within organisations becomes imbued with connotations of talent, with those included in the talent pool potentially being exposed to certain language, certain ways of talking, to which non-talent are never exposed (Swailes, 2013). In turn, this has potential to create self-reinforcing advantage as the talented are exposed to and learn to use strategic language and meanings that then reinforce their privileged status in a virtuous circle. The talented become increasingly perceived as such and can maintain this position with less effort than others. Talent management language thus has a performative effect, noted in the context of management consultant recommendations in Ford and Harding's (2013) qualitative enquiry of the NHS. Ford and Harding argue that talent may be 'invoked' (p.2) through the language and practice of management consultants - discourse being fundamental to this process and the legitimisation of management consultants themselves. This relates to Minbaeva and Collings' (2013) research; although based on limited empirical data, talent construction was seen to be highly contingent and contextual, a point endorsed by subsequent empirical and conceptual literature (see, for example: Thunnissen et al., 2016; King and Vaiman, 2019; Tyskbo, 2019; Asplund, 2020; Harsch and Festing, 2020; Wang et al., 2022; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). Hence, when 'talent' move from one organisation to another individual performance often declines (Groysberg, 2004; 2008; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020).

Given the significant scope for gender bias, there is some evidence of a critical turn in the talent management field, with emergent critiques of the prevailing gender order. Lawless et al. (2019), for example, note the role of talent management talk in signifying fundamental and underpinning assumptions about the nature of talent and talent management practice. Talent discourse is thus potentially part of how individuals become seen as talent since language 'does' things. Makarem et al. (2019) specifically focused on the power and gender implications of talent management discourse. They conducted a textual and discourse analytic study of forty articles, in addition to Michaels et al.'s (2001) seminal work on talent management, with a focus on the role of language in talent talk. Adopting a postructuralist, feminist, perspective, Makarem et al.'s (2019) analysis highlights an underpinning gendered notion of

talent itself, with repeated use of masculinised language and an omission of what are termed feminine qualities, such as communication skills or interpersonal dynamics. Through its absence, the talent in women's heads is overlooked and talent is synonymised with hegemonic masculinity. Makarem et al. (2019) note that all examples of talent in Michaels et al.'s (2001) text are male, and war metaphors pepper the work. The forty articles were similarly found to normalise a masculinised notion of talent, but with talent management considered a neutral tool and not one that can itself wield considerable power over who and what is considered to be talent. This more recent critical turn signposts the way for this thesis, with its focus on the potential gendered translation into practice of talent management, its talk and its construction.

3.4.1 Talent management, performance management and gender

Performance management is fundamental to talent management practice, yet this itself is subject to gender bias, notably where performance assessment is predicated on masculinised notions of success such as status or aggressive competition (Festing et al., 2014; 2015). The working organisational definition of success within talent management may thus introduce gender bias into talent management practice if it is more representative of masculine traits. Festing et al. (2014) further propose that approaches valuing what might be deemed more feminine aspects such as personal development, commitment or motivation might be less gender biased, as may more inclusive models.

Festing et al.'s (2014) empirical study of two German media organisations is used to reinforce their contention that an inclusive talent management process facilitates maximum utilisation of women's potential. They highlight a number of steps that organisations can take in order to develop inclusive systems, including equal representation of both men and women amongst performance assessors in order to reduce sex discrimination and the adoption of transparent talent management processes, including talent pool selection criteria. Festing et al. (2014) used documentary analysis (based on publicly available data) in addition to a total of 43 interviews: 6 with HR and talent management staff (e.g. head of HR) and 37 with those included in the talent management programme (20 women, 17 men), but none with those excluded or not participating, across two case study organisations. Their data included an analysis of the two case study organisations along 5 dimensions of inclusivity, including those outlined above.

Findings from the two case study organisations were in line with expectations: i.e. the more inclusive case organisation appeared to adopt a more inclusive TM programme, as reported by interviewees. This included greater emphasis on

‘communication and social skills’ (p. 13) as a dimension of talent. However, those in this organisation also spoke of the significance of a ‘professional support network’ (p. 13), interpreted here as part of the general picture of valued communications, rather than more exclusive mentoring from senior colleagues (which might be seen as masculinised). There were a few senior females in this organisation and careers appear to be interpreted as including horizontal or developmental moves and not simply vertical progression, with management experience not required for inclusion in a talent pool and an inclusive approach to staff with interrupted career paths (e.g. through maternity leave). Talent development was seen to focus on ‘personal development aspects, including coaching, soft skills and team and leadership skills’ (p. 14) in a non-threatening / non-competitive environment. In contrast, the case organisation least consonant with Festing et al.’s (2014) 5 dimensions of inclusive talent management was reported by participants to be masculinised and less inclusive in approach. This included talent criteria such as assertiveness and self-presentation (‘impression management’, p. 13), with no stereotypically feminine dimensions, and an age-based barrier which effectively excluded women who had taken a career break from the talent pool (reinforcing the significance of alternative career conceptions discussed above). The talent scheme itself was seen to focus on qualifications and what might be termed ‘hard’ aspects of management such as strategy and law.

Female participants in both case organisations were more supportive of an inclusive, rather than elite or exclusive, approach, whereas males were more likely to prefer an exclusive approach. Moreover, females in both organisations tended to perceive current practice as being exclusive in contrast to males’ perception of both organisations’ talent management programmes as being either a mix or even completely ‘universal’ (p. 15) / inclusive. Interviewees in both organisations spoke about a lack of transparency in terms of both the programme itself and also the selection criteria, although the less inclusive case organisation was reported as having more explicit and transparent selection criteria once individuals got to know about the scheme. This opacity of the schemes themselves leads to a situation where who (not what) you know becomes increasingly relevant and (male-dominated) networks are likely to reinforce indirect gender bias, similar to Böhmer and Schinnenberg’s (2016) career capital and Mäkelä et al.’s (2010) network position within off-line processes.

Even in the more egalitarian case organisation, senior management remained male-dominated with a prevailing norm of male-as-breadwinner and the long working hours Achilles heel of greater equality, leading Festing et al. (2014) to

conclude that leadership construction remains highly masculinised. This highlights the propensity for talent management to reinforce hegemonic masculinity rather than challenge such.

In their subsequent study of five subsidiaries of a large MNE, Festing et al. (2015) posit that the prevailing masculine management discourse inevitably ensures that feminine traits and behaviours are undervalued, notably in performance evaluation prioritising agentic over communal working (Festing et al., 2015). Although Festing et al.'s (2015) study involved only one multinational organisation and the sample size is relatively small for a quantitative study, their findings suggest that how talent is assessed may advantage males, not least because such reflects a masculinised notion of effective performance. Keddie (2023), in her conceptual paper on Australian policing, similarly notes the typical undervaluing or exclusion of feminine qualities within performance or promotion metrics.

Of course, there is a clear link between performance management and talent management scope, rationale and potential outcomes. If female managers are generally less satisfied with how their performance is evaluated, this may have implications for the recruitment and retention of high calibre staff, for example (Festing et al., 2015). Interestingly, Biswas et al. (2017), in their quantitative study of 183 Bangladeshi organisations, subsequently found that more inclusive HR policies were associated with more positive attitudes towards the role of women in senior management, which may point to future research addressing Festing et al.'s (2014, 2015) conclusions.

Amid growing calls to embed gender within talent management research objectives, Khoreva et al.'s (2017) quantitative study of 11 Finnish organisations investigated the role of gender in moderating the potential relationship between talent management practice and the commitment of high-potentials, through a psychological contract and social exchange theory lens. Their data suggest a correlation between gender and the strength of relationship between quantitative measures of self-reported talent management effectiveness and self-reported commitment to leadership development. Khoreva et al. (2017) explain this finding through suggestions that female employees perceive their talent to be less 'visible' (following Acker, 1990) and, therefore, have a more noticeable reaction to talent management practice. These conclusions, however, lack any empirical, qualitative, data to understand exactly what is being experienced and reasons for any potential differences. This thesis affords an opportunity to explore in depth whether, and how, understandings of talent and talent management practice, are gendered.

3.5 Women and work: Contemporary issues

Due to the time interval between data collection and thesis submission, this section contains an update on relevant literature relating to women and work: the gender pay gap, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and attitudes to gender equality.

3.5.1 Gender pay gap

As highlighted in Section 3.2.1, the gender pay gap is now more nuanced than at the time of data collection, having fallen to 7.0% for full-time employees in 2024. There is also evidence of significantly reduced pay differentials for younger employees. Full-time working males aged 16-24 have been earning less than females of the same age in certain socio-economic groups consistently since 2022 (Ryan, 2024) and for 18-21 year-olds the differential has remained at -0.5% (that is, women have earned more than men) for the last two years (ONS, 2024a), with this negative pay gap being particularly marked in the North of England. Similarly, for men and women aged 22-29, the pay gap has reduced from 2.5% in 2023 to 1.3% in 2024. Moreover, young males are far more likely to end up in neither education, employment or training (so-called NEETs) among the 16-24 year-old category, accounting for 58% of all NEETs, with 15.1% of young men compared to 11.2% of young women being in this category (Ryan, 2024). There have also been significant shifts in educational attainment and girls now outperform boys continuously through pre-school readiness, Early Years, GCSEs and A-level attainment and also outnumber boys in HE.

In terms of leadership and progression when in paid employment, there is evidence of increased recognition of feminine characteristics within leadership and talent criteria. The CIPD Profession Map (CIPD, 2025b) explicitly includes Valuing People and Working Inclusively within its Core Behaviours, for example. Moreover, of direct relevance to the context of this thesis, the College of Policing Fast-Track selection criteria now include demonstrating behaviours of being ‘resolute, compassionate and committed’ and ‘inclusive, enabling and visionary leaders’ (College of Policing, 2022).

However, gender stereotypes appear to be enduring. At Key Stage 2, for example (age 11), girls outperform boys in all areas *except* maths, where boys’ attainment is 1% higher than that of girls. Similarly, university course studied reveals continuing conformity to gender stereotypes, with women dominating non-science areas and men dominating physical sciences, computing and engineering and technology (Ryan, 2024).

Moreover, despite some pay differential shifts among younger workers, women continue to dominate part-time employment and the pay gap among the highest earners and notably for older women, is stubbornly enduring (ONS, 2024a; Vinnicombe, 2024). Indeed, despite some inroads into UK Boardrooms since the date of primary data collection, men continue to dominate UK Boardrooms (see Section 3.2.1) and account for 60% of appointments to senior Board leadership roles (FTSE Women in Leaders Review, 2025), with a masculinised and aggressive Boardroom culture (Vinnicombe et al., 2024).

3.5.2 Covid-19 Pandemic: an impact?

The Covid-19 Pandemic afforded a unique opportunity for radical organisational and social change, with associated moves towards greater gender equality.

Pre-Covid-19 there was evidence of slow change in work and organisational structure, with increasing prevalence of remote working, gig workers and changes to employment contracts - growing self-employed among less skilled workers on the one hand, but more e-working among relatively powerful professionals on the other. As noted in Section 2.4.3 above, however, the pandemic heralded wide-scale and accelerated change in how and where people worked (Kravariti et al., 2022), with employees being told that they *must* work from home, with the exception of what were termed core workers in the UK. The latter were forced to go out to work and were the only group of employees for whom education and eventually childcare provision became available as a priority once some aspects of lockdown were relaxed. Moreover, this rapidly accelerated spatial (and indeed temporal – see below) shift in paid employment has left an enduring legacy. Although the number of employees working purely from home has decreased since 2021 there has been a longer term shift in hybrid working, with 28% of employees in Great Britain now being classed as hybrid workers, particularly marked among those aged over 30, parents and managers or professionals (ONS, 2024b).

Such wide-scale and rapid change in the location, structure and requisite management of work afforded opportunity for gender norms – notably the ideal unencumbered worker norm (Acker, 1990; 1992) – to be queried and challenged. Lockdown highlighted and rendered more visible unpaid work and caring, since these were not provided outside the home during particularly the first lockdown in the UK (Handley, 2023). Non-paid workloads increased during lockdown, particularly for those with children whose education was now forced into the home. Both the location / space and the time / timing of work were disrupted; non-paid work and paid work became interwoven, with disruption to their traditional time- and location-based separation. Those in paid employment

faced the challenge of accommodating additional caring needs alongside employer demands, all within the one physical space of the home, within the same time-period and with no additional physical or emotional support (Hassard and Morris, 2024).

In the face of such wide-scale disruptive change, evidence from the UK, US, Japan and Europe during and post-pandemic suggests that, rather than creating more equal spaces, structural shifts necessitated by the pandemic were associated with work intensification and the entrenchment of gender inequality. Hassard and Morris' (2024) longitudinal study of the UK, US and Japan highlighted the negative effects of homeworking, with increased opportunity for control afforded by technology alongside a 24/7 paid-work availability expectation. Moreover, evidence from their study of employed managers indicates that it was predominantly women who bore both the temporal and spatial burden most heavily. Indeed, Zanhour and Sumpter's (2024) US-based research highlights how mothers themselves, as part of the doing of gender and gendered structures, internalised the ideal worker norm by either trying to hide their working mother position OR by prioritising employment over and above their own health, typically working extended hours to accommodate both paid work and caring. Garcia's (2022) investigation of UK dual-earner couples similarly depicted an overarching inequality and gender division of unpaid work. Although *both* parents in their sample worked at home during the pandemic, and both parents increased the time they spent on unpaid work, it was the women in their study who were more likely to request flexible working and reduce their employment hours to accommodate the increased caring and unpaid work demands (a finding replicated elsewhere, e.g. Parry's (2024) US-based study). Although there was some, limited, evidence of re-negotiated divisions of labour within the home, this was only where women's employment hours had increased and men's decreased (for example, through furlough), with time availability the determining factor. However, where this was the case, men in their sample were likely to see their increase in non-paid work as temporary and as providing 'help' to their female partner.

The work of fathers was thus prioritised before, during and after the pandemic, highlighting the 'flexibility paradox' (Parry, 2024), whereby flexible working actually *increased* work-home conflict rather than providing opportunity to balance paid and non-paid work (Garcia, 2022; Parry, 2024). Garcia's (2022) US-based qualitative study of dual-earner couples revealed not only the same temporal blurring of paid and non-paid work, but also marked physical or spatial gendering. Fathers were generally able to obtain or maintain their dedicated office or paid-work space, whilst mothers were much more likely to have to

inhabit the family living space when engaging in paid work, with more opportunity and availability for non-paid work interruptions. In this sense, mothers who partook in paid work were said to self-exploit, spending greater time on childcare and making themselves more continuously available. Moreover, even so-called stay-at-home mothers reported a decrease in personal well-being due to reduced autonomy, greater caring demands and increased disruption during the pandemic (Aslam and Adams, 2022).

The paid work, and physical space for such, of fathers was thus deemed higher status, higher value and worthy of privileging above that of working mothers. The mirror effect of this, highlighted in Kelland et al.'s (2022) UK-based qualitative research with working mothers, fathers and managers, is that care-giving fathers report experiencing mockery and suspicion, or being labelled as lazy, if they request flexible working. An enduring breadwinner and ideal worker model thus reinforces fathers' reluctance to take advantage of parental leave or reduced working hours.

Far from challenging Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) ideal worker norm, the adjustments made within households during the pandemic revealed intensified work, and sustained both the ideal worker and gender norms (Parry, 2024; Scholz et al., 2024; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2024), heightening the masculinised ideal of the always-available worker, prioritising paid over non-paid work. Even relatively privileged women often masked the extent of their work intensification, in part due to heroic norms, but also in order to avoid not being seen as an ideal worker. Micro forms of resistance, such as turning off a video call during a Teams call, were in evidence during the pandemic, but on the whole did not challenge the entrenched unencumbered worker ideal (Scholz et al., 2024; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2024). Moreover, for those in typically lower class and more vulnerable employment, the pandemic enabled the development of the 'idealized' worker norm, with such workers popularised as heroic and self-sacrificing, further reinforcing gender and class inequality (Scholz et al., 2024), with less advantaged women being exploited through an ethic of care before, during and after the pandemic (Allard et al., 2024).

The highly disruptive spatial, structural and temporal paid employment changes augmented through the pandemic continue, though to a lesser extent. As indicated above, a greater proportion of workers continue to work at least partly from home (ONS, 2024b) compared to pre-pandemic, although there are significant numbers of employees (approximately half) for whom this is not possible due to the nature of their employment (CIPD, 2025b). Indeed, the College of Policing highlights opportunities for flexible working requests in its Fast Track programme (College of Policing, 2022). This notwithstanding, and

despite 41% of employers in the CIPD's 2024 Labour Market Survey offering hybrid working, there is evidence that some – particularly larger – employers are moving towards increasing employee mandated office days or hours (CIPD, 2025b). Moreover, many employees have reported negative side-effects of hybrid working, including work intensification, increased opportunity for surveillance, spatial issues as noted above and the caring / paid work conflict (Hassard and Morris, 2024). This, combined with employee perceptions of the negative impact of hybrid or flexible working on promotion prospects, renders the future of hybrid or homeworking complex, mutable and subject to contradictory – and gendering – forces.

3.5.3 Gender equality attitudes

Gender stereotypes appear to remain as significant as in 2015. For example, in addition to the entrenchment of ideal worker norms noted above, and despite a general consensus that men and women lead in similar ways (Ryan, 2024), when there *is* a perceived difference, traditional stereotypes prevail. Male politicians, for example, are believed to be better at "delivering on objectives" and female politicians at more feminine tasks such as ethical behaviours and decisions (Ryan, 2024).

Caring remains a double bind for working women, since not only is it perceived as *their* work, but working mothers are seen as both less committed and less suitable for senior positions simply because of motherhood. There is no similar disadvantage for working fathers, although fatherhood *is* associated with lower tolerance of parental leave (Kelland et al., 2022; Vinnicombe et al., 2024).

More significantly, in the interval between data collection and thesis submission, a notable shift has been witnessed in the value attributed to gender equality. Pay and attainment data over recent years have been heralded in the popular media as an indication that boys, notably white, working-class boys, are now missing out on subsequent meaningful careers. This, in turn, is associated with shifts in wider societal attitudes and the notion that steps to achieve gender equality are no longer needed, with almost half (47%) of recent British participants in a 2024 Ipsos survey agreeing with the statement: "when it comes to equal rights with men things have gone far enough in Great Britain" (Ryan, 2024). This is a marked increase on 38% in 2023 and 29% in 2019 (pre-Covid).

At boardroom level, there is evidence of growing reluctance to further gender equality, with what Vinnicombe et al. (2024) describe as an 'anti-woke' agenda and a risk of retrograde steps in terms of equality and diversity as broad targets such as Boardroom quotas are almost met. Indeed, there is evidence of negative spillover, whereby having a current female executive actually has a

negative impact on opportunities for other women as there is no longer a perceived pressing social need for gender equality (Vinnicombe et al., 2024).

It appears, therefore, that despite unprecedented and disruptive change heralded by the Covid-19 pandemic during 2016-2023, women's disadvantage, the ideal worker norm, and hegemonic masculinity endure: plus ça change.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the continued disadvantage faced by women in employment, with evidence of hegemonic masculinity and gendered organisational processes that sustain women's lower pay and horizontal and vertical segregation.

The ideal, unencumbered, worker norm and Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) gendered processes continue to ensure a patriarchal employment arena that is itself reproduced and reinforced by wider patriarchal structures. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic is associated with work intensification and further entrenchment of paid/non-paid work conflict for women, combined with increased notions that gender is now irrelevant to employment and a growing reluctance to engage in consideration of the gendering of work, employment and society (Smith et al., 2021; Ryan, 2024; Scholz et al., 2024; Vinnicombe et al., 2024; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2024).

The assumed female non-paid work burden makes it far more difficult for women to be seen as (talented) leaders. Mentoring has been identified as having potential to support women aspiring to progress or to assume leadership roles (Tansley and Tietze, 2013), yet this practice itself may reinforce gender invisibility and patriarchal power structures (Dashper, 2019), particularly given the interaction between accessing mentoring and networking opportunities and the non-paid work sphere.

Masculinised language and communication sustains women's disadvantage in the workplace. Hegemonic masculine discourse is interwoven with androcentric cultures and associated HRM practice (Calas and Smircich, 2006), having a notable impact particularly on women aspiring to, or occupying, leadership roles (Ford, 2006; Talbot, 2010; Coates, 2016). Language may itself be constitutive of masculinised leadership, with women facing a double-bind if they attempt to conform to a macho-management (Ford, 2006) leadership ideal that is seen as contradicting the feminine (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011) and with associated stickiness of female merit and female bodies that do not fit the leadership glass slipper (Simpson and Kumra, 2016).

Such societal and organisational structures and processes influence the context within which talent and talent management are practiced, creating significant potential for bias (Festing et al., 2014, 2015; Böhmer and Schinnenberg, 2016). There is emergent evidence that talent connotations are subject to the same masculinisation as leadership (Böhmer and Schinnenberg, 2016; Makarem et al., 2019) and that liminal spaces afford an opportunity for social magic (Ingram and Allen, 2019) to fill the gaps with masculine constructs and gendered practice. Talent management practice, therefore, may be a central arena for the doing of gender and associated implications for women's careers (Böhmer and Schinnenberg, 2016) and equality and diversity (Festing et al., 2014, 2015).

Such potential for gendering and gendered talent management practice provides the justification for this thesis, which offers an opportunity for in-depth exploration of talent management within a large, UK, public sector organisation, Shire Police. Indeed, the very nature of this case study organisation and associated policing culture render it a particularly appropriate focus for empirical research. Given the relevance of context to talent management research (Collings et al., 2017; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020) the following chapter considers this specific context of UK policing.

Chapter 4 The Policing Context

4.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have considered talent and talent management, and the gendered organisation, both of which are central to the aims of this thesis as outlined in Chapter 1. Given the focus of this research on one large,UK police force (Shire Police), this chapter outlines extant literature on (UK) policing and the nature of the case study organisation.

This study was conducted in a large police force in the North of England (Shire) in 2015-16, which time period marked the tail end of significant austerity measures and cuts to funding across the UK public sector. This chapter considers that national policing context at the time of the study, followed by moves towards new public management (NPM) within policing. Literature on gender within the police service across the UK is explored, with a section covering changs in the period post-primary data collection and thesis submission.

4.2 The national policing context pre-2016

This section provides a snapshot picture of the policing context at the point of data collection, which was located within the aftermath of a global financial crisis and recession (Shaw, 2015a; 2015b)[7]. The 2010 UK coalition government agenda included significant debt reduction alongside a shift from state to individual responsibility and market-led growth, with further public sector spending reductions continuing through to 2019 (Shaw, 2015a; Institute for Government, 2019).

Despite calls for further funding in the wake of global and EU terrorist attacks, cuts to policing were sustained (Home Office, 2017), with an 18% ‘real-term’ (excluding local tax) reduction in funding 2010/2011-2015/2016 (National Audit Office, 2015; Shaw, 2015b). Reductions continued during 2016/2017, with a 16% decrease in central Government spending on policing 2009/10-2018/19 (Institute for Government, 2019). Police Services throughout the UK became increasingly reliant on local council contribution to policing and reserves (Institute for Government, 2019).

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[7] See Section 4.5 for an update on the national policing context post-data collection.

This reduction in funding at the time of data collection was reflected in police numbers and composition. Following a period of growth in police officer strength throughout the 1980s and early 1990s and again during the noughties to a peak in 2009, police officer numbers declined consistently over the 2010-2019 time period. Numbers fell by 18% between 2010-2016, (Allen and Dempsey, 2016) and full-time equivalent police numbers decreased 14% between 2010 and 2019 (Institute for Government, 2019). This was associated with a shift in the police workforce composition, with growing reliance on volunteers to bridge the gap. There was an increase in police community support officers (PCSOs – classified as police staff, due to the absence of warranted powers) and special constables ('Specials', unpaid but classified as police officers as they do have such powers) over the same time period (Shaw, 2015a; Institute for Government, 2019). Funding and workforce reductions were reflected in a shift in priorities, with 33 of 43 police forces either reducing or abolishing neighbourhood policing teams (Shaw, 2015a), for example. Total police workforce (sworn officers plus police staff and volunteers) numbers peaked in 2010 and dropped consistently thereafter until 2018 (Home Office, 2025b). This was in a context of a changing social environment for policing at the time of data collection, including internationalisation, greater personal mobility, unprecedented technology-led global and personal communications, and changing structures of families and communities (IPC, 2013).

Paradoxically, crime rates also fell from 2010-11, although the picture is a much more complex one than such simple statistics would suggest (National Audit Office, 2015; National Audit Office, 2020). An Independent Police Commission (IPC) (2013) investigation concluded that, despite falling crime levels, the police service faced new challenges, for which a traditional approach and structure might not be best suited. Extensive surveys were conducted as part of the IPC (2013) research, including a public attitude survey, a survey of 23,152 police staff and officers, a survey of police and crime commissioners (PCCs), two Delphi consultations and meetings with stakeholders in 7 police forces, in addition to expert witness hearings and written witness statements. IPC conclusions suggested an increase in new types of crime (cybercrime, trafficking, terrorism) and growing public demand for policing that is responsive to local needs, in a climate of continuing budgetary pressure and a desire for a proactive and 'evidence-based' (Lumsden and Goode, 2016) approach to policing.

Crimes thus became more complex as funding fell, often requiring cross-agency collaboration and communication in a community context and with an increase in family / social / domestic crime (Jones, 2017). The police also had a growing

role to play in tackling mental health, particularly given funding cuts to mental health services themselves within austerity Britain (Institute for Government, 2019; Brown and Silvestri, 2020). Pressures simultaneously intensified in areas such as counter-terrorism and low-volume, high-harm crime (National Audit Office, 2020).

Such externally driven change had implications for how the service was configured and managed, with the creation of more partnership working and supportive roles (Jones, 2017). Recommendations arising out of the IPC (2013) investigation incorporated professionalisation of the police service, including high standards of behaviour, self-regulation and internalised norms, supported by appropriate expertise (IPC, 2013). This latter is particularly interesting in the context of talent, talent acquisition and talent development in a police workforce depicted by high levels of anxiety and de-motivation, combined with low staff morale and commitment (IPC, 2013).

Managers and HR professionals were increasingly being expected to deliver more, with fewer staff within a management culture of work intensification and extensification (Scholarios et al., 2017). This is reflected in the findings of a small-scale, cross-public sector, qualitative study by Lewis et al. (2017). Lewis et al.'s (2017) findings suggest that work life balance discourse at the time of data collection was increasingly about managing austerity, whilst framing individual well-being as a personal (rather than organisational) responsibility.

UK policing, therefore, faced continuing funding challenges at the point of data collection, combined with a need to re-evaluate the essence of the service delivered, priority areas and the most efficient and effective way of delivering a police service appropriate to the local (force-level) context, but with a potentially de-motivated workforce. Police forces were also being urged to consider further strategies for increasing diversity by both Government (Home Affairs Committee, 2016a; Home Affairs Committee, 2016b) and, for example, the British Association For Women in Policing (BAWP, 2020), with initiatives including improving access to flexible careers and targeted mentoring schemes (Home Affairs Committee, 2016b; Jones, 2017).

Whether and to what extent such challenges and planned change is effectively implemented depends crucially on the alignment of such with individual sense-making (Davies and Thomas, 2003); moreover, gendered interpretations and organisations may well be a barrier to strategies aimed at increasing diversity, particularly in an austerity context. The following sections outline moves towards a culture of 'new public management' within policing, followed by a more detailed consideration of gender in (UK) policing.

4.3 Policing and NPM (New Public Management)

Wajcman (1999) and Davies and Thomas (2002a) suggested that new forms of management in UK policing were emerging around the turn of the Century, but that these remain fundamentally based on concepts and practices that continue to disadvantage women. Resonating with the findings highlighted above (Lewis et al., 2017), it might be concluded that a strong sense of masculinity is retained within new management approaches that emphasise innovation and entrepreneurialism, whilst simultaneously promoting long working hours (Davies and Thomas, 2002a).

'NPM' (New Public Management) is a term used to describe a shift in government practice from around the 1980s - particularly, but not exclusively, in the UK and US – with greater focus on typically private sector goals around efficiency and effectiveness within a managerialist organisational context (Currie and Learmonth, 2010). NPM has been subject to considerable criticism on several fronts, notably incompatibility between private sector focus on economic ends, hierarchies, markets and managerialism contrasted with public sector concern with social ends and a typically professional orientation (Currie and Learmonth, 2010). Of particular interest here is the conflict between public sector professionals and 'new' management, with their associated efficiency-oriented practices, in addition to the move towards managerialist apparatus such as HRM and thereby talent management as part of such practice.

Several researchers have explored the relevance of NPM in a policing context within the UK. NPM might be deemed inclusive of financial accountability, efficiency measures at individual unit and organisational level, greater marketization both between and within organisations and more focus on what is re-framed as the 'customer' (Thomas and Davies, 2005). Davies and Thomas' (2000b; 2002a; 2002b) and Thomas and Davies' (2005) extensive ESRC funded research into NPM focused on a significant contextual change to the policing landscape at the time. Their differentiation between gendering and gender in NPM is pertinent here. They defined the former as gendered meanings alongside emerging managerial and professional subjectivities and the latter as the NPM impact on senior males and females within the sectors studied (including UK policing) (Davies and Thomas, 2002a). Of potential relevance to the present study was the finding that there was no single, unified, understanding of NPM; rather, there were competing discourses, with four potential 'subjectivities' (Davies and Thomas, 2002b; Thomas and Davies, 2005) in terms of gendering.

These included a managerial self/subjectivity, emphasising leadership and management, rather than solely professional and including the establishment of leadership competencies (Thomas and Davies, 2005). This was not unequivocally accepted, with some participants explicitly juxtaposing the notion of managerial imperatives with those of the profession / getting the job done.

A competitive masculine self/subjectivity focused on competition, particularly around 'presenteeism' (Davies and Thomas, 2002b, p. 7) and an identification with competitive, target oriented, behaviours. (Davies and Thomas, 2002b; 2005). Similar tensions were evidenced here as under the first subjectivity, with some respondents expressing concern over excessive hours. Indeed, Davies and Thomas' (2003) subsequent study of three UK police forces refers to a '*greedy* organization' (Davies and Thomas, 2003, p. 692) demanding long working hours which have an impact on the private sphere and which is central to being seen as committed to the job. This resonates with Turnbull and Wass' (2015) conclusions following their longitudinal study (2011-2014) of police Inspectors, whose job was flagged as meeting a minimum of 8 of the 10 accepted characteristics of 'extreme work'. Their mixed-method investigation revealed a continuing 'cult of masculinity' (Turnbull and Wass, 2015, p. 522) amongst individuals of Inspector rank, and – in line with the competitive masculine self – a felt need to 'be seen to be keen' (Turnbull and Wass, 2015, p. 523), which became normalised and essential for any further promotion. Austerity measures were deemed to have intensified an 'extreme' hours culture, which was not embraced by the police Inspectors in their study.

A 'disciplined and docile self' (Davies and Thomas, 2002b, p. 8) or 'disempowered and unquestioning subjectivity' (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p.689) played out particularly well in the police force, where requisite discipline and obedience were seen as traditionally consonant with almost militaristic undertones and unquestioning acceptance.

Finally, 'a feminised management self' / 'subjectivity' (Davies and Thomas, 2002b, p.8; Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 689), placed greater value on soft skills such as supporting others and reduced focus on command and control. This resonates with increased emphasis on what are seen as feminine leadership skills, such as coaching and supporting others (Thomas and Davies, 2005). As with previous identities, there was evidence here of frustration with a softer approach, which is clearly at odds with a managerial and competitive, masculine discourse.

In terms of policing and policing culture, the above study would suggest that the NPM project is fractured, with two polar identified positions within NPM: the

‘professional-ethical’, with its focus on community and a disjoint from the past; and the ‘competitive masculine’, arguably in line with NPM but not such a significant shift from the traditional police culture (Davies and Thomas, 2002b) and mirroring images of masculinity, rationality and competition (Davies and Thomas, 2003).

The latter resonates with talent management imagery and masculinist discourse around the time of the study, and also with continued undervaluing of feminine characteristics (Metcalfe et al., 2020). Some female participants in Davies and Thomas’ (2003) study expressed feelings of marginalisation through this orientation, but there was also evidence of deliberate rejection of this approach by some women and articulation of a deliberately different style. Nevertheless, Thomas and Davies’ (2003;2005) research points to a police identity fraught with difficulties for women under NPM, with evidence to suggest that more women than men valued the greater flexibility of NPM, but that women were less comfortable with the competitive masculine ideology (Thomas and Davies, 2003; 2005).

More women than men in Thomas and Davies’ (2003;2005) research indicated that what was perceived as work intensification (long working hours, greater accountability etc) had necessitated lifestyle changes, with questions around sustainability of lifestyle and compatibility of the job with family responsibilities. This is similar to Turnbull and Wass’ (2015) study, where part-time working, for example, was perceived as part-committed, notably to *police*women (i.e. women identifying primarily with the job role, rather than gender). They comment, therefore, that: ‘*Police*women comply, police*women* complain’ (Turnbull and Wass, 2015, p. 524) about extreme working hours, with the latter (identifying more with gender than being an officer) ultimately adapting their career aspirations in line with what seems achievable in a masculine organisational culture.

It is interesting to note Davies and Thomas’ (2002b; 2003) suggestion that women who adopt the ‘professional-ethical’ identity (seen as policing’s emotional labour, with emphasis on partnership working) may become further marginalised and disadvantaged as this distances them from the ‘competitive masculine’ identity required for short-term success and policing performance. Indeed, one female respondent in Davies and Thomas’ (2003) study specifically recounted a personal experience of having to change her own approach to fit what was perceived to be a masculinist organisation, in order to be accepted and recognised as effective in this masculine culture. This resonates with Metcalfe and Dick’s (2002) conclusion, following their multi-method investigation of police officers within a large police force in England. They suggested –

congruent with Dick and Metcalfe's (2007) quantitative study of 2 UK police forces - that police men and women have similar levels of organisational commitment, but that stereotypical beliefs and the wider organisational structure and process and practice may hinder women, despite their overall commitment to the job.

The physical notion of an effective police officer has also been deemed to be itself gendered, with clear implications for what might be seen as talent. Policing is seen to be a physical profession, with similarities in that context to firefighting. In an Australian context, Perrot (2019) identified the idealised notion of a masculine and able-bodied fire service worker. Their interviews with thirty-three male firefighters across four Australian fire service stations highlighted a focus on youth, bravery, being able and being muscular – to the point of fetishization as exemplified in male firefighter calendars. Thus, the dominant ideal is one that conforms to hegemonic masculinity, with older – and middle-class – workers deemed as 'soft' and not as highly valued. Clear analogies might be drawn here with the masculinised identity of Davies and Thomas (2002b, 2005) and Turnbull and Wass' (2015) extreme work culture within policing.

Davies and Thomas' (2003) study, with data collection conducted in 2000-2001, nonetheless represents a period of change in the police force amidst efforts to introduce NPM. Their findings refer to the power of individuals to reject, reflect and change those discourses. They also suggest that a move to community oriented policing is hindered by the two competing subject positions within NPM and a continuing subjective alignment of community policing with 'women's work' (the 'soft option', Thomas and Davies, 2003, p. 696) and not policing operations, which are generally more favourably perceived. For Davies and Thomas (2003), if the professional-ethical identity is to grow, policing must become feminised, with new ways of managing performance. As indicated above, there was also concurrent indication that some women were acutely aware of these competing discourses and were deliberately exploiting such to their own advantage: some police women were highlighting flaws with a highly masculinised approach and contrasting that with their own personal preferences and skills, more closely aligned to a professional-ethical identity within NPM.

Some 15 years later, Yates et al.'s (2018) UK-based qualitative study of 20 senior female police officers in the UK similarly highlighted an enduring masculine culture. Conducted in one large metropolitan Force in England, this study highlighted a sustained masculinised workplace. Participants identified female police officers as more likely to be located in 'fluffy' roles, more likely to be seen as better communicators and as less confrontational - i.e. as other, and non-confirming to the hegemonic ideal. This became a double-bind as female

officers were seen as less likely to be able to authentically claim workplace stress, as they were not working long hours or in what were seen to be masculine roles. Indeed, experiencing some kind of bodily felt stress was interpreted by these senior police officers as positive, an indication that they were doing the job well in this masculinised context, where the ideal body was seen as limitless. Stress and the associated physical consequences of this were self-regulated by these senior police women, who were used to self-censorship and self-regulation (denying the body as stressed and seeing physical work as an inevitable part of policing) in terms of bodily functions within this hypercompetitive and masculinised context. Yates' (2018) participants were acutely aware of organisational censure if the body were to 'dys-appear' (become seen, but perceived as dysfunctional) during times of stress, and there was an acute awareness that to be signed off on stress marked the end of a policing career. However, Yates' analysis only focused on senior, female officers.

As previously noted, part-time and flexible working is a particular challenge within UK police forces. On the basis of her extensive qualitative study of 3 metropolitan UK police forces, Dick (2009) concluded that flexible working in the police service may have 'transformational potential' (Dick, 2009, p. S191) in the wider NPM context, although the road to such is difficult terrain for managers trying to reconcile individual and organisational demands for and of flexible workers. Consequently, although Dick (2009) concludes that practice is often rooted in the micro-level resolution of a particular instance of flexible working and the integration of this with organisational objectives, there is scope for transformation of the currently accepted norm of working within the sector. Dick (2009) argued that power had shifted from the manager to the individual requesting flexible working, with managers operating within an NPM discourse being compelled to find a way of accommodating such, often resulting in what are termed 'idiosyncratic' ways around traditional ways of working. Such solutions are frequently sub-optimal, however, for the individual, for the work-group (often left to pick up the slack) and for the organisation, with participants in Yates et al.'s (2018) study noting the continued understanding of practices such as part-time or flexible working as indicative of low commitment and consequently career limiting.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence of potential to challenge the established order, with those working flexibly demonstrating alternative ways of working and highlighting possible querying of an all-hours culture (Dick and Jankowicz, 2001; Dick, 2009).

The following section considers how gender plays out in this context.

4.4 Gender and policing pre-data collection

Austerity measures and spending challenges notwithstanding, the gender composition of the police workforce was of increasing interest nationally at the time of this study due to, for example, specific reporting duties imposed by the 2007 Gender Equality Duty, the 2011 Public Sector Equality Duty and the Equality Act, 2010 (Laverick and Cain, 2014), an express objective of achieving a representative and diverse police workforce (Home Office, 2010) and *perceptions* and *claims* of 'improved' policing through greater gender diversity (Silvestri, 2015; Casey Review, 2023).

As alluded to above, three distinct categories of employee can be identified within the police workforce: police officers, police staff ('support' or administrative staff) / police support volunteers (PSVs), and special constables / police community support officers (PCSOs) with slight differences in the gender composition of each group. Certainly, the numbers of female senior police officers appeared to be increasing nationally at the point of primary data collection, with a reported 1.6% increase (on the previous year) of females at the rank of Chief Inspector and above to 19.5% in 2014, and a further increase to 23% in 2016, with a slightly slower increase in the number of females at constable level (Home Office, 2014; Allen and Dempsey, 2016). Although the total number of police officers decreased in line with the austerity agenda (from 144,274 in 2009 to 129,956 in 2013 (Home Office, 2014) and to 118,779 in 2016 (Allen and Dempsey, 2016)), the loss of female police officers was slightly slower than the trend, with the total percentage of female police officers consequently increasing from 19% in 2003 to 29% in 2016 (Allen and Dempsey, 2016).

Total police staff numbers in 2009 were 79,296, dropping to 65,573 in 2013 and 61,668 in 2016 (a drop of 13% 2005-2016), with an associated reduction of female staff employees from 68.9% in 2009 to 68.1% in 2013 (Laverick and Cain, 2014; Allen and Dempsey, 2016). The number of PCSOs also dropped from a peak in 2010, though the numbers of special constables (volunteers) has been more variable, decreasing 1997-2004, growing at an average rate of 9.4% 2004-2012, with annual declines thereafter until 2015-16 marked a return to growth in numbers. Thus, at the point of data collection, police staff numbers (as with police officer numbers) had been falling 2010-2017, though women continued to account for the majority of police staff (Home Office, 2025b).

Progress in women's representation at more senior ranks of police officers notwithstanding, a Home Office (2010) investigation prior to data collection confirmed persistent barriers for women seeking promotion to sergeant, in

addition to continued horizontal segregation, with areas such as traffic, Special Branch and firearms remaining male-dominated (with, in turn, implications for both horizontal and vertical career progression). Female officers were found to still dominate in 'child/sex/domestic' (Home Office, 2010. P. 12) specialisms, congruent with traditional gender stereotypes. Home Office (2010) priority areas identified for action if greater gender equality were to be achieved included: monitoring of women's recruitment, retention and progression and local equality and diversity targets; further research into barriers to both vertical progression and entry into specialist roles; procurement of a police officer uniform suitable for both men and women; and the development of a national pay structure integrating police staff. There was also a recommendation for 'broad cultural change to create a working environment in which flexible working is regarded as corporately acceptable' (Home Office, 2010, p. 18), particularly given exit interview evidence that female police officers were much more likely to leave the service for 'domestic reasons'.

The British Association for Women in Policing (BAWP) has been particularly active in seeking to correct gender imbalance within the police service, with a series of agenda-setting reports (BAWP et al., 2001; BAWP, 2006; BAWP, 2014). Gender Agenda 1 (BAWP et al., 2001) established five long-term aims for UK policing: to consistently demonstrate valuing women officers; to achieve balance across police ranks in terms of gender and other characteristics; to have a 'woman's voice in influential policy fora'; to understand the conflict between achieving work-life balance and a successful police career; and to have a working environment and equipment that enable female officers to work professionally. Actions to facilitate the achievement of such aims included (internal and external) mentoring and steps to address what is described as a 'macho culture' (BAWP et al., 2001, p. 11), with extremely long, inflexible and typically full-time working hours.

The 2006 BAWP review subsequently concluded that some progress had been made but noted specific and enduring barriers in the representation of female officers in the media, gendered language use by 'senior and influential' (BAWP, 2006, p. 6) individuals outside the police service, and the persistent undervaluing of female police staff (who are in support functions and have different terms and conditions to police officers). Continuing inflexibility of working patterns and hours was found to be reinforced through a' full-time means fully committed' culture, combined with limited support networks for women.

In terms of flexibility, the IPC (2013) concluded, on the basis of their primary survey data, that 20% of female police officers are primary carers, with over half

of respondents indicating that shift patterns created difficulties, 18% of respondents reporting that flexible working was discouraged and 50% indicating that it was merely ‘tolerated’. Dick and Hyde’s (2006) qualitative study of police managers and their officers who were working flexibly (in this case, reduced working hours) similarly identified barriers to the advancement and development of such officers. However, limitations to officer progression were seen to lie within the individual officers themselves, given the context of a prevailing masculinised policing culture. Constraints imposed by organisational policies and procedures were not questioned by line managers in Dick and Hyde’s (2006) study; rather, attitudes and predispositions of individuals working flexibly (e.g. commitment) were blamed for lack of ‘career development’ (p. 353). Moreover, such attribution was evident in police women themselves; female participants in Dick and Hyde’s (2006) research cast the blame for limited career development as their own personal decision to work flexibly or limited ambition, never challenging organisational practices such as the timing of training.

The last BAWP report (2014) prior to primary data collection for this thesis reinforced the central role of work-life balance considerations for gender equality, in addition to advocating actions to develop female police employee confidence and personal development in their chose career path, thus resonating with a potential gap in the area of talent development. The elite talent scheme within the police service at the time of data collection was the ‘High Potential Development Scheme’ (HPDS) of which women comprised 57% (28 of a total of 55 officers) in 2013, marking a significant increase on 19 women in 2010 (N.B. no total 2010 HPDS figure given) (BAWP, 2014). Moreover, BAWP (2014) reported that all 43 police forces had increased the percentage of female police officers and that there were more women within specialist areas (such as firearms and surveillance). The BAWP (2014) report notwithstanding, women police officers continued to suffer from a gender pay gap of 8-15% (contingent on area) at the point of data collection (BAWP, 2020) and, as noted above, there are still fewer women than men in senior policing roles with women comprising just 29.3% of Chief Inspectors in March 2024 (Home Office, 2025b).

This latter BAWP (2014) report was informed by Laverick and Cain’s (2014) empirical investigation of the possible gender implications of the reduction in UK public expenditure and consequential policing reforms in the aftermath of the global recession. Laverick and Cain (2014) adopted a mixed-methods approach – focus groups and semi-structured questionnaires – to develop an understanding of the challenges facing female police employees and to

highlight potential barriers to the achievement of Gender Agenda 2 aims in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Findings from Laverick and Cain's (2014) study suggest that the 'discourse of austerity' (Laverick and Cain, 2014, p. 39) heralded a retrograde step in terms of gender equality and the experience of women within UK policing (although they also take great care to note the significant numbers of male police staff and officers affected by challenges arising out of, for example, childcare responsibilities). Durbin et al. (2017) similarly posit that austerity measures have a disproportionately negative effect on women who are more likely to bear the brunt of cuts outside of employment (e.g. welfare benefits cuts) but also within austere organisations where equality measure are a contested terrain.

Laverick and Cain's (2014) research indicated a shift from organisational to individual responsibility for learning and development, with an associated reduction of financial support. Whilst the former was celebrated by some participants in their study as resonating with the professionalisation / NPM agenda, unpredictable working hours had a negative impact on an individual's ability to pursue a personal learning and development agenda. Inflexibility, combined with the full-time and often residential nature of training and development provision (BAWP, 2014), heightened this obstacle, particularly for those with caring responsibilities and acutely for 'dual police families' (Laverick and Cain, 2014, p. 68). Caring responsibilities and family circumstances, along with restricted access to flexible working, are thus barriers to promotion and personal development (BAWP, 2014; Laverick and Cain, 2014).

The attainment of a healthy work-life balance was identified by respondents in Laverick and Cain's (2014) study as elusive for police officers (particularly dual police families). Where working shifts created untenable difficulties, respondents reported that it was typically women who changed role, or changed shift, or who did not try for promotion. Caring is seen as a double-bind for women: if they adopt a pattern of part-time or flexible working, this poses difficulties with promotion, negative stereotypes and not being seen as committed to the job; if they attempt to continue with unpredictable shifts, this often becomes unsustainable or, where full-time and shift patterns are maintained, leaves little or no room to pursue further opportunities or training or, indeed, to maintain personal fitness.

An enduring police culture of long working hours thus characterises policing and other extreme and gendered work (Gascoigne et al., 2015; Turnbull and Wass, 2015), resonating with Yates et al.'s (2018) findings. Yates et al (2018), in their UK based qualitative study of senior female police officers in one large metropolitan Force in England, concluded that UK policing remained

characterised by ‘a heavily masculinised workplace’ (p. 94). Aspects such as part-time or flexible working continued to be seen as career limiting and equated with low commitment.

The impact of unpredictable working on work-life balance was also noted in Scholarios et al.’s (2017) online survey of four UK police forces, with a final sample of 1207 responses from officers who were working full-time and under variable shift arrangements (VSAs). Unpredictable working was understood to mean short-notice changes to the pattern or duration of work, with a variable shift arrangement denoting employer-led matching of police officer demand and supply on a three-month rota basis and with extended shifts (of longer than eight hours). Flexible working arrangements were in place and were typically negotiated on an individual basis. These included reasonable adjustments to hours, such as time off in lieu, or specific shift scheduling to accommodate illness or caring responsibilities. 77% of respondents were working under a VSA without flexible working arrangements, and 23% were working within a VSA context but with a flexible working arrangement in place. Unpredictable working was negatively correlated with health and wellbeing, the impact of which was felt despite flexible working arrangements.

Resonating with Laverick and Cain’s (2014) research, Scholarios et al. (2017) noted the link between work-life conflict and unpredictability, and suggested that this may persist in the face of a degree of worker control afforded through flexible working for reasons such as employee resistance to leaving work early. Though based on a cross-sectional survey and self-reported data only, there was some suggestion that officers themselves may not have exercised the potential control provided under flexible working arrangements, possibly due to perceived pressures to deliver service under resource constraints. Scholarios et al.’s (2017) findings reinforce prior research identifying potential intensification of a masculinised policing culture (Brown and Wolfenden, 2011) and oppositional forces from line managers who may view flexible working as a burden and associated with an equal opportunities agenda, rather than being used as a strategic tool to facilitate retention, greater efficiency and effectiveness.

In addition to barriers to the promotion of those working flexibly, the promotion of women police *staff* may be particularly challenging, given what BAWP (2014) identify as absent police staff career structures and routes. Combined with police staff redundancies and uncertainty in a climate of funding cuts, police staff may feel particularly undervalued, prompting a recommended development of national police staff career pathways (BAWP, 2014). It is further suggested that greater pressure on the service has potentially profound implications for the

psychological contract, likely to become more transactional under conditions of stress rather than relational, the latter arguably being more appropriate for organisations facing cuts in funding on a large scale (Brown and Wolfenden, 2009; 2011). Austerity measures are thus likely to create further challenges for police forces in terms of effective engagement, retention, promotion and development of the workforce, as evidenced by IPC (2013) data.

The conclusions of BAWP Gender Agenda 3 generated recommendations for the police service nationally, for all police forces and for individuals. The significance of flexible and accessible training, enabling particularly those working part-time to develop, was emphasised, as was a need to 'challenge(s) cultural expectations which require individuals to return to full time hours' (BAWP, 2014, p. 14). Networks, secondments, buddying, mentoring and coaching were flagged as flexible, efficient and effective approaches to development of the female policing workforce as a whole, reinforced by Laverick and Cain's (2014) recommendation for buddying and coaching opportunities, specifically for women at the rank of Inspector and above.

The role of mentoring has been further highlighted in subsequent research on policing. On the basis of her life-history interviews of 35 senior police women, Astley (2015) concluded that a lack of effective mentors was a significant contributor to the absence of women at senior levels within the police service. Male mentors were perceived as more effective and conducive to a woman's career progression than female mentors, being deemed a symbol of a female officer's acceptance in a male-dominated institution. Indeed, a male-dominated environment (such as policing) may offer females more opportunities to access powerful (male) networks and mentors (Kankkunen, 2014), although this might be contrasted with Ibarra's (1993) and Ibarra et al.'s (2010) notion of (lack of) homophily between mentor and mentee affecting the depth of relationship and access to more strategic (social) resource. Jones' (2017) study of female police officer mentors and mentees provides further support for the positive impact of mentoring in this context. Her study across 45 mentor/mentee dyads indicated self-reported benefits across four dimensions: cognitive, skill-based, social networks and, in particular, affective. In contrast to mentoring, networks were deemed to be relatively ineffective per se, largely because the accompanying social activity was seen by women to undermine their job-role credibility. Moreover, workload and work life balance considerations make networking more difficult, as women progress through the ranks (Astley, 2015).

Notions of female identity were also relevant to gender equality discourse at the point of data collection. Silvestri's (2015) review paper has an underpinning notion of female officers as 'different', citing evidence to suggest that women

police officers have greater empathy with victims, are better at ‘de-escalating conflict situations’ (Silvestri, 2015, p. 61), are more likely to be transformative (as opposed to transactional) leaders (see also Silvestri, 2007) and are unlikely to abuse their own position of power, and are better suited to developing and delivering an ‘ethical’ police service. This resonates with Rabe-Hemp’s (2009) qualitative exploration of female police officer identity. The 38 female police officers in her study seemed to simultaneously see themselves as both female and police officer (thus, police *women* and *polic*e women), but tended to reinforce traditional stereotypes through, for example, ‘othering’ (seeing themselves as different to ‘other’ police women) and stereotyping of (other) female officers in line with dominant police force norms. There was a tendency to revert to notions of female officers naturally having different skills, traits and behaviours to male officers. This included being more empathetic and caring, for example, reverting to social constructions of female and being police *women*. However, a female identity was juxtaposed with individual identities as *police* women, with references to physical aspects of policing and the need for physical strength when dealing with the public. The police women in Rabe-Hemp’s (2009) study did not identify with other policewomen, indicating that they were different to the larger group and did not display the stereotypical characteristics associated with their gender such as being ‘soft’ police officers. Such tensions were navigated through integration of being female and the feminine with the work role, enacted in daily interactions on the job. The inherent danger in stereotypical and gendered assumptions, of course, is that this over-simplifies (Rabe-Hemp, 2008) and ignores similarities between men and women, in addition to placing an immediate burden on women in the police service who are assumed to be ‘transformational’, analogous to the ‘think manager, think male’ and ‘think transformational leader, think female’ dichotomy outlined in Chapter 3.

At a national level, there was emergent suggestion that commitment to equality and diversity may have waned within a broad narrative of success (Silvestri, 2018), with a call to reinvigorate Government and senior police leader commitment to equality. This resonates with what Silvestri (2015) suggests is a tendency to assume that ‘all the major battles encountered by women have been fought and won’ (Silvestri, 2015, p. 58) as gender became mainstreamed (BAWP, 2014; Silvestri, 2015) and subsumed into one broad category of ‘equality’, alongside race and disability.

The following section considers statistical, structural, wellbeing-focused and gender equality changes to the policing and workforce landscape post-data collection.

4.5 Policing 2016-2025

4.5.1 Police funding, numbers and crime

As depicted in Section 4.4, police numbers and recruitment were in decline at the time of primary research. In contrast, funding for policing increased in both nominal and real terms post-data collection, with an inflation adjusted funding increase of 19.2% between March 2016 and March 2025 but with a higher Council Tax precept (increasing from 28% to 34%) (Home Office, 2025a).

In 2020, the UK government announced additional funding for policing and a commitment to recruit 20,000 additional police officers by 2023 (the Uplift Programme). Total workforce and total police officer numbers increased consistently 2019-2024 (Home Office, 2025b). Police officer numbers in March 2024 stood at 147,746, which is the highest since records began in 2003 (Home Office, 2025b), although there has also been a drop in officers in frontline roles alongside a drop in PCSOs and other volunteers, possibly due to the latter comprising part of the growth in recruitment (Home Office, 2025b). Moreover, total workforce numbers (officers and staff) is still not as high as in 2010, despite increases each year 2019-2024 following a drop during 2011-2018 (Home Office, 2025b).

There is evidence of increased gender diversity of new recruits and at all officer ranks (Laverick, 2023; Home Office, 2025b). The proportion of women among police officer numbers increased to 35.4% of all officers in England and Wales by March 2024, with FTE numbers of 52,331 being the highest number of female officers since the start of comparable data collection (Home Office, 2025b). The proportion of women police officers has continued to increase at all ranks, to stand at 37.5% of all police constables and 29.3% of Chief Inspectors in March 2024 (Home Office, 2025b).

Numbers of police staff dropped during 2010-2017, rising thereafter to 81,303 FTE staff in 2024, which is still 2,133 below the 2010 peak (Home Office, 2025b). Women continued to account for the majority (62.7%) of police staff in March 2024 (Home Office, 2025b).

Police officer age profile has become more skewed post-data collection, with 44% of officers being aged over 40 in March 2020 (Laverick, 2023). This has implications for staffing and management within policing, with increasing numbers of voluntary police officer leavers. Voluntary resignations were at the highest rate since records began in 2024 (Home Office, 2025b) and 72% of all voluntary leavers had under 5 years' service, suggesting potential future talent shortages within the police force and growing significance of talent

management. 32% of all officer leavers in 2024 were female, the majority of whom (66.1%) left due to voluntary resignation, compared to just over half (50.8%) of male leavers (Home Office, 2025b). Of note, female officer leavers reported the significance of job-personal life conflict as a major factor influencing decision to leave, particularly the incompatibility of caring responsibilities with shift patterns (Home Office, 2025b).

Crime levels remain below their 2002/3 level, but have been increasing since 2014. Such increase is facilitated partly by technological developments, with notable increases in crimes such as fraud and other cyber-enabled crime (Home Office, 2024b). There are higher recorded levels of sexual offences, linked in part to cultural shifts recognising victim vulnerability and wider movements such as the global Me Too movement. Non-crime activity now accounts for a significant amount of police time, notably mental health, safeguarding and missing persons - also linked to mental health (Hoddinott et al., 2023). The police workforce faces particular challenges with mental ill health call-outs, being the place of last resort and stepping in where other – possibly more appropriate – professionals are absent; it is estimated that mental health-related activity, including safeguarding individuals and care-taking whilst awaiting a mental health bed, accounts for 9% of all police incidents (Home Office, 2024b).

Shifts in the nature of reported crime have created a requirement for additional skills from the police workforce, notably skills to work within multi-agency and community-based teams. The Home Office Independent Review in 2024 called for greater focus on anticipating skills gaps in view of such shifts, in addition to provision of continuous training once in post. Steps to develop a workforce suited to the shifting landscape have included the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) (providing routes to graduate police education), policing apprenticeship degrees introduced in 2019, and moves towards evidence based policing (EBP). Some forces are also aiming to improve productivity through re-allocation of work from officers to staff, particularly where specialist skills are required, for example digital forensics and data analysis (Home Office, 2024b). The Home office (2024b) recommends that forces consider utilising new technology to enhance policing productivity, including online victim appointments, rapid video response and desktop investigations, all of which facilitate flexible working. Such developments and shifts in requisite skills sets render talent management particularly crucial to UK policing.

The above notwithstanding, policing culture remains described as resistant to change and overtly masculinised (Brown et al., 2021; Casey Review, 2023).

Brown et al.'s (2021) research with senior policewomen in England and Wales provides evidence of continuing high value attributed to aggressive policing and masculinisation. However, there is also evidence of acknowledgement of the need for change and incorporation of more feminine leadership approaches, required by the changed policing and crime landscape. More significantly, in what was termed the post-liminal group in their study, Brown et al. (2021) found some support for evidence based practice, which was in turn linked to greater possibility for disruption of the all-hours policing culture, though they conclude that cultural barriers resisting change continue to pose a significant obstacle to widespread shifts.

4.5.2 Wellbeing, stress and flexibility

Policing is physically and emotionally demanding, for both police officers and police staff, with very high and high levels respectively of reported job demands and responsibility (Graham et al., 2023). Officer and staff emotional wellbeing is consistently lower than the population average, with enduring evidence of mental health consequences (Houdmont et al., 2021) and psychological sickness absence (Phythian et al., 2023). Reported levels of anxiety, depression and mental ill health vary by rank, being higher for lower levels of police officer but consistent across all grades of police staff. Indeed, a third of officers took leave due to mental illness specifically in 2024 and 44% reported finding work stressful or very stressful (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025).

Given persistent evidence regarding low police workforce morale, the post-data collection period has been marked by greater emphasis on police officer wellbeing, with an annual Police Federation of England and Wales pay and morale survey incepted in 2014. The 2025 survey of over 35,000 officers (24% of total officer headcount) identified low levels of self-reported morale, with 57% of respondents indicating low or very low morale and 23% indicating intention to leave within 2 years or less (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2024; 2025). Heavy workloads and unpredictable working patterns continue to be a source of dissatisfaction, with 32% of participants reporting being pressurised to work long hours in the last year and 66% and 61% indicating negative or very negative ratings for workload /responsibilities and work-life balance respectively (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025). Shift working is particularly associated with lower wellbeing for police officers and staff (Graham et al., 2023).

Just over a third of Police Federation of England and Wales (2025) survey respondents reported being unable to take their annual leave and 66% stated

that they had suffered cancelled rest days during the last twelve months (termed leavism, using leave instead of sickness absence). There is also a perceived lack of resource for double crewing (where more than one officer attends), with only 27% of participants reporting having access to double crewing at all times. General life-satisfaction ratings for police officers are significantly lower than the population average, with 81% of officers indicating an impact on mental health and wellbeing, notably attributing this to high workload and poor work-life balance in 60% and 51% of cases respectively (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025). Just under 40% of officers were also dissatisfied with opportunities for development and training, and promotion prospects.

Porter and Gavin's (2025) online survey of 54 police officers identified three key areas influencing police officer mental health: organisational stressors, (including lack of support and mental health stigmatisation, and also bullying and harassment); operational stressors (exposure to trauma, for example); and occupational impacts of the job on home and mental health. These areas were reported as affecting both new and more experienced officers, despite increased numbers of police on the job.

In this national context, mental health has become a focus for police force leadership teams, with proactive and reactive actions from forces nationwide. These include, for example, wellbeing champions (reported by 65% of Porter and Gavin's (2025) survey participants), access to a gym (60%) and access to quiet spaces (56%), a wellbeing app (48%) and regular wellbeing or resilience classes (29%). However, although 80% of officers report being aware of proactive and reactive mental health provision at work, 18% of respondents to the Police Federation of England and Wales survey stated a belief that reporting personal mental illness or stress would have a negative impact on their promotion or specialisation prospects (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025) and 32% of police officers in Graham et al.'s (2023) study report a belief that disclosing mental illness would lead to more negative treatment from others.

Phythian et al.'s (2023) secondary analysis of Blue Light Wellbeing Framework[8] (BLWF) and HR Policy Review data highlights the significance of flexible

[8] Blue Light Wellbeing Frameworks were launched in 2017 alongside Oscar Kilo (see below). BLWFs are Force records under 6 headings (absence management, risk assessment, leadership, protecting the workforce (specifically an ageing

working from a police employee wellbeing perspective, amid a perception of unfairness and lack of transparency of promotion processes. This raises questions about the impact of perceived HR practice (and thereby talent management practice) on the police workforce psychological contract.

Police employees have the right to request flexible working, although they do not have the right to have this request approved. Moreover, certain policing roles are deemed inappropriate for flexible working due to 'objective justification' of unsuitability for such (College of Policing, 2025a). Flexible working within policing in England and Wales is most likely to be in the form of reduced working hours; yet only 19.96% of female police officers and 1.1% of male officers work part-time (Charman and Tyson, 2024).

As depicted in Section 3.5.2, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns created particular impetus for agile working, including for UK police forces. There was an increase in non-workplace working for both men and women, officers and staff, during that period (Fleming and Brown, 2021; 2022). Policewomen who worked partly or wholly from home during this period were more likely to have caring responsibilities, with policing role affecting the probability of agile working: those in a support role were more likely to work from home during this period and response officers least likely. Police staff and police women who adopted flexible working encountered similar stressors in terms of responsibility for non-paid work, with greater responsibility for domestic tasks and caring when working partially or wholly from home (Fleming and Brown, 2021; 2022). That notwithstanding, there was evidence of flexible working for both police officers and police staff being associated with lower felt organisational stress, and higher levels of satisfaction with police force communications and support, compared to those continuing to be based in the workplace (Fleming and Brown, 2021; 2022), suggesting potential organisational benefit. There was also evidence of employee demand for continued partial or complete working from home post-lockdown (Fleming and Brown, 2021; 2022).

National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) family support guidance policy (2024) highlights the range of flexible working options available to police forces, including phased returns, career breaks and agile working (working from a different location to the workplace). This policy document emphasises the

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workforce), mental health, and personal resilience (including sleep)) of steps taken and Force development to support the national wellbeing agenda.

strategic relevance of flexibility and work-life balance and notably advocate line manager training to support greater use of flexible working policies. However, and in the context of record levels of voluntary police officer resignations (Home Office, 2025b), Charman and Tyson's (2024) qualitative data from interviews with 62 police leavers highlights workforce dissatisfaction at perceived organisational inflexibility, a factor noted in Fleming and Brown's (2021) study. Leavers in Charman and Tyson's (2024) research reported ongoing conflict between non-paid work commitments and paid work, amid enduring cultural norms of working long hours. This conflict was particularly marked for female participants, with part-time continuing to be associated with part-committed. Those with promotion aspirations were forced to adopt a work-first attitude, given the career and work-perception penalty associated with flexible working patterns. Despite flexible working policy and rhetoric, therefore, the evidence would suggest that a masculinised, all-hours culture prevails (Charman and Tyson, 2024), creating particular stressors and non-paid work tensions for carers (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025; Porter and Gavin, 2025).

In addition to working hours tensions, age discrimination is also indicated within the police service, with older workers being more likely to flag age discrimination than younger workers: 2% of 28-24 year olds reported discrimination had affected their mental health, compared to 6% of the over-50s (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025).

4.5.3 Policing and gender

The Casey Review (2023) has resurfaced concerns over what was deemed to be widespread misogynistic practice within policing. Although the Casey Review focused specifically on the London Metropolitan Police Force - subsequently re-emerging in a BBC undercover documentary (BBC, 2025) - this report nevertheless raises questions about UK policing generally, suggesting that little has changed since the time period during which primary data collection was undertaken for this thesis and Laverick and Cain's (2015) suggestion that austerity was a threat to equality.

BAWP reports into gender equality and associated recommendations have now been mainstreamed into the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Committee of the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC), with a dedicated Gender Lead and Gender Board incepted to initiate actions to address barriers to the progression of women in policing (Laverick, 2023). In 2017, UK police forces committed to HeForShe, a global UN initiative established in 2015 to promote equality for women and girls. This requires annual reporting from every force, focusing

explicitly on solutions to gender inequality and the dissemination of best practice initiatives. These initiatives have included action on uniforms, menopause guidelines and innovative attempts to address caring-work conflicts, including buddying, coaching and mentoring schemes alongside interview and assessment reforms (Laverick, 2023; HeForShe, 2024).

As highlighted in Section 4.5.1, there is some evidence of success in improving gender equality metrics in the post-study period, with increased numbers of women police officers and greater representation of women among middle and senior police leadership roles compared to the period of data collection. The percentage of women in senior police leadership roles increased from 24% in 2017 to 30% in 2024 (HeForShe, 2024) and female officers accounted for 35.4% of the total in 2024 (Home Office, 20252b). However, despite growth in numbers and inroads into leadership and police numbers, it is noticeable that the pace of change slowed in 2023-2024 (HeForShe, 2024). Of course, 35.4% police officer representation also means that women still remain in the minority as police officers and the majority (62.7%) of police staff (Home Office, 2025b), though with considerable variation by force, level and area of specialisation. Cumbria, for example, has 41% female officers which is considerably higher than British Transport Police at 21%. Women continue to be underrepresented in senior roles, with the highest female representation in senior roles being North Yorkshire at 44% but with 36 forces reporting female representation in senior positions at under 30% (HeforShe, 2024). Female police officers also continue to predominate in areas such as domestic and sexual violence, are much less likely to have roles within operational support or national policing (Laverick, 2023), and accounted for only 32.9% of all officer promotions in 2023-2024 (Home Office, 2025b).

Female police officers are more likely to report discrimination as harmful to their mental health, and more likely to agree that their mental illness has been caused or worsened by work - 77% of women in the Police Federation of England and Wales Pay and Morale 2024 survey (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025) reported this, compared to 74% of men. Significantly, those police officers with caring responsibilities were also far more likely to report stressful lives outside of work – 51% of carers compared to 32% of non-carers. This, in turn, manifested in mental illness, with 87% of carers (80% non-carers) reporting mental health problems during the previous year and 58% (compared to 45% non-carers) seeking professional help for this. Carers are also less likely to feel that they have been well supported at work with their mental health issues (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025). This report reinforces Graham et al.’s (2023) summary of policing research for the National Police

Wellbeing Service, Oscar Kilo[9]. Graham et al. (2023) highlight continuing sexism and reported sexual harassment within policing in England and Wales, with 34.5% of female police officers and 21.2% of police staff (compared to 17.9% and 17.6% for male officers and staff respectively) reporting being subject to sexist comments.

Despite improvements in resourcing and recruitment of officers and staff in recent years, an all-hours, masculinised and change-resistant culture prevails (Brown et al., 2021; Casey review, 2023; Charman and Tyson, 2024) and there is continued job segregation and masculinisation of functional specialisms such as firearms, alongside feminisation of domestic abuse and family support (Casey Review, 2023). An association of long working hours with commitment to the job is itself gendered, since fewer women than men can typically demonstrate this in UK policing (Jones, 2017; Scholarios et al., 2017).

Policing remains a hierarchical and masculinised organisational context, as depicted by Davies and Thomas (2000b; 2002a; 2002b), Dick and Metcalf (2007), Thomas and Davies (2005) and Yates et al. (2018) around the period of data collection. This creates enduring problems with efforts to improve police wellbeing, since policing culture is still one of hegemonic masculinity, where mental ill-health is stigmatised and being tough is celebrated (Phythian et al., 2022). Moreover, Phythian et al.'s (2022) secondary data review of 34 Blue Light Wellbeing Frameworks (BLWFs) highlights the limited support for psychological wellbeing and inconsistency between forces in terms of application. Phythian et al. (2022) also draw attention to the growing importance of sleep for police workforce wellbeing, particularly given an ageing workforce, with calls for greater attention to individual (rather than primarily organisational) wellbeing.

4.6 Policing context: some conclusions

Given statistically significant shifts in the representation of women in policing, the current policing landscape is potentially not quite as bleak in terms of overt discriminatory practice as at the point of data collection, but it is arguably more subtly gendered and, hence, more difficult to identify and address. As concluded in the Casey Review (2023), policing remains sexist, misogynistic and plagued by discriminatory practice, with institutional and culturally

[9] Oscar Kilo (OK) is an online wellbeing resource, launched in 2017 and developed in partnership by Public Health England and the College of Policing, with support and guidance for individual officers and staff, in addition to support and guidelines for police forces.

embedded gendering. Although focusing specifically on the Met, that Review has implications for UK policing more widely and certainly for the continued relevance of this thesis.

Austerity and professionalisation of police discourses may, in fact, heighten the difficulties faced by women as they struggle with a new ‘professional’ identity in the context of enduring horizontal barriers and a masculinised culture (Brown and Silvestri, 2020; Laverick, 2023; Scholarios, 2023; Charman and Tyson, 2024).

The following section will outline key aspects of the case study organisation during the data collection period.

4.7 Shire Police

Although several UK Governments have expressly committed to a more representative police service, wide inter-force variations in terms of female recruitment and deployment to specialist areas remained at the point of primary data collection (Home Office, 2010). This section of Chapter 4 considers the local Force context for this study, Shire Police, at that time.

This study was conducted in the middle of the austerity agenda (National Audit Office, 2015; Shaw, 2015b), associated with declining morale and commitment to the job, with increased dissatisfaction (IPC, 2013) and work intensification through New Public Management (NPM) cultures (Scholarios et al., 2017). As highlighted in Sections 4.4 and 4.5.3, UK policing is gendered nationally, with an ideal police worker who conforms to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity (Dick and Metcalfe, 2007; Yates et al., 2018) and glass walls for women police officers (Home Office, 2014; Casey Review, 2023). For police staff, where women are in the majority, career structures and routes are said to be absent (BAWP, 2014).

Shire Police was the fourth largest Force in the country at the point of data collection (Shire Police, 2015), with around 8,600 combined police staff (45% of the total) and police officers (55% of the total). Females comprised just over 31% of police officers in 2014 (a 3% increase since 2010 and higher than the national figure for England and Wales of 27.9% (Home Office, 2014)), and 32.3% of officers in 2015 (Shire Police, 2014; 2015), depicting an upwards trajectory. Women accounted for over 57% of police staff in 2014 and 58.8% in 2015 (Shire Police, 2014; 2015), comprising just over a quarter (26.4% - an 8% reduction since 2010) of special constables at Shire in 2014 (Shire Police, 2014; 2015). Hence police officers and special constables were typically male-dominated, whilst police staff were female-dominated. Women remained in this

position in 2024, accounting for just 33.7% of police officers and 56.9% of police staff, in a Force region where women comprise 50.8% of the total population (Police.UK, no date given (accessed 23.07.25) – based on 2021 census data). Women comprised 32.59% of Shire middle management and 34.67% of senior leadership teams in 2024, which was a decrease of 7% and 5% of middle and senior management roles respectively from the previous year (HeForShe, 2024), suggesting that moves to improve women's representation in senior officer ranks may be slowing.

3.34% of all employees in the Force were working under a flexible working arrangement in 2014 (interpreted as those with formalised arrangements in place for flexible working, including working at home), with women accounting for 68% of flexibly working police staff (Shire Police, 2014). 41/79 police officers working on a 'Flexible Working Scheme' were male at the point of this research, although the proportion of the total number of female officers working under the arrangement was clearly higher than for men (Shire Police, 2014). Part-time working, categorised separately to flexible working, reveals clear gender demarcation: 82.4% of police staff working part-time and 90.6% of police officers working part-time were female (Shire Police, 2015).

Post-data collection, the mean gender pay gap has decreased annually within Shire since 2021 (data for 2014-2019 not available) – falling from 12.40% in 2019 to 10.35% in 2024 (Shire Police, 2025). However, the reduction in pay differential was considerably lower in 2023-2024 at 0.06% (Shire Police, 2025). Gendered horizontal segregation remains evident within Shire, with just 4.6% of firearms officers being female in 2022, for example (Shire Police, 2022).[10]

Shire Police's Equality Objective 6 included several actions to address some of the gender imbalance indicated by the above data in 2014. Notably, the first action under this objective was to 'formalise' talent management within the Force (Shire Police, 2014, p.36), establishing an intention that the Force's talent management scheme would serve to increase (gender) equality, amid a national and regional backdrop of declining numbers (Home Office, 2014). It is in this context that this thesis sought to achieve the aims outlined below.

4.8 Research Aim: Shire Police and Conclusion

In a context of unprecedented financial cuts to the police service in the UK, combined with challenges of reform, greater accountability in line with NPM and

[10] Note: Directly comparable data was not publicly available on all metrics in 2025, hence illustrative data is included in this chapter.

a ‘professionalisation of policing’ agenda, this thesis critically explores the potential gendering of talent management practice within one large police force in the North of England.

An in-depth, qualitative, investigation forms the basis for understanding talent management at work within a large police force: its forms, constitution and maintenance and its contribution to organisational practices. Through this knowledge it seeks to develop an understanding of how workplace practices are circulated and experienced, the implications of this for the (re)production of gender and what this means for organisational and HRM strategy.

The specific research aims of this thesis are:

1. To examine how talent and talent management are understood and translated into practice within the context of a large UK police force.
2. Through a feminist lens, to understand how, and to what extent, talent management practice is gendered, politicised and performed.
3. To inform critical debate and theorization of talent management, specifically the dark side of talent management.
4. To consider the implications of talent management practice for organisational and HRM strategy.

Chapter 5 details the methodological approach to this study, the findings of which are considered in chapters 6, 7 and 8. Final discussion and conclusions are detailed in chapters 9 and 10.

Chapter 5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction

As explored in preceding chapters, talent management is typically represented as a gender-neutral toolbox, with much early research being within a managerialist tradition (Collings et al., 2022). More recently, however, a more critical nuance has developed in talent management research, including:

- the potential for the masculinisation of talent management, with calls for talent management research adopting a gender-aware lens, with further exploration of talent management masculinisation processes (Festing et al., 2014; 2015; Dundon and Rafferty, 2018; Makarem et al., 2019).
- constraints on equity, transparency and rationality (Daubner-Siva, 2017; Tyskbo, 2019; Keddie, 2023) when translating talent management into practice.
- the significance of context to talent management practice (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Vardi and Collings, 2023; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024) and the need for context-rich research.
- the research gap with respect to those not included in the talent pool and a need for research focusing on the employee experience, rather than an HRM or managerialist perspective (De Boeck et al., 2018; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022).

Within the parameters of this recently nuanced understanding, my research aims to understand how talent management is gendered, politicised and performed and to inform critical debate and theorization of talent management, specifically the dark side of talent management. My research also addresses Collings et al.'s (2011; cited in Thunissen et al., 2013) critique of the predominance of quantitative research in the field of talent management, with a call for alternative approaches.

This chapter focuses on the methodological approach adopted for this study of talent management though a gender lens. I begin by considering my underpinning beliefs and assumptions and how this locates my research within a subjectivist, interpretivist, framework. I then outline the specific research strategy adopted – a rich case study context and socio-biographic narrative, loosely structured interviews. I move on to explain how research participants were recruited to this study, prior to consideration of my underpinning rationale for the chosen approach to data analysis. Finally, I consider ethical dimensions to my research.

5.2 Positioning the study: philosophical framework

I position my research as subjectivist, interpretivist and inductive. This section explores what I understand by these terms and how and why my study is influenced by this framework.

When positioning the philosophical underpinning to any research project, the researcher must first decide which typology to adopt from the plethora of available classifications and varied interpretations of terms. I have chosen to use primarily Burrell and Morgan's (1979) original paradigmatic model, Morgan and Smircich's (1980) revision and Cunliffe's (2011) update to explain my approach and use of the above terms. I also refer to Saunders et al. (2019) in support of the way in which I have described my methodology.

Arguably one of the most influential paradigmatic typologies within organisational research is Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four-fold classification. Burrell and Morgan use two dimensions to classify all organisation and management research: subjective-objective and regulation-radical change. The subjective-objective dimension is concerned with beliefs about the nature of the social world, the extent to which the world objectively exists, as opposed to being something much more subjective and open to individual experience and interpretation. Regulation-radical change focuses on the distinction between broadly functionalist versus disruptive beliefs and explanations about the nature of the social world. Albeit an oversimplification (Deetz, 1996), this enables Burrell and Morgan to map four broad approaches to social science research, which they term paradigms: radial humanist, radical structuralist, interpretive and functionalist. They present a case for this grid effectively mapping social science research traditions, which is seen to fall into one of the four quadrants, each of which has associated underpinning assumptions and preferred research approaches.

Morgan and Smircich's (1980) revision of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) original work outlined six distinct locations of social science research along a continuum ranging from subjectivist at one extreme to objectivist at the other. As with Burrell and Morgan (1979), each of the six continuum categories was seen to be associated with a cluster of associated assumptions about ontology and human nature, which was linked with epistemology and the application of preferred research methods. The useful addition introduced by Morgan and Smircich (1980) was the notion of a continuum; rather than mutually exclusive and isolated paradigms, there is scope for variations on the theme. Cunliffe's (2011) update on Morgan and Smircich's (1980) model added a more nuanced understanding of the subject-object differentiation, in addition to intervening turns in (particularly qualitative) research in the three decades since Morgan and Smircich's original paper. Cunliffe considers subject and object to

be intertwined and reciprocal, each influencing the other. She also draws attention to the influence of power and discourse on the subject, with subjectivities that are performed in a specific context. Her three identified problematics are objectivism, subjectivism and intersubjectivism, the first two being similar to Burrell and Morgan (1979) and Morgan and Smircich's (1980) objectivist and subjectivist categories and the third being a new classification based on the focus of self in relation to others. Intersubjectivist approaches consider meanings to be co-created in relation to others, within a specific context and space.

It is important to locate the philosophical underpinnings to my research since my personal beliefs are relevant not only to the choice of research topic and which questions to ask, but also decisions about how to ask those questions and the very knowledge that emerges from a particular method (Morgan and Smirch, 1980). Within Burrell and Morgan's (1979) and Morgan and Smircich's (1980) frames, this research sits firmly at the subjectivist end of the spectrum. I believe that there is no objective, absolute, social reality and that the social world is different to the material. Rather, individuals create their own personal realities, which will vary over time and in different contexts and which are also influenced by – and influence – wider (though fluid) social structures such as gender and class. My research is similarly subjectivist within Cunliffe's (2011) model: whilst acknowledging that some meaning is co-created, I do not believe that *all* meaning is so constructed, since meaning is surely sometimes personal and individual. This foundational belief is the basis for the questions I have sought to answer and my focus on the nature and meaning of talent management to those both included and excluded from the talent pool, male and female, managers and workforce. I have predicated this scope on an assumption of subjective realities, influenced by the perceptions and actions of people, who are sense-makers within a particular context. It is these subjective meanings that I am seeking to explore.

In line with, for example, Giddens (1979), there is also a notion of the personal both being influenced by, and influencing, the wider social world, lending sense to talk of wider social structures such as gender and class. This study is thus constructionist and interpretivist (Crotty, 2003; Saunders et al. 2019), underpinned by a notion of individuals as sense-making and actively engaged in constructing meaning, for example the meaning of talent and talent management, whilst appreciating that fluid and personal interpretations are also partially co-constructed or intersubjectively constructed (Cunliffe, 2011).

My study was thus concerned to critically explore the nature and meaning of talent and talent management within a specific historical and cultural setting (a large UK

police force at a particular point in time), cognisant of individual, local and societal power relations (e.g. gender-based, patriarchal practice). I was interested in how individuals made sense of the talent management process, what they understood by talent and talent management, how they spoke about their experience of talent management, and individual differences in talent management narrative. Given the relatively recent and very limited attention to gender within talent management literature and research (Makarem et al., 2019), I was also aware of a need to adopt an inductive approach to my research. I was not certain what my research participants might say, what might emerge from the data, whether or how talent management might be gendered in practice. Therefore, I aimed to maintain an open approach to analysis (see below for further details of data analysis) in order to develop understanding about the richness and complexity of the talent management experience.

In summary, my research philosophy is explained here as subjectivist, interpretivist and with an inductive approach to the development of talent management theory and practice. This framework has influenced subsequent methodological choices about my research and its design, which are now outlined in subsequent sections of this chapter.

5.3 Research design

This section explains what Saunders et al. (2019) term research design: *research strategy* and *time horizon* for my study, my chosen *research method* and *participant recruitment*. My research strategy was a single case study, which I consider below.

5.3.1 The case study

Extant talent management literature has begun to call for explicit awareness of, and empirical and conceptual integration of, the context within which talent management is practiced (Thunnissen et al., 2016; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024). There has also been an identified need for in-depth, rich, case studies (Gallardo-Gallardo, 2016) and for more empirical research within the public sector (McDonnell et al., 2017; Collings et al., 2022). Considering this identified research gap and mirroring recent case study-based empirical work in the talent management field (Asplund, 2020; Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022), I chose to adopt a case study research strategy, focusing on one large UK public sector organisation.

My case study research strategy provided an opportunity to study talent management within a real-life setting, a setting that itself might logically be interwoven with the practice and understanding of talent and talent management.

Indeed, the very advantage of case study research is that it facilitates exploration of a focal topic ‘in context’ (Hartley, 2004). In other words, the case itself – Shire Police - is relevant to the research aim and my case study design facilitated a deep exploration of the practice of talent management within this one organisation, with rich understanding of the context and the role this plays in talent management practice. A case study research design was also particularly suited to my exploratory study where multiple sources of data were used (see below) to study complex phenomena and answer questions such as ‘how’ or ‘why’ in an exploratory or explanatory approach (Yin, 2003; Cresswell, 2013).

I chose one large, multi-site, police force (Shire Police) as my case study for this research. This focus on a UK police force was justified by prior research into the masculinised nature of UK policing (Davies and Thomas, 2002a, 2002b; Metcalfe and Dick, 2002; Dick and Metcalfe, 2007; Laverick and Cain, 2014; Turnbull and Wass, 2015; Yates et al., 2018) - and, indeed, policing globally (see, e.g., Keddie, 2023) - combined with the opportunity to explore a newly introduced talent management scheme within a large police force. That scheme was heralded as providing equality of opportunity (see Chapter 7), but the (masculinised) context within which it was introduced was one where potential gendering might emerge in practice. In other words, selection of Shire Police as a case was an example of Flyvbjerg’s (2006) critical case and was theoretically justifiable (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000), given dominant masculine norms and my research aims (see Chapter 1).

Overall responsibility for HR policy and practice within Shire Police lay with the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) at the time of this study, transferring to the Mayor for the region in 2021. The PCC / Mayor has overall responsibility for policing, but HR practice within Shire Police is affected by several other bodies. Police officers are sworn officers of the Crown and, as such, are governed by national police regulations and pay, in addition to bodies such as the National Police Chief’s Council (NPCC), the College of Policing, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMIC) and the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) (CIPD, no date). Police staff, in contrast, are employees of a specific force, but with a national framework governing pay, and terms and conditions of employment. Each police force can then supplement the national framework locally (CIPD, no date). HR is structured differently within each force, with Shire Police adopting a strategic HR partner approach at the point of data collection. Talent management was, at that time, devolved to local forces to implement as they deemed fit and Shire Police was among the first in the country to seek to introduce a comprehensive talent management system aimed at both police staff and police officers. Given austerity,

however, this was narrated as a cost-neutral policy and was subject to review and governance from the force leadership team. One other force in the wider region was developing a talent management scheme at the time of this study, but it was deemed too sensitive to permit access for PhD data collection.

Here, the organisation itself was the 'case': the context-rich exploration of Shire Police facilitated consideration of unique aspects of the case that may be missed through a broader approach, providing an opportunity to explore possible relationships between talent management practice and this specific context (Saunders et al., 2023). The opportunity to access multiple sites and both police officers and police staff within several Shire sites facilitated understanding of what might have been unique to that particular force and what might be more common across policing or for police officers / police staff more generally. This single, context-rich case study thus lent itself to the development of emergent themes with the potential to refine and extend extant talent management theory (Cresswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2023).

It might be argued that multiple cases would have been useful for disentangling what was distinctive or unique to Shire Police compared to other forces or other sectors, through either replication in other similar police forces *or* in other forces that are deliberately different so that variation could be tested (Cassell and Symon, 2012; Saunders et al., 2023). However, this single case study organisation was a critical case (Yin, 2018), being at the forefront of talent management within the sector, and I was only aware of one other police force within the entire North of England region at a (less advanced, but) similar stage of development, making replication difficult. Whilst statistical generalisability might also be afforded through multiple cases (Yin, 2018), this would have required either greater knowledge of the topic than was available at the time of data collection *or* additional time to develop a survey instrument on the basis of preliminary exploratory findings.

Thus, the exploratory nature of my study, combined with the proposed method (narrative, loosely structured interviews), lent itself to depth rather than cross-sector comparisons (and greater breadth of cases does not necessarily translate into greater credibility (Symon and Cassell, 2004)). (Indeed, albeit from an objectivist position, Swailes and Blackburn (2016) call for more single-case research in the talent management field in order to exclude other effects.) Whilst critics might argue that the choice of only one case study renders this research irrelevant and statistically non-generaliseable outside that boundary, it is argued that concepts such as validation are more appropriate to qualitative, context-rich research (Saunders et al., 2023). It is thus possible to demonstrate validation and generalise beyond the

case study organisation on the basis of theory, developed from this critical case (Yin, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018). This is supported by triangulation of method and reflection with supervisors throughout the design, data collection and analysis stages of research (Saunders et al., 2023). Ultimately, the practical delays in accessing just the one case study organisation (see below) and previous unsuccessful efforts to access a second policing case study, also rendered a multi-case approach impractical.

The *time horizon* for my study (Saunders et al., 2019) was a snapshot at a particular point in time. This point reflected an opportunity to conduct my research approximately one year after the inception of a new Shire talent management scheme. As such, this time frame sat well with recent research suggesting that participants' understandings of talent management may evolve over time (Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022), particularly after around 8 months and within the first year. However, it was not longitudinal, which means that I was not able to monitor changes in narrated individual meanings and interpretations but was only able to access this at a specific point in time, during the single interview.

My decision to conduct my research within this case organization at one moment in time, rather than longitudinally, also reflected practical considerations. Accessing my case study organization took a considerable period of time – approximately nine months. I had to deal with several gatekeepers, each of whom had slightly different agendas, and all of which took up a considerable amount of time in terms of meetings with individuals and small groups, in addition to submission of different documents. I attended three meetings with gatekeepers before being given access to Shire for this study. Initial contacts were made with two grade 4 Shire Police staff who were studying on a CIPD course at the university where I worked. This then progressed to introduction and a meeting with the senior officer responsible for day-to-day steering of the Force's talent management program, with whom I had two meetings; he was Shire's HR specialist and became the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for the duration of my research. The turning point for access was a meeting with several members of the HR talent team (responsible for program design, implementation and evaluation): the HR Director, a trainer who was representing the Learning and Development specialist, the Employee Relations specialist and the Resourcing specialist[11]. I explained my research aim, intended research questions

[11] Given the time interval between data collection and submission and corruption of files, it is not possible to provide accurate titles of gatekeepers, but summary information is provided.

and planned participant contact strategy at that meeting, and was given broad information on the talent management scheme, which had been driven by Shire Senior Leadership Team and notably a very senior female police officer. Potential outputs from my research were discussed and logistical aspects such as Force approval of research documents (all of which was subsequently approved by the SPOC). The HR talent team were particularly interested in receiving information about Shire workforce experiences of the scheme, although timescales, COVID-19 and personal circumstances precluded this. An initial attempt to gain access at an alternative large UK police force, where a talent management scheme was about to be introduced, had previously proved unsuccessful, but parallel contacts and tentative links were being pursued within Shire Police, since gaining research access had been taking up a considerable amount of my time during the initial phase of primary data collection.

Once access had been obtained, I was almost one whole year on from planning my research strategy, thus rendering a snapshot approach to data collection practically appropriate, whilst also theoretically acceptable. Having considered my case study approach, the following section will now outline my research method.

5.3.2 Research methods

There were three stages to data collection within my multi-site, large UK Police Force case study:

1. Exploratory interview with senior staff (SPOC) responsible for talent management implementation;
2. Qualitative analysis of talent management documentation;
3. In-depth, qualitative individual 60-90 minute interviews.

Adoption of multiple methods facilitated a degree of triangulation (Hartley, 2004; Silverman, 2011), rigorous analysis, a robust audit trail and grounding in a solid empirical base (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), thus complying with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) 'trustworthiness' (p. 289) and enabling claims to robustness (Musson, 2004, cited in Robson, 2011) of my research.

Each of these three stages will now be explained in more detail.

1. Interview with Head Office SPOC to explore the espoused TM scheme, policy and practice.

An initial interview was held with the central Head Office SPOC responsible for TM scheme implementation. This SPOC was a senior member of the HR team, having

retired as an active police officer several years previously. He had been involved in the design and inception of the talent support scheme (TSS) and was pivotal to the recruitment, selection and development of TSS participants.

Appendix A contains the very broad questions asked in this interview. In practice, this SPOC spoke at length and with very few prompts. He was also the main source of TSS documentation analysed qualitatively within chapters 6 and 7 (See stage 2 below).

This interview was semi-structured in order to ensure flexibility and exploration of how talent was talked about by those involved in managing the scheme, with discussion of organisational policy, procedure and documentation.

2. TSS documentation.

Hard copies of on-line documentation were obtained following the interview in the first phase of this study and analysed qualitatively. Additional information on, for example, numbers of staff and officers included within the talent pool and gender composition of Shire's workforce, was also provided in phase one, electronically or as hard copy.

3. Interviews with TSS participants and those excluded from the talent pool.

I conducted a total of 36 narrative, loosely structured, interviews which were included in my data analysis and findings. These lasted from 30 minutes to two hours, but typically around 60-90 minutes. Interviews took place at a variety of locations in order to maximise participant access and make it as easy as possible for individuals to participate in the research project. Locations included 4 police stations across 3 districts, the Force's Head Office, the main training hub, and the researcher's own office for those working in the District town centre.

My primary research method reflected a qualitative approach, using narrative, loosely structured, interviews. I was interested to explore and understand different talent management meanings and understandings, which naturally suggests a qualitative approach to data collection. My choice of narrative, qualitative interviews as my main research method reflected my personal philosophical position and research aims and was inextricably linked to my case study design. What we might generally term narrative, loosely structured interviews, as here, are preferred where little is known about a topic (Robson, 2011) and where the research is therefore exploratory, as in this study.

Qualitative methods in general are particularly appropriate where the research philosophy is subjectivist and interpretive, which was my approach as indicated in the previous section, with participants seen as sensemaking within a real-world

context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). It is most apt when ‘exploring fluid, fast developing situations such as the implementation of talent management’ (Ford and Harding, 2013) and investigating feelings and understandings (Robson, 2011; Silverman, 2011). This approach also builds upon similar work in the field, with analogous – though not identical – aims. Tansley and Tietze (2013), for example, used semi-structured interviews in their research involving individuals with some responsibility for talent management. Stewart and Harte (2010) and Sparrow et al. (2013), in their exploratory studies of talent management, also used semi-structured interviews, in addition to analysis of internal documents in the latter case. Moreover, my decision to use narrative and loosely structured interview reflects an approach that has grown in popularity in recent years and an affinity to a notion that:

> *“... we live in story-shaped worlds.” (Sparkes and Smith IN Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, p. 295.)*

Narrative research is particularly suited to case-based investigation (Riessman, 2008), as with my research design. However, there are multiple interpretations and uses of the term ‘narrative’, contingent upon discipline (Riessman, 2008), with several possible conceptualisations of narrative research – embracing spoken, written and visual data in multiple forms - and somewhat blurred boundaries (Smith and Sparkes, 2008). Moreover, a cause of confusion for the novice is the multiplicity of interpretations and applications of the term ‘narrative’ itself, which may refer to an entire life story, long sections of talk or documentary narrative, with many researchers using ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ interchangeably and others differentiating the latter on the basis of being (relatively) time-structured and event-focused (Riessman, 2008). An alternative notion is that of narrative as ‘stories in the making’ (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 61) since stories are themselves the sensemaking process. Czarniawska (2010) considers stories to be central to ‘the emotional life of organizations’ (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 63), rendering them uniquely appropriate for an exploration of gender – and associated power relations - in the context of talent management.

My approach also mirrors McAdams’ (1993; 2012) life story approach to qualitative inquiry. Mc Adams assumes 3 key propositions:

1. People both construct and also internalise their stories as a means of sense-making;

2. Such stories have meaning and are relatively enduring, thus can be told to others;

3. "… *these narrative accounts… can be analysed for content themes … and other categories that speak to their psychological, social, and cultural meanings*." (Mc Adams, cited in: Holstein and Gubrium, 2012, p. 15.)

I was interested in exploring participants' personal stories, their sensemaking, and their shared interpretations of the meanings and practices of talent and talent management. This is articulated in McAdams' (1993; 2012) conception of stories as the means through which we make sense of our world, and which can be told to others – myself as researcher in this case. I was also then able to analyse the stories I was told for themes and link these at a theoretical level to nascent research, since individual narratives are open to such interpretation.

My interview questions were structured to elicit stories using themes that were related to my research questions, following, for example, Hollway and Jefferson's (2010) framing of loosely structured narrative questions that were centred around their research aims. Participants were asked to tell their story, both of how they had arrived at where they currently saw themselves in their career, in addition to their talent management story (accessed through questions about participants' life and career history and their experience and understanding of Shire's talent management program – see Appendix D). I wanted to explore participants' stories of how they got to where they were in their work and personal lives, as I was interested in how they narrated their way through power relations such as gender and social class. Following Squire (2008), Czarniawska (2010) and Hollway and Jefferson (2010), initial career description questions were used to prompt narrative, with subsequent loose questions being based on Riessman (2008), Czarniawska (2010) and Hollway and Jefferson's (2010) question phrasing for their research into similar themes.

Individual stories also offered me an opportunity to explore narrated socially constructed understandings of the organization. This was particularly important given prior research into policing as discussed in Chapter 4 and the case study research design explained above. My socio-biographic narrative questions also provided me with the opportunity to explore which socio-biographic life aspects were narrated as being important to individuals as they made sense of their career stories. I combined narrative inquiry with a loosely structured approach towards the end of the interview, to ensure that talent meaning, understandings and experience of talent management practice and potential gendering thereof, were discussed (See Appendix C and Appendix D).

Through my interviews, I was trying to understand how participants made sense of their career and talent management now, at this juncture, which in itself was linked to their interpretation of and re-telling of past events. I do not claim to have been able to

access any ‘truth’, since what emerged during the interviews was specific to that point in time and the stories that individuals chose to tell. However, I do believe that I was able to draw meaningful conclusions about individual understandings, meanings, sharedness and differences through the loosely structured interviews that I undertook. I will now explain how my pilot interviews were conducted and how I recruited research participants to my study.

5.3.3 Pilots and participant recruitment

Having decided to use narrative interviewing as the main research tool (see above for a rationale of this decision), I also conducted six pilot interviews during the access phase – four with individuals working within professional service firms and two with individuals working within policing. These pilots enabled me to refine my research skills as an interviewer in addition to affording me the opportunity to slightly revise my interview questions and personal notes as an aide memoire during the data collection phase (see Appendix D). Following discussions with my supervisors I made one notable amendment to my interview questions, which was the addition of a catch-all gender question towards the end of the interview. This would only be asked where participants did not raise gender in their discussion. Additional prompts and alternative phrasing were also added as my aide memoire (see Appendix D).

The Head Office SPOC was my key conduit in gaining access to participants. For confidentiality reasons, Shire required my initial contact email and request for research participants to go through the SPOC, which was ultimately sent out to staff and officers within the organisation on two separate occasions in order to maximise participant recruitment. I sent my briefing document and consent forms to the SPOC, for organisational approval (which was given without amendment) - see Appendix B - and this was then e-mailed to all participants. Once interviews began, there was also a degree of snowballing, as participants returned to their district or department and encouraged others to participate. The SPOC also arranged meeting rooms on specific dates in Districts and Head Office, sending a reminder e-mail to those working within those locations, which further increased participation rates. In the following section I will now consider my approach to sampling and how and why I decided on the final number of research participants to be interviewed for this study.

5.4 Research participants

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is an enduring talent management research gap considering the experience of talent management from the employee perspective. There is also a notable lack of rich, qualitative data that is cognisant of the specific context within which talent management is practiced. The previous section of this

chapter articulated my reasons for choosing a single case study design, which will contribute to the contextual research gap around talent management. This section considers how and why I recruited particular participants to my study from within that case study organisation.

Although a single, large, UK Police Force case study, Shire Police offered an opportunity for me to add to research into talent management practice within the public sector, in addition to enabling me to research across six Shire sites (4 District stations and 2 support function locations, including Shire Headquarters). This meant that I was able to recruit participants from Head Office and different Police Stations, thereby enabling me to explore stories that might tell me something about local implementation and local factors affecting how talent management was practiced. This was important as previous research into multinational organisations has highlighted how local or regional factors might be relevant to talent management practice (see Chapter 2). I therefore aimed to recruit participants from several Districts within Shire Police. As Chapter 4 highlights, UK Policing is characterised by differential employment terms, conditions, and career opportunities for different categories of employee – specifically, Police Staff compared to Police Officers. This is also linked to gender (see below, and Chapter 4), as there is a skewed gender distribution across the two categories. In view of this, I further aimed to recruit from both categories of employee (police officers and police staff) for my research. Moreover, as my research focus concerns the potential gendering of talent management experience and practice it was important that I was able to recruit a mix of male and female research participants.

I also aimed to recruit participants from among both those excluded from the talent pool within Shire and also those included. There is relatively scant empirical data available that incorporates talent management from the employee perspective. The limited research that has considered the employee tends to favour the experience of those included in the talent pool, with very few studies explicitly sampling the excluded. My research will potentially speak to this gap, by focusing on both those included *and* those excluded from Shire Police's talent management scheme, in addition to identifying possible differences in lived experience depending on the individual's talent status.

This attempt to recruit research participants from different roles, Districts, talent pool status and gender mirrored what Riessman (2008) refers to as 'purposeful' sampling, since gender, talent pool membership and employee category have all been identified as potentially relevant to the lived experience of talent management in prior research. In order to consider the formal presentation of the Talent Support Scheme

– that is, how the scheme story was being told formally within the organization and its espoused practice – I also carried out Interviews with the main head office SPOC and two regional SPOCs responsible for talent management implementation within Shire Police. I was able to supplement this with qualitative analysis of the formal documentation for the scheme. After gaining permission from relevant gatekeepers to undertake research within Shire, I was able to then work with the main head office SPOC to recruit research participants, meeting my theoretical sampling criteria identified above. That is, a mix of male and female, police staff and police officers, talent pool included and talent pool excluded, from a variety of organisational sites.

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 detail the participants included in the final data analysis stage of my study. There was a mix of male, female, staff, officer, TSS participants and non-participants, in line with the research aim and objectives and prior literature outlined in previous chapters.

Table 5.1 Research participants: officers and staff

POLICE OFFICER		Det Constable	DS/Sergeant	DS	Inspector	Detective Inspector	Chief Inspector
ON TSS	M	3	3	1	1	1	
	F	2	4	1			
NOT ON TSS, **applied**	M	1			1		
	F						
NOT ON TSS, Not apply	M	3	1			1	
	F					1	
TOTAL OFFICERS	24						
POLICE STAFF		Grade 1-4	Grade 5-6	SO1-SO2	POA-POC	POD - POF	N/A
ON TSS	M	2					
	F	3		1			
NOT on TSS, **Applied**	M	1					
	F	1					
NOT ON TSS, Not apply	M						
	F	2	2				

TOTAL POLICE STAFF	12				
Total on TSS in Shire Police **(by category)**	STAFF	15 (12 in sample)		POLICE OFFICER	34 (24 in sample)

Table 5.2 Research participants: gender and TSS status

GENDER	TOTAL FEMALE	17		TOTAL MALE	19
Emp category	POLICE STAFF	9		POLICE STAFF	3
	POLICE OFFICER	8		POLICE OFFICER	16
TSS status	ON TSS	11		ON TSS	11
	NOT ON TSS	6		NOT ON TSS	8
Total on TSS in Shire Police (gender)	FEMALE	21 [52.4% (n=11) in sample]		MALE	28 [39.3% (n=11) in sample]

A difficult decision that I faced as a qualitative researcher, alluded to above, was that of the number of participants and interviews. This is a conundrum for those of us engaged in interview-based research since:

> *"There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 244)*

Whilst the quantitative researcher has well established sample size principles (Robson, 2011), there seems to be no definitive answer to the question of how many interviews are enough for those engaged in qualitative research (Baker and Edwards, 2012). This notwithstanding, I was guided by a number of general guidelines when determining that I had completed sufficient interviews to achieve my research aims. In a NCRM paper on qualitative interviews Baker and Edwards (2012), Adler and Adler (2012) and Becker (2012) all refer to the notion of empirical saturation, which requires the concurrent gathering and analysis of data throughout the process, combined with ensuring that sufficient data has been collected to address research aims. In practice, I expected to analyse my data using template analysis (King, 2004a; 2004b; 2014; King and Brooks, 2017) - see analysis section below for elaboration. This required the development of a-priori codes, which broadly emerged from extant theoretical, conceptual and empirical work in the field. Though subsequently deemed insufficient and too restrictive, these a-priori codes helped me

to start to analyse my data in a manageable way, at the same time as I was conducting interviews. I also wrote notes on each interview both during and after the interview, effectively identifying codes or linking to themes iteratively. In this way, I began to feel that little new of a theoretical nature was emerging from my participants after around 30 interviews, although I continued with those additional interviews that I had already arranged in advance, up to 36 interviews. In other words, I continued with my recruitment of participants and interviews until "*redundancy with respect to information* [was] *reached"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 233). This ensured saturation (Robson, 2011), richness of data and achievement of my research aims.

My 36 participants had also raised unexpected findings – for example, the similarities in experience of non-traditional male police officers with male police staff and police women, and the explicit voicing by both male and female participants of gender as irrelevant to current policing, whilst telling me personal stories that were themselves quite gendered. This suggested that I had tapped into cases that were contributing to theoretical and empirical development and reflected my inclusion of participants who might have been likely to raise quite different dimensions in their stories; I included men and women, those included and those excluded from the talent pool. In this way, I was able to tap into the sometimes quite unexpected similarities and differences in stories told and issues raised, in addition to focusing quite deliberately on my research aims.

Flick (2012), in Baker and Edwards' (2012) NCRM paper, raises the central point of what he terms outside factors influencing the number of interviews, which was a further factor guiding my number of participants. I found it quite difficult to recruit volunteers to my study, having to send two general e-mails and several subsequent emails to each District in order to recruit to my study. I also used snowballing, asking participants if they could talk to colleagues who might be able to take part, reinforcing confidentiality and location flexibility. The total of 36 interviews had exhausted all attempts to add to my interview pool at that time but exceeded the 26 interviews cited by van Hulst and Tsoukas (2023) in an analogous study into policing. It is also above the sometimes-cited minimum (30 – Baker and Edwards, 2012) and mean (30 - Adler and Adler, 2012, cited in Baker and Edwards, 2012) for a PhD. The following section details my approach to analysing this wealth of data.

5.5 Data analysis

The analysis of narrative is one of the most diverse and contested methodological terrains and the tenets of quantitative, positivist, research are not applicable to

qualitative, social constructionist, inquiry. However, for Riessman (2008), and as identified above, this does not suggest that such research is not useful beyond its immediate context, since:

> *"Generalizing from a sample to the entire population is the statistical approach; case study involves "generalisations to theoretical propositions", which are, to some degree, transferable." (Riessman, 2008, p. 13)*

Similarly, Hartley (2004) suggests that case study generalisation *is* possible, but on the basis of theoretical, not population / sampling, generalisation. As highlighted in Table 5.3, my analysis offers this theoretical generalisation and contribution.

I conducted two levels of analysis for this inquiry: documentary analysis and also interview analysis. Narrative *documentary* analysis requires a qualitative overview of the language used and the communicative project, since:

> *"Documents do not speak for themselves; … we have … materials that were constructed by socially situated individuals from a perspective and for an audience…"* (Riessman, 2008)

Through my qualitative exploration of talent management documentation I aimed to highlight such communicative and political projects, as detailed in chapters 6 and 7.

With respect to the interviews themselves, all interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after the interview and I adopted a thematic approach to analysis, choosing to follow King's (2004b) template analysis rather than grounded theory. King's (2004b) template analysis provided scope for integrating of elements of Riesman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis (retaining a focus on participants' stories in addition to the words themselves) within a rich, constructionist, perspective. Moreover, as King (2004b) suggests, this approach is particularly pertinent where 'the perspectives of staff within a specific context' (p. 257) are sought, as within an intra-organisational talent management study.

Template analysis avoids the pitfalls of imposing theoretical constructs early in the process and avoids a simple word count approach - neither of which would be desirable for my research, given its exploratory nature and my epistemological underpinning. Template analysis involves hierarchical organisation of 'codes' (or labels) and 'higher-order codes' (King, 2004b, p. 258), with parallel coding (the allocation of more than one code to a particular section of text) possible, as can be seen within Table 5.3. I found the flexibility to be able to revise codes or their links to themes extremely useful during the initial phases of data analysis, where emergent codes were perhaps unclear or their levels ambiguous. I was also able to revise codes (for example, adding new codes, or redefining codes at a slightly different level) as I became more familiar with the data or as more interviews were completed.

Template analysis thus enabled me to adopt flexibility of coding alongside alleviating the burden of following a highly prescriptive process as required for grounded theory. In other words, I felt that thematic analysis offered me flexibility, but also a framework that I could use to ensure a rigorous and defensible approach to data analysis.

King (2004b) suggests that the initial coding template might reflect the rough interview guide, themes evident in the literature or initial overview of a small sample. King also advocates a minimum of two sweeps of all data, with involvement of outside experts where possible. Such an approach avoids simple 'counting', which would most definitely not sit with my research. This is similar to the approach I adopted, with an initial thematic sweep of interview transcripts (following King's (2004b) template analysis) supplemented by a second reading of interview data from a more critical, reflexive, stance. As I had unexpected breaks in the analysis of my data, I was also able to undertake a third analysis of my findings for chapters 7 and 8, which further developed the richness and robustness of my analysis.

My use of template analysis is further justified by the adoption of this approach by similar prior empirical work. Dick (2009), for example, in her research into flexible working within UK policing, analysed data collected through a series of semi-structured interviews using template analysis. She developed an initial (a priori) template based on the interview questions themselves, which were then refined through subsequent identification of codes from readings of transcripts.

King (2014) and King and Brooks (2017) identify several possible stages of research, adopted for my analysis as follows (see Table 5.3 for detailed codes):

1. Preliminary coding. I developed a priori themes based on my loosely structured interview themes or questions. This was helpful as an initial way of organising my thinking around the data. However, after reading and allocating codes (descriptive labels) to the interview text of approximately 8 participants, I began to feel that this a priori set of codes was too restrictive and did not necessarily reflect what was emerging from my rich data. The data did not fit these a priori codes, which I discussed with my supervisors. I then re-read my initial set of interviews before developing a revised set of codes or labels, based on emergent aspects arising from the data. I also grouped participants by gender and employee category (police staff / police officer) for analysis, in order to highlight differences and similarities within and between categories of participants, in line with extant literature.

2. Clustering codes. I grouped my detailed codes (first order codes) together to form (second order) themes, mirroring Dick's (2009) approach to analysis of data from a

policing context and Brooks and King's (2012) study into healthcare within the UK. (I have termed these codes and themes, respectively, in Table 5.3.)

3. Following King (2014) and Dick (2009), I continuously revised and refined my codes and themes, until I felt that I had achieved a meaningful and full coding.

4. I moved from first order codes and second order themes to develop a higher level of theoretical dimensions in order to relate my findings to extant literature. This was required in order to achieve the theoretical generalisation referred to above, in addition to moving towards what Dick (2009) termed interpretation and theorisation. In this final stage of my data analysis, I was able to link my raw data to wider social structures such as gender and social class.

Table 5.3 below illustrates my coding and the allocation of data to first order codes. The relationship between first order codes and second order themes is highlighted, culminating in the final, much broader, set of dimensions which relate to theoretical contributions.

Table 5.3 Final Coding

FIRST ORDER CATEGORY	SECOND ORDER THEMES	THEORETICAL DIMENSION
1. Inter-district variation in practice	Inter-district variation + parochial	POLITICAL TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE
2. Quotas		
3. Differential access to SLT	Acting politically as talent	
4. Discussed importance of using 'talent' language (strategic)		
5. Self-concept as part of in-group	Performing talent + in-group	
6. View of others as out-group		
7. Heightened confidence		
8. Access to other talented people		
9. Talented people are hardworking	Gendered Policing Culture	GENDERED TALENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE WITHIN A
10. Talented people are confident		
11. Talent people work long hours and full-time – incompatible with family		
12. Talented people are flexible		
3. Talented people are dedicated / driven	Masculinised notion of talent	
14. A good leader: strong, able to do physically demanding work		
15. Masculinised language e.g. militaristic	Social Magic	
16. Staff v officers: staff (not) looking the part, not visible, not heard, limited extra-role opportunities		
17. Gendered stories		
18. Talented: unpredictable, long hours	Masculinised notion of talent	
19. Decision not to apply: extra work, long hours, no confidence in process		

20. Mentor/ sponsor impact: application quality, application decision, symbolic, opens doors, male contacts and networks	Sponsors and mentors Visibility Social magic	GENDERED ORGANISATION
21. SPOCs: Get who you would think in advance; can spot talent by conversations		
22. Talent is heard; talent is seen		
23. Career stories: family dominates women's career stories; own emotions and ambitions dominate men's	Work-family conflict	WORK-LIFE COPING STRATEGIES
24. Women and some men: accommodate family		
25. Work spilling over into non-work		
26 Delay family to prioritise work and career		
27. Barriers to promotion seen as structural, not gender	Work-life balance approaches	
28. Doing it all (women)		
29. Separate home and work		
30. Accommodate family needs		
31. Work-life balance varies over time		
32. Stories suggest gendering, but state that gender is not an issue (M/F)		
33. Strategic language use by those on TSS; different to those not on	Talent Management Experience: Included	TALENT MANAGEMENT: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE
34. Positive words on TSS: pleased, resources, honour, exposure, visibility		
35. Negative words on TSS: False promises, (no) promotion, frustrated, more to do, varies by stage in career		
36. Demotivating, frustrating	Talent Management Experience: Excluded	
37. Unhappy with process, seen as biased, not given nudge to apply		
38. Stories tend to re-frame TSS as more work to do		

To summarise, data in this study was analysed through an iterative process, culminating in a thematic analysis standing underneath the participant's voice. This stage of my research was conducted by hand and without the use of data analysis software, following Silverman's (2011) call for the researcher to immerse herself fully in the data or what Willig (2008) referred to as deep immersion in the text. Having now detailed my research and data analysis approach, the following section continues with consideration of ethical dimensions to my research prior to a final conclusion.

5.6 Research ethics

Research involving people is potentially fraught with ethical quagmires, with several well-known examples of serious ethical breaches within social research (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Ethical approval for this research was formally requested (and granted) through a University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee application in 2013, prior to data collection. The central ethical consideration identified was the research participant and potential harm to individuals who chose to engage with the study, in addition to possible harm to those who chose not to participate.

Due to confidentiality of email addresses, my initial contact with potential participants had to be through Head Office HR department and the central SPOC. It was thus possible to infer a degree of cooption from central HR, an implicit pressure to volunteer for interviews. This was addressed through careful researcher explanation of confidentiality, and of the voluntary nature of participation, through both the initial contact and subsequent participant consent forms and the interview itself. Those not included in the talent pool may have found the interview process particularly stressful or difficult and great care was taken to ensure that all participants understood their ability to withdraw consent at any point up to thesis and /or research publication. The anonymous nature of any subsequent research outputs was also explained, in addition to a very transparent awareness within the organisation (particularly within HR) that no individual would ever be identified or identifiable.

As the sole researcher, I had acquired relevant skills to reduce potential harm. I had considerable prior experience of meeting with individuals who are potentially distressed through my employment as a line manager, in addition to prior experience of interviewing professional women for previous research. This experience and skill-set facilitated a sympathetic and sensitive approach during all interviews.

Data confidentiality is paramount when research involves people (see, for example, Sture, 2010 and Robson, 2011) and careful steps were taken to maintain confidentiality throughout the process. This was acutely pertinent to the highly

sensitive case study organisation and sector, with individual anonymity being crucial. All electronic transcripts were filed using a code, to which only I had access, and which was held on a secure (password-protected) computer.

I made every effort to remove the practical personal cost to participants by flexible accommodation to locations; I made myself available for interviews either at District office, or central Head Office, or my own (private, individual) office. I thereby bore the travel costs and took steps to ensure that residual risk was reduced through ensuring that interviews took place in a public space (organisational office or meeting rooms) during working hours.

Although the principles of informed consent and right to withdraw (Sture, 2010) were adhered to, I had to introduce a degree of initial deception into my interviews in order to avoid participant bias. The research briefing document and consent form did not explicitly refer to gender, but rather a general aim of exploring talent management within the organisation. This was justified as essential in order to avoid bias in responses. However, a catch-all gender question was added to the end of the interview guide (see Appendix D) and individuals were advised after the completion of the interview that the research was going to include consideration of the potential gendering of talent management. This was so that participants could make an informed decision at that point regarding inclusion of their data.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter considers my methodology: my underlying philosophical framework, my rationale for choices about the research design (case study and loosely structured, narrative interviews) and how and why I have analysed my data using the template approach detailed. The following three chapters discuss the findings from this process, beginning with a discussion of the gendered UK policing organisation and the individual strategies adopted to resolve resulting work-life tensions within Shire in Chapter 6. I then consider the (gendered) politicisation of talent management in Chapter 7, followed by exploration in Chapter 8 of talent understandings, the gendered doing of talent management and the lived experience of those included in, and excluded from, the talent pool.

Chapter 6 Empirical Chapter: Shire Police Talent Management Context and Coping Strategies

6.1 Introduction

This first of three empirical chapters considers how participants experience Shire Police organisational milieu in relation to talent management practice. This contributes to talent management theorisation through addressing calls to situate talent management research within meso and micro context (Gallardo-Gallardo et al, 2020; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024), specifically Shire police. A novel contribution is made through the application of Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) gendered organisation theory to talent management in a policing context, and three identified strategies for coping with Shire work/non-work conflict.

6.2 The formal talent management scheme

Shire is a large Police Force in the North of England (Chapter 4 refers). This study was conducted in 2015 following years of austerity, associated with declining morale and commitment to the job along with increased dissatisfaction, combined with work intensification through NPM (see Section 4.7). Shire officers were male dominated (67.7% in 2015, Shire Police, 2015) and police staff female dominated (58.8% in 2015, Shire Police, 2015).

The composition of research participants is detailed in Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 and discussed in Chapter 5. Just over half of the male research participants were not currently included within a talent pool, seven not having applied for such and five having applied but not been selected. Just over a third of the female participants were not included within a talent pool, five of whom had not applied and one who had.

Two talent management schemes were available: the internal talent management support scheme (TSS) and the national talent management scheme (Fast-track programme (FTP)). Individuals could apply for, and be accepted onto, one or both schemes simultaneously. The TSS will be considered initially below, prior to an overview of the national programme (FTP).

6.2.1 The talent support scheme: A wheel of opportunity?

The TSS was introduced in April 2014, with the first cohort induction in September 2014, and was defined as:

> *The systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention and deployment of people who have the potential to make a significant impact.* (Shire Police, 2014).

Participants within this study were from the first TSS cohort.

The HR Resourcing specialist (the single point of contact [SPOC]) was responsible for supporting the TSS and provided documentary evidence of the scheme, discussing this in detail during an exploratory interview. He indicated that HR and other Senior Officers within the Force introduced the TSS, in part, as a tool to help address gender and ethnicity gaps within the organisation:

> *".. One of the things we identified early on was that the way to get people from minority groups .. into a position where they could progress .. was to identify the talented ones and then see what we could do to develop them and assist them to self-develop."*
>
> (MSNSW39, p. 2)

The adopted official definition of talent was the CIPD's [12] and reflected both the above context and a desire to be seen to be doing something to address 'white space'. White space was the term used by the SPOC to describe women's (and ethnic minorities') limited progression to senior ranks.

The talent management wheel was a visual representation of development opportunities available to police staff and officers via the Force intranet. Every grade of police staff and officer was represented on the wheel, with developmental opportunities (for example, internal training courses) available to *all* employees at the same grade in addition to further opportunities and resources relevant to promotion. The outer band of the talent wheel was available to *all* staff, with a toolkit to facilitate identification of developmental needs in addition to guidelines for preparing for advancement to the next level. This outer circle reflects a public sector and Shire ethos of inclusivity, a desire to be inclusive of *all* staff wanting to be developed and / or to prepare for promotion possibilities – albeit in a context of austerity.

The context of UK policing - and most definitely this Force - was one of marked underrepresentation of women in senior roles, with senior management viewing the scheme as an opportunity to do something to redress this. The middle band of the wheel thus provided additional resources and support to those with Equality Act protected characteristics (e.g. female Police Officers). Mentoring, coaching, shadowing, action learning group membership and masterclasses were illustrative

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[12] The link to the relevant part of the CIPD website at the point of data collection is broken, hence no reference to that citation. However, this has not changed significantly in the interim and can be seen in CIPD 2024.

activities that the SPOC identified as additional resources available for those in underrepresented groups.

The Inner Core of the wheel was specifically reserved for those on the TSS, depicting a degree of exclusivity and a privileged minority who receive special treatment, compatible with an exclusive approach to talent management. Resources and support available within the inner circle included activities seen to be in line with the Force's strategic ambition. For example, a series of seminars focused on the skills and knowledge base that were deemed relevant to Shire management and leadership, including the politics of policing, financing and the future of policing.

Opportunities within the scheme focused on leadership and personal professional development, rather than operational in-role development (see Table 6.1). However, every opportunity was required to be cost-neutral. This meant that in-house development (training, coaching mentoring, stretch projects etc.) formed the core offering, although cost-neutral external opportunities - such as participation in external networks or mentoring schemes – were also possible.

Each TSS participant was allocated a coach, in addition to being encouraged to find their own mentor. They all had a menu of available developmental opportunities (Table 6.1), detailed in the Guidance Notes for Applicants (Shire Police, 2014), with a selection of opportunities for each individual based on personal development plans discussed with the allocated mentor. All the opportunities in Table 6.1 sat within the inner circle of the Talent Management Wheel and were only available to TSS participants. Sub-unit Single Points of Contact (SPOCs), mentors or supervisors (District or Department) thus had a central role as gate-keepers, opening up potential for bias. The central SPOC certainly spoke of an organisational context where the ostensibly neutral TSS was practiced in a way that had potential to become gendered, with underlying inequity - considered further in Section 6.3 and Chapter 7.

6.2.2 The national talent management scheme

The FTP was solely for serving police officers (not police staff) and was originally available to both external and internal applicants (now only available internally, College of Policing, 2025b). Six Shire officers had been selected for the FTP 2014-2015 - two external recruits and four internal applicants. All four internal applicants participated in this study, but none of the external applicants; the external route onto the FTP will therefore not be considered in this study.

The scheme was explicitly aimed at identifying police officers with the potential to be superintendent and was associated with promotion to Inspector within two years of being accepted onto the programme. Scheme participants completed a College of

Policing Initial Leadership and Development Programme, were required to pass promotion threshold exams, and were involved in national FTP activities.

Table 6.1 TSS Developmental Opportunities

Activity	**Notes**
Mentoring	(internal)
Coaching alliance	(internally trained)
Action Learning set	With member of Chief Officer Team; focus on specific Shire issue
Special project	Linked to Shire priorities
Quarterly Master Classes / keynotes	Group-based; 50% min attendance
Additional development opportunities, available subject to the individual development plan and support from both the sub-unit SPOC and line manager, included:	
360-degree feedback	
External attachment or exchange	Private or not-for-profit enterprises
External mentoring	Only for Senior Leadership Team or above
High profile partnership projects	
Development as action learning set facilitator or performance coach	
Participation in local, regional or national external CPD forums or networks	
Myers Briggs Training Inventory (MBTI) and Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI)	
Chartered Management Institute (CMI) level 3 qualification	Funded by individual. Only for those at supervisory or first line management level.
CMI level 5 qualification	Funded by the individual. Only for those at second line management level.
Writing organisation policy or procedure	

6.3 What (and who) is officially talent?

This section considers how talent management is translated into practice within Shire Police through understandings of talent, for both the TSS and the FTP.

6.3.1 The talent support scheme (TSS)

The formal (HR) Shire Police definition of talent was:

> *Someone with the potential to make a significant impact.* (Shire Police, 2014)

This definition reflects the notion of both high performance and high potential, with a talent as subject (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020) - i.e. the person, rather than specific skills – perspective. Since not everyone will be deemed to have this potential this reinforces a practiced exclusivity, albeit within the context of the wider espoused inclusive TSS wheel.

Shire set an annual quota for TSS recruitment (58 places for 2014 -15) and those selected for the scheme remained on the programme for three years. Within total Force numbers, each district had its own TSS allocation. Some districts did not use their quota in the first round of the TSS, with others (unsuccessfully) requesting additional places.

Internal tension was apparent at Shire in terms of who and what was seen as TSS talent, highlighted by the TSS SPOC in terms of inclusivity / exclusivity tension:

> *"I thought we should keep it elitist, but the Chief Officer team said it should be open to everybody. I understood our end goal was to .. balance gender equality in the higher ranks and balance ethnic minority in the higher ranks .. but the steer we got from the Chief Officer team was, no, everybody."* (MSNSW39, p. 3)

In this case, the SPOC's stated position was that the TSS should help redress the white space identified previously and, in that sense, be exclusive and targeted. However, he indicated this was overridden at senior officer level so that the scheme would be ostensibly available to all employees. Yet, as discussed below, the scheme became exclusive in practice. Within this framework, the SPOC expressed concern about talent selection at the very basic level of understanding what talent means to Shire Police:

> *"It's easy in football, you just see who can score goals and things, but … it's difficult to identify talent if you don't know what you're really looking for and I don't think we really know what we're looking for if I'm honest."* (MSNSW39, p. 16)

This statement is from the SPOC, someone who had been involved in the scheme's inception and management. He had been involved with the design of the talent

wheel and the programme's roll-out, in addition to communicating the scheme throughout the Force. Nevertheless, he believed that there was internal confusion about who, and what, was understood to be talent within the organisation.

Each district commander and departmental head appointed their own SPOC to manage the TSS at sub-unit level, in a decentralised HR approach. Applicants were required to submit a 250-word expression of interest; this could be submitted by the individual or by a superior or peer on their behalf. The local SPOC would then draw up a shortlist of individuals to be invited to a one:one interview (called a 'discussion'). Yet even at this first step, talent management practice began to differ from espoused practice as it was possible for each sub-unit to declare that there was nobody to put forward for the scheme. This raises the question of whose definition of talent prevails throughout the process, as recounted by the central TSS SPOC:

> *" .. some* [heads of sub-units] *said 'I just haven't got anybody good enough in my department' … If you went round all these people and said 'what's your view of talent?' then you'd probably get twenty different views. Even though – we've said, here's your definition, here's what we think you should be looking at, trying to give them a little bit of steer."* (MSNSW39, p. 9)

Shortlisting criteria included an applicant's demonstration and application of the College of Policing (COP) talent indicators (see Table 6.3), achievement of Personal Development Review (PDR) objectives, and discussion with his/her line manager. This process reinforces the potential for bias through line-manager or sub-unit objectives (does a line manager want to lose some of the input from his/her key staff through participation in the TSS?), in addition to interpersonal relationships between line manager and applicant. Sub-unit involvement is further considered below and in Chapter 7, but inter-district variation was one way in which the practice of talent management had potential to translate an ostensibly gender-neutral tool into the reality of a gendered and politicised one.

According to a set of intranet guidance notes for SPOCs (and a similar document for TSS applicants) SPOCs were advised to identify individuals who had demonstrated 'cognitive capacity, leadership and communication and personal drive at a level which clearly indicates their potential' when shortlisting (Shire Police, 2014, p. 3). This guidance is clearly open to interpretation and sufficiently ambiguous to enable preconceived notions of what a good leader might be, or what personal drive means within Shire, to influence selection decisions. The notion of personal drive, for example, is one criterion that is sufficiently vague that it may leave unchallenged a masculinised conceptualisation of personal drive, reinforcing and not challenging the existing gendered policing culture (see below). Moreover, illustrative examples within

TSS SPOC documentation may further reinforce this potential bias. Guidance notes for SPOCs when engaging with the selection criteria can be seen in Table 6.2 below.

Table 6.2 SPOC selection criteria guidance notes

Evidence of competent performance
Evidence of exceptional performance
Behaviour at a higher level than role e.g. undertaking higher level tasks
Consistent demonstration of potential, desire and commitment to achieve higher ranks
Evidence of higher level operating (more work; more responsibility; operating more strategically; higher level of commitment)
Evidence of higher levels of work
Opportunities to demonstrate competencies (to be taken into account)
Evidence of commitment to self-development e.g. self-reflection, acting on feedback, development courses

Obscured within these words is work intensification (e.g. 'more work') and potential for gender bias, masked within ostensibly gender neutral terms. Taking on additional tasks, for example, requires discretionary effort or work at a higher level without additional work time to do so. Commitment and course attendance would most easily be demonstrated by working longer hours; yet more work, more responsibility and undertaking work at a higher level is only possible for those with the time to do such work. As highlighted in chapters two and three, women tend to bear the brunt of the domestic burden, leaving less time to do *more work* within the workplace. Women within Shire are, therefore, less likely to be able to work the longer hours, unpredictable shifts or undertake more tasks at a higher level that this depicted notion of talent requires. Women are consequently less likely to be included within the talent pool. Yet this bias is rarely questioned as it remains concealed behind ostensibly objective, gender-neutral criteria. The obscured nature of the meaning behind the words *may* therefore reinforce hegemonic masculinity, an all-hours culture and an underlying notion of women not fitting the remit of talent.

District / departmental SPOC guidance notes (and applicant guide) indicated that the one:one interview for those shortlisted from the expression of interest stage should consider the College of Policing (CoP) Talent Indicators – see Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 College of Policing (COP) Indicators

CRITERION			
	Cognitive Capacity	Leadership and Communication	Personal Drive
Descriptor	- Broader thinking and awareness (keeping abreast of what goes on; consider wider issues and impact on police; able to see link between tasks, own work and wider aims of the organisation; demonstrate longer-term thinking)	- Influential leadership (natural authority; willing to invest time to develop and empower others; thrive on seeing others succeed; able to flex leadership style to suit situation)	- Committed to self-development (acknowledge, act on and address own self-development needs; more likely to seek feedback and change as a result; willing to seek advice or guidance form others)
	- Problem-solving capacity (able to assimilate information quickly and not need much direction; consider risks and make clear and logical decisions; use professional competence to make quick and effective decisions under pressure)	- Inspirational role model (dedicated, enthusiastic, inspire others; committed set of personal values; someone others would go to for guidance and support)	- Focus on delivery (see tasks through to completion; deliver against challenging deadlines; 'go above and beyond what is expected to get the job done'; take opportunities and step out of comfort zone; someone you'd highlight as a positive representation of the organisation)

	- Implementing change (come up with innovative ideas and how to do things differently; recognise need for change; able to drive change, influence stakeholders and know what needs doing)	- Emotional intelligence (aware of others' emotions; compassionate; able to control own emotions; self-assured and self-aware; emotional resilience to bounce back when things don't go own way)	- Constructive ambition (stand out from the crowd due to influence on peers; highly motivated to achieve for team, force and self; motivated to be a good leader, not just status or rank)
		- Effective and adaptable communication (able to articulate self in front of any audience; use effective communication to engage others; communicate in a confident but not overly forceful or dominant manner; tailor message tone and content)	

SHIRE POLICE. 2014. *Talent Support Scheme – Guidance Notes for SPOCS, Applicants and supporting documentation.* Unpublished. P. 7.

Guidance Notes for SPOCs (Shire Police, 2014) also included illustrative questions and exemplar answers for interview stage, although in practice those interviewing applicants could – and did – deviate from this significantly.

It is noticeable that some of the COP indicators are potentially inclusive and gender-neutral. Emotional intelligence, for example, is indicative of NPM aims of professionalisation and the significance of police workforce wellbeing. However, as

Table 6.3 highlights, the CoP indicators are also vague, open to interpretation and potentially gender biased. For example, under cognitive capacity, keeping abreast requires the (extra-role) time to scan the horizon; under leadership and communication, the term ‘natural authority’ is widely subject to interpretation and masculinised notions of authority; under personal drive, going above and beyond what is expected takes the time to be able to do so.

Akin to potentially gendered CoP indicators, Guidance Notes for SPOCs similarly refers to intangible indicators, such as attitude, commitment, professionalism, passion and sincerity. As with many leadership constructs, these are sufficiently vague to be interpreted in a way that reinforces existing norms and stereotypes, a means of translating ostensibly neutral HR concepts and tools into potentially gendered practice. Commitment may be linked to demonstrating working additional hours and doing more work - a clearly gendered construct - although its translation into practice may also be more nuanced and refer to aspects such as loyalty (possibly seen as a more feminine trait). Yet the thread of ambiguity facilitates maintenance of the status quo within Shire.

Two specific exemplars used under the Leadership and Communication area of Inspirational Role Model, and the Focus on Delivery criterion were image and pride, with ‘good self-presentation' highlighted under the area of Effective and Adaptable Communication; this notion of physical image was referred to explicitly by several participants and will be further explored below.

Guidance Notes for Applicants (Shire Police, 2014) also outlined the application process, which involved the initial submission of an Expression of Interest form to the District or Department and an ‘opportunity to participate in a one-to-one discussion about the content of the … Expression of Interest Form’. The Notes specifically referred to CoP indicators in the shortlisting process, in addition to discussion of the ‘level of personal commitment required to be selected onto the scheme’. This has the potential to be interpreted as a commitment to longer working hours, which is itself gendered due to women’s greater non-paid work burden. However, it may also be interpreted as more gender-neutral attitudes such as loyalty or ambition, though even these may become gendered in practice. Ambition, for example, may vary over the career span for those faced with the challenge of combining child- or elder-care with a policing career. Thus the inherent ambiguity within the TSS shortlisting and interview process afforded opportunity for gendered practice to emerge, although it did not *determine* that this would materialise.

This selection process created a skewed uptake and profile of TSS participants, not necessarily in line with the initial context for scheme introduction. TSS initial cohort

participants were more likely to be police officers (comprising 70% of those included in the scheme, compared to approximately 55% of the total Force workforce (SPOC-revealed internal data)) and male (comprising 57% of those included on the TSS). These figures suggest that talent management may have reinforced the lack of career structure for police staff (Scholarios et al., 2017).

6.3.2 The Fast Track Programme (FTP)

FTP aspirants were required to submit an initial application and undertake a one-hour interview with Shire's senior leadership team. They were then either rejected or put through to the national selection stage, which included a two-day assessment centre and a series of intense selection exercises including interviews, presentations, reasoning and psychometric testing.

Applicants were assessed against 11 College of Policing key skills, competencies and characteristics: integrity, transformational leadership, resilience, business and financial skills, strategic partnership skills, ability to lead change, creativity and innovation, ability to hold a long-term strategic position, willingness to challenge existing culture, political astuteness and humility and self-development skills. Talented individuals were deemed to be those who demonstrated these skills, competencies and characteristics.

This notion of talent sits within an exclusive and stable approach (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020), whereby only *some* people are viewed as being talented and should, therefore, be selected and those skills capitalised upon. This is also a subject-based (rather than being object-based) approach, since those selected are the individuals demonstrating that they are or have talent.

One hundred individuals nationally were recruited onto the FTP 2014-2015, four of whom were from Shire and all of whom were participants in this study. These four officers had been the only ones to apply for the Fast Track programme and, historically unusual for Shire, all four were put through to the national assessment centre. Although this is a small number of interviews, there was remarkable consistency in experiences and discussion of key themes.

Of the scheme entrants during 2014-15, three were men and one was a woman. Their interviews will be included in the general analysis below but fast-track specific analysis will also be highlighted.

The above depiction of TSS and FTP opacity extends potential organisational ambiguity in pre-employment practice (Ingram and Allen, 2019) to internal Shire talent management documentation. Obfuscation within both local and national schemes lends itself to resultant lacunae becoming filled by cultural norms such as

the extreme working hours considered below. In turn, this creates opportunity for gendered mental models and practices (Acker, 1990, 1992, 2012) to reinforce hegemonic masculinity.

Section 6.4 considers the extent to which this is experienced by participants and the impact of Shire culture on talent management practice.

6.4 Talent management in context: The policing organisation and Shire Police culture[13]

Shire context and culture is characterised by emphasis on the physically strong body, a hierarchical organisation, and an extreme, all-hours, culture.

Physical credibility was depicted as central to personal standing within the organisation. One female Chief Inspector spoke of feeling the need to prove herself and demonstrate that she was not a physical liability to the team:

> *"As a woman you have to be able to do the job better than your male counterparts. You've got to have that credibility. You've still got to be able to go and put a riot shield up and be a public order commander, to be seen as having that tick.*
>
> *… It's just that kind of machismo really, and I think there's that bit about until you've … faced a few bullets, you're not worthy of being a senior police officer."*
>
> (Female Chief Inspector, TSS SPOC. FPSPOCH31, p. 34)

This participant depicts an organisational culture where women need to out-perform men to succeed. She was in a relatively senior position so had clearly succeeded within Shire culture but nevertheless used the present tense when highlighting what she experienced as a gendered organisation. The phrases she chose to use, such as 'facing a few bullets' and 'machismo', are quite masculinised and highlight how, as a senior police woman, she has adopted masculine frames of reference. She also articulates a need to demonstrate both physicality and 'machismo' (masculinised behaviours and attitudes) to be seen as dependable and credible. Physical strength and 'being able to do the job better' than men were seen as essential for her as a senior police woman, despite the fact that she was now in her fifties and in a senior rank, with no real day-to-day need to use physicality on the job.

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[13] The word culture is used here to refer to the specific organisational context which frames, influences and is influenced by Shire Police's workforce and their behaviour.

Other participants similarly referred to the physical body and used masculinised language while recalling examples of ongoing gendering of the job within Shire. One commented:

> *"I was never bullied, but ... I've had the comments where* [colleagues have said] *'Oh, you can't go to that, you're only five foot four and you're a woman'. You know - 'It's a fight, the lads will sort that out'."* (Female constable, TSS participant, FPOSB17, p. 9)

This participant was depicting a culture where not having the traditional (tall, male, strong) policing body was seen as against the desired norm, suggesting conflation of physicality and credibility with male and masculine – a point returned to below. Her use of 'the lads' to refer to male colleagues also suggests an affinity with other officers and acceptance of this view as simply the way it is, with the hegemonic masculine body perceived as important, but also difficult to achieve for female officers.

Male officers were similarly aware of the drive for a physically strong body, to the extent of pushing work-related hours to the extreme:

> *"Then after that* [a full shift] *I'm going to have to train 'cause .. I'm getting over a back injury so I can just start training again, because I identify myself as someone who keeps in shape .. I measure myself a lot against that. I've got certain expectations in my own fitness. So I'm going to finish all of that at maybe ten tonight and I might speak to my wife in that time 'cause I've not seen her all weekend."* (Male constable, TSS participant, MPOSL34, p.25)

The above officer was on the FTP and talked about a constant need to dedicate himself to the job, not just in terms of hours and extra-role work, but notably here in terms of his need to regain physical health quickly after injury. He prioritises being 'in shape' – this is a yardstick against which he self-assesses, and refers to the impact of long hours on his relationship, further discussed in Section 6.5.

The physical toll of the job and long working hours were similarly narrated by the following male participant:

> *"I joined at twenty-two, so I was still fairly young .. I went to pretty nice schools, universities and stuff. Walking into the Police was a culture shock .. in terms of what you had to deal with …both the emotional toll and just the physical demands of doing shifts that I'd never done. Working long hours without breaks, without eating, without drinking … it took its toll on me a little bit ...*
>
> *People talk about a police culture – a lot. Does it exist? Yes. Is it inevitable? Probably. I don't think you'd get away from that. I think I just adapted, and sort of maybe started to fit in a little bit more."*

(MPNSX26, pp. 10-11. Male police officer, FTP participant; applied, but not accepted for, the TSS.)

This officer was a non-traditional male entrant in terms of his university education, which was neither typical nor a requirement at the time he joined the police. He talks of a personal struggle with being accepted and was acutely aware of how his overt ambition and education made him the butt of jokes and different treatment from both colleagues and sergeants (line managers). Being overtly ambitious and highly educated did not sit easily with the militarised policing culture where everyone joined at the same level (constable for police officers) and promotion opportunities were limited in the context of austerity. He therefore changed his behaviour to fit into this culture.

As with the female sergeant above, this officer's language reflected a macho organisational context, where work had a bodily toll. He paints a picture of how bodies in this culture needed to withstand working very long hours, without breaks and with limited opportunity to take care of basic needs such as eating and drinking during a shift. It is interesting that he also referred explicitly to the emotional toll of the job, something that other participants (male and female) mentioned when, for example, discussing being first at a crime scene or working on a particularly challenging case. One younger male constable spoke of appreciating having a partner who was not in the police service, as this provided emotional relief from dealing with traumatic incidents at work:

"I think it's more of an emotional thing than anything else. The majority of the stuff we deal with is bad news and is sort of tragic and, you know, really can be quite traumatic. It's hard enough to kind of deal with that sometimes yourself let alone start sharing that with someone and bringing them down as well."

(Male police constable, on the TSS. MPOSL23, p. 22)

It appears that both men and women within Shire were acutely aware of the need to have both emotional resilience and physically strong and fit bodies, and of the toll of policing on their bodies, in addition to emotional / mental health consequences. There is also recognition of the extra burden placed on those who did not fit the ideal image of physical strength or were unable to bear the extreme toll.

This ideal strong, masculinised worker was also recognised and reflected in the talk of police *staff,* who spoke of being aware of their subordinate, less valued, status. In an attempt to fit in, some police staff deliberately dressed in a manner aimed at emulating the police officer uniform, depicted in accounts from male and female staff:

"I think as well, because we've got that divide between police officers and civilian staff … what I would just say is a professionalism of … looking

> *professional ... Are you wearing the right clothes, the right footwear?* (FSNSW10, pp. 22-23. Female staff, scale 1-4. Did not apply for TSS.)

This female staff participant identified a personal attempt to *look professional* and wear the *right clothes* and even to have an appropriate body stance and posture, explaining that the 'right clothes' meant something akin to the officer uniform. Police officers similarly frequently referred to their 'gear' and the weight of this, along with the toll of simply wearing such heavy apparel on the body. These are also linked to a militaristic culture, frequently referred to by participants and implicit in language and references made. The most senior female police officer in the study recalled her own experience of training school, with specific reference to a disciplined environment and marching and parade, very much akin to a military setting, with clear hierarchy and uniform inspection:

> *"I did really well at training school. It was a very strange sort of militaristic environment. I was sent away for fifteen weeks. Very formal, I was in my uniform all the time. I had a best uniform which I had to put on some mornings and we used to go out and march and parade and be inspected."* (Female Chief Inspector, not on scheme, FPSPOCH31, p. 6)

This Chief Inspector was in her fifties and obviously underwent training and induction prior to NPM - and austerity drives - within policing. It might be argued, therefore, that moves to professionalise the service and potentially efforts to reduce costs might have reduced this militaristic approach. However, the only female FTP participant, much younger in her mid-twenties, depicted a similar experience much more recently:

> *"When I joined .. you went to* [location] *for fifteen weeks .. it was very militarised – you paraded on a morning, whenever you were outside you had to have your hat on, your boots bulled .. if you see my joining picture it's like what you would get in the Army. Disciplined."* (Female police constable, FTP participant, FPOSW16, p. 32)

The picture narrated is one of continuing militaristic discipline, where boots are 'bulled' (polished for parade / inspection) and hats are worn outdoors, as in the armed forces. It is interesting to note, again, a direct reference to looking the part and appearance (the photograph in uniform). The word disciplined is also noteworthy here, depicting control, order and a regimented culture.

Further symbolism of the continuing disciplined and hierarchical culture was witnessed directly by the researcher when interviewing a senior male officer at one of the busiest districts. Other officers opened doors for this participant and referred to him as 'sir', and participants on the FTP spoke of being referred to as Sir or Ma'am by colleagues who knew they were on the programme, in what is depicted as a hierarchical command structure:

> *"The organisation is very hierarchical, we have a command structure and it's Sir/Ma'am or boss and whoever has the highest pips or crowns is always right."* (Male Detective Sergeant, on the TSS. MPOSH01, p. 6)

However, there was also some evidence of perceived change:

> *"When an inspector used to walk in the room you'd have to stand.. And there are some officers still do it .. Whereas now I wouldn't. But I'm sure if you look at some policy or whatever it'll still be written down that that's really what you should do .. It's a respect thing .. the odd people that do know that I've got through* [the FTP] *have been saying ma'am, because obviously you should refer to an inspector as ma'am. Or sir."* (Female police constable, FTP participant, FPOSW16, p. 33)

This FTP participant suggested that the organisation was changing, yet then proceeded to provide examples of either policy or behaviours where this deferential practice was still evidenced, reinforcing my own experience as highlighted above. It may be the case, therefore, that the shift this participant perceives is indicative of her own increased standing and familiarity with senior leadership team members now she is on the national FTP, rather than a cultural shift in line with NPM. Indeed, she subsequently articulates continuing tradition and militaristic undertones, but juxtaposes this with increasing numbers of women in the force:

> *"It's a uniform service and it has its traditions and things* [but] i*t's changed a lot now because .. the balance is different. When I went in CID there were definitely only a small pocket of girls, whereas now I think it'll be a lot nearer fifty-fifty .. They're talking about professionalising the police service and we've really gone from being .. almost militarised - this is what we do, we do it this way, we follow this procedure - to now, it's probably how I've been able to flourish a little bit."* (Female police constable, FTP participant, FPOSW16, p. 33)

This participant refers to professionalisation and increasing numbers of women as evidence of change, yet her own experiences to an extent suggest continuing emphasis on long working hours within a hierarchical organisation. For example, she subsequently explains how work-related time pressures meant that she had made a conscious decision to cut her hair short as she could not find time to care for it alongside the job and the FTP (see Section 7.7 below).

There was certainly evidence of the normalisation of long working hours. Participants spoke of how Shire was seen to embrace an all-hours culture, with significant demands on non-working time that was not only attributable to the long hours, but also the unpredictability of such:

> *"If I look at the chief inspector, who I work with, he often sends emails at ten o'clock at night, having worked a full day. He doesn't go home early. He takes his computer on holiday with him and … while I would like to get*

> *promoted, that's not the kind of life that I really want."* (Female sergeant, TSS participant, FPOSL06, p. 3)

Leadership here is depicted as working long hours and taking work on holiday (albeit a working model that this participant rejects) and is clearly a recognised part of Shire culture.

A male detective sergeant, also on the TSS, painted a similar picture of very long working hours which, in his case, he saw as being partly responsible for the breakdown of his relationship with his ex-wife:

> *"At one point I lived at the police station for about two weeks, literally. I went home occasionally and had a shower but came back again - there were so many suspects and so many interviews - it was virtually home, shower, change, and back again."* (Male detective sergeant, TSS participant, MPOSH01, p. 15)

This participant went on to describe how work was ubiquitous, to the extent that his daughter and current partner would remove the battery from his work phone or hide it in order to force him to switch off from work when he was at home. The job is ever-present, even when not at work.

Both male and female police officers spoke of this all-hours culture as problematic, particularly the difficulty this creates with work-life balance and family time. However, for those who want to succeed, working long hours is seen to be a necessary condition:

> *"Unless you're getting through a volume of work to a high quality standard, you won't get looked at, you won't get considered. And you only need to look at our SLT* [senior leadership team] *in terms of the length of hours that they work*." (Male sergeant, TSS participant. MPOHS21, p. 29)

> *"But when you are looking at people looking for promotion, they have put the extra effort, they have put the extra hours in."* (Female police officer, TSS participant, FPOSW03, p. 30)

Male and female police officers and staff view extreme working hours as pervasive, challenging, but essential for success. This was seen as particularly troublesome for women, who are seen as bearing the brunt of domestic work. The word women is used deliberately here as there was no evidence of a similar experience among male participants. An example of this is a female, early thirties, who described the attitude of her boss:

> *"My boss was quite hostile I suppose – and she has openly said that she's worked with people and all they thought about was their kids all day. She says 'You're nothing like that, you don't gibber on about them'. And I thought, well no, I'm at work and I'm a professional person at work; I go home and I'm a mum."* (Female staff, TSS participant, FSOSL05, p. 2)

This staff participant was referring to her own situation after having children and taking maternity leave, speaking of the difficulty she experienced in being seen as committed to the job.

A male officer in his twenties similarly commented:

> *"There's still that bit of culture of 'oh, it's a woman's job to look after the children' and it's a woman job to do this and a woman's job to do that, and I think that is slowly changing … you get more stay at home dads and stuff, but* [name] *that's also on this scheme is on about putting off having kids for a while."* (Male police constable, TSS participant, MPOSL29, p. 28)

The perception is that 'mums' (rather than fathers) are more committed to non-paid work obligations and thus could not be relied upon to prioritise the organisation, even during working hours. Non-paid work is seen as women's work by at least some within the organisation, with a consequential notion of women as being less committed to the job. This seems to translate into both working hours commitment, but also emotional or mental commitment when at work, reinforcing meta-discourse of work-family conflict as a woman's problem and not a structural or societal problem.

Shire cultural context is translated into HR practice. A female officer, for example, spoke of her personal experience of explicit bias in selection within Shire, where it was already 'known' who was going to be selected for the TSS (see Chapter 7 for further detail) and several others spoke in a more nuanced way of a gendered recruitment and selection bias. To illustrate, one male police officer recalls his own experience:

> *"There's all this fair recruiting now and the Police likes to be very open with its policies of … everyone can apply for them* [jobs / promotion]*. It's a load of rubbish - jobs for the boys still goes on ... I've witnessed it happen. I've gone into an interview, I've sat down in an interview, and they've said, "Don't worry, you've already got it." So it definitely still goes on."* (Male police officer, on the fast-track. MPOSB28, p. 17.)

This officer is broadly aware of HR policies and espoused practice, but contrasts that with his own experience, suggesting that the practiced culture within Shire remains unequal and one where the 'jobs for the boys' continues to be practiced.

The ideal police officer within Shire Police thus has a physically strong and fit body. Non-ideal type workers within Shire are not as highly valued, including women, but also non-traditional male recruits to the organisation and police staff who are viewed as being different by colleagues and superiors. There was evidence of 'non-traditional' police officers (either university educated, or with specific personal circumstances creating significant responsibility for family care) recognising the

hyper-masculinised culture and their precarity within it. For example, the 'non-traditional' officer cited above was acutely aware of being seen as different due to his education and overtly stated ambition. He told his story of being ridiculed by his first sergeant and ultimately of having to adapt his own behaviour in order to 'fit in a bit more'.

Other participants similarly highlighted the lack of fit to Shire culture of those who entered with higher-than-standard qualifications or on a designated fast-track programme. One male officer, on the TSS, repeatedly referred to the need for cultural fit and specifically referenced the High Potential Development Scheme (HPDS) – a scheme for fast-track promotion for *direct entrants* to the police – as not being culturally aligned:

> *"HPDS .. Generally speaking, the culture of the Police, wrongly, looks at those people to be, erm, wrong or shouldn't be in the job or 'who are they to tell us?' or, experience-wise, people don't like it. And I do stress that I think that's wrong and it shouldn't happen."* (Male police sergeant, on the TSS. MPOSH21, p. 23)

There was also evidence of older, and in some cases more senior, police officers continuing to place high value on this physical side of policing when discussing who they saw as talent:

> *"In terms of this officer - he arrests treble the amount of people that everybody else does, because – the level of personal motivation he has to put handcuffs on people is more than anybody else. And he will trawl every friend of theirs on Facebook, he will ring and he will ring and he will pester and he will badger, and he will bully, and he will smash peoples' doors down where other bobbies would be too scared to."* (Male police inspector, on the TSS. MPOSB13, p. 23)

The above depicts a continuing narrative of hyper-masculine being seen as talented, contrasted with, for example, direct entrants to the HPDS scheme, who were seen as being educated but not having 'hands-on' knowledge of the job. In this cultural context, anything and anyone other than the unencumbered, strong and standard entry police officer is marginalised. Irrespective of age, level or gender, participants consistently paint a picture of sacrifices in order to fit in. The female Chief Inspector cited above, for example, articulated her personal experience of taking Shire work on holiday with her and having little or no rest from work in order to study for her promotions examinations. Male officers similarly depicted an avaricious organisational culture that devoured non-paid work time. The overwhelming narrative from participants is one of a masculinised culture, where physical strength and an appropriate (masculine) police body confers advantage, but for non-traditional officers and police staff the perfect police body is extremely difficult to achieve.

Physical capital is most easily conferred and used by those who fit the dominant masculine ideal, are unencumbered and capable of working extreme hours.

This study extends previous policing research (e.g. Yates, 2018) to a meso and micro organisational context. Physicality and bodily stress are endemic and extreme working hours and work-home conflict as depicted in Chapter 4 (see e.g. Charman and Tyson, 2024) are reflected within Shire's masculinised milieu. Yet the ideal, masculinised body (rather than educated mind) within Shire Police is somewhat at odds with a political project towards accepted professional status, with highly educated entrants from middle class backgrounds feeling a lack of fit with Shire culture.

This is one of the key tensions in this study, as articulated by the younger female constable on both the TSS and the FTP (FPOSW16) cited above, depicting what she termed a militarised organisation, where physical aspects are fundamental to how the job is made sense of. Yet she also spoke of combining the old (militarised) with the new (professionalising) within Shire, increasing numbers of women police officers and her own ability to 'flourish' on the FTP. Younger police women, as this participant, may thus be experiencing a degree of shift towards professionalisation, with greater emphasis from senior leadership and talent schemes on knowledge and education, while simultaneously being aware of extreme hours demands and the prevailing cultural capital of a strong body.

TSS and FTP documentation and espoused practice is sufficiently opaque to be permeated *either* by a culture of professionalisation *or* one of continuing masculinisation, yet the former may be problematic within Shire where the physically strong body is given credence within a hierarchical organisation and an extreme, all-hours, culture. This is further developed in Chapter 8.

The following section explores the impact of Shire's all-hours culture in more detail and the individual coping strategies adopted to resolve work-life balance challenges.[14]

6.5 Shire Police culture and individual coping strategies

[14] There is a degree of double-counting in categorisation of participant narratives into these three strategies. Three of the Work Hard and Have it All and four of the Gender Blind strategies are double counted with the Accommodating and Adapting strategies. This is because it was possible, for example, for individuals to remain Gender Blind whilst themselves accommodating work demands by reducing hours working, or to have narrated a previous accommodative strategy that had now been replaced by Work Hard and Have it All.

A novel contribution is made with this finding of individual approaches to managing work / non-work conflict within Shire. Categories were developed following emergent evidence of distinctive patterns in participant narratives. Men and women told different life and career stories, with evidence of gendering of the ways in which individuals attempted to balance the demands of an extreme-hours organisation with non-work. Participants adopted one of three coping strategies, explained below:

1. Accommodating and Adapting
2. Working Hard and Having it All
3. Adopting a Gender-Blind Perspective

1. Accommodating and Adapting

This strategy and attitude involved participants accepting the dual and conflicting time burden of work and family, while adopting various personal time management strategies to reduce cognitive and practical dissonance. Individual strategies included prioritising family, accommodating work demands, compartmentalisation, or a combination that varied over time.

One female sergeant, for example, described her personal prioritisation of home and family:

> *"The priority is to make sure I get home on time and that my children are happy … When I'm at work I work hard* [but] *I don't want to do any more than I have to do. I want to be able to know that at whatever time it is, I can go."* (Female sergeant, TSS participant. FPOSL06, p. 5)

This was seen as her decision, cognisant of the demands made on those working within the organisation. Whilst questioning these demands placed upon her within the police service, there was no challenge of societal or broader structural constraints. Her attitude was one of acceptance of the broader gender order, where women bear the brunt of the domestic burden.

Other women spoke of a life course approach to managing work-family conflict. One officer, for example, commented that her career currently had a lower priority than her husband's, but that when he retired (in a few years' time), he would become the main carer and she would be able to prioritise career. Work-family time conflict remained, but with different resolution strategies over time.

Another female sergeant elucidated this approach, prioritising her family at one point in time and then her career when she felt family demands were not as pressing:

> *"I decided that I would put promotion on hold … I went off and had a child and came back and started to really focus … For me it was - right I'll sort my family life out and get where I want to be with that and then come back and start it* [my career]. *I know it shouldn't be like that, but … I think if*

> *you're an ambitious female sometimes that's the way it goes."* (Female sergeant, TSS participant. FPOSB22, p. 6)

This participant saw career progression as incompatible with having a young family. Her strategy was accommodative and longitudinal, with a decision to focus on having a family initially and then to pursue her career. Interestingly, this participant articulated a career-focused strategy initially, talking of the importance of gaining experience in the lower ranks ('on response') before pursuing promotion. It was only as she continued to tell her story that the deliberate personal prioritisation of family came to the fore, again suggesting an overall acceptance and accommodation of both organisational and wider societal norms and structures.

Some female police *staff* similarly talked of adopting a longer-term conflict resolution strategy. One senior HR participant, for example, referred to a delayed career development process, reflecting differing family circumstances:

> *"I then decided, okay, well I'll put myself back in the ring, and by that time my kids were going off to university and I'd run out of excuses to think that they needed me, because they clearly didn't. The timing for me was right."*
>
> (HR Officer (senior), not on NSS. FSNSL36, p. 2.)

This accommodating approach was most typical among female participants, but even childless police women and many police men were often keen to express an awareness of the work-family conflict, particularly where shift working or unpredictable hours were involved.

There was evidence of a similar response among some male participants, both staff and officers:

> *" .. most of my time's spent sort of family-based and time with the children, family and that sort of thing because I've got quite a range of kids ... It's just working it out, getting the balance right."* (Male staff, on TSS. MSOSC20, p. 6.)

Interestingly, this staff participant found that shift working was easier in terms of combining work and family, although his career history was not peppered with reference to having to accommodate his family to the same extent as that of many female police staff and officers.

One male officer, a participant on the FTP, described his own personal strategy of deliberately compartmentalising the two spheres of work and non-work, in the context of an all-hours culture:

> *"Long hours, I can do that .. I'm very good because I'm disciplined with allotting family time. It's like, well, you must do family time now.*

> *I've always said this job is seductive anyway, and that's the terminology I use on purpose because it really can distract you from everything else in life."* (Male police officer, on the TSS. MPOSL34, p. 25.)

This highlights dealing with a hyper-masculinised culture by balancing work and non-work through personal accommodation and individual strategies, without questioning perceived personal responsibility for accommodating an all-hours, avaricious, culture. The use of the word seductive is deliberate here, to highlight the all-consuming nature of the job which this police officer had wanted to do since being very young, having drawn a police officer self-portrait at primary school. Like many police officer participants, he defined himself in terms of his job and referred to his identity as an officer. Being a police officer was not just a job, it was *who* he was; because work was so central to him, something he relished doing, he could become immersed in the role and devote endless time and energy to work. However, he was aware of the potential for work to distract him from his family and referred to being 'disciplined' to ensure that he could take a share in school runs, for example.

This accommodation strategy was more prevalent among female participants, with six female police staff (out of seven) and five female police officers (out of seven) falling within this remit. Typically, women in this category adapted their work and non-work commitments over time as family circumstances fluctuated. Such accommodation and adaptation included part-time working or prioritising non-work commitments while dependents required more time and care, with work becoming more of a focus as family became more independent. Of the male participants, one (of two) male staff and four (of seventeen) male officers came within this remit. Two of the males compartmentalised work and non-work as their adaptive strategy, while remaining highly involved in work. Of the three remaining males within this category, two were highly educated and senior officers within a dual career family, with one of these alternating work and non-work priorities with his wife and the other prioritising his child with an ex-partner due to family circumstances. This might indicate that such non-traditional male police officers (more educated, but also quite senior) felt more able to negotiate the work/non-work conflict through at least s*ome* work-related adjustment. The final male officer was, at the time of the study, devoting considerable time to work but had just that week had a long conversation with his partner about re-prioritising work and non-work, so was verging on compartmentalisation or re-focusing non-work and work balance. Males adopting this strategy were therefore more likely to be within dual career households than women within this category and more able to continue to devote long hours to the job.

Although both male *and* female participants discussed personal work-life balance strategies, the notion that barriers imposed within a gendered organisation and all-

hours culture are predominantly a woman's problem prevailed. One male officer, on the FTP, articulated what he experienced as the typical choice faced by many women:

> *"Currently there's only one female on it* [the national scheme], *in comparison to five men. There's women that work part-time because there's childcare … there's very few bosses that are part-time, they're all full-time. You can't be a part-time inspector, you can't be an inspector in this job and have children and be working part-time and be a young mother, you can't do it."* (Male police officer, on the national talent scheme. MPOSB28, p. 28.)

This participant summarises an organisation where talent is seen as working long hours and where the home and family impact women's careers adversely. Men and women are seen as being different, with women more aligned to the private realm of home and the family. The internal mental work (Acker, 1990; 1992) carried out by both male and female participants highlights how this gender order is perpetuated within Shire.

2. Working Hard and Having it All

This second strategy, similarly, accepts the prevailing gender order and all-hours culture and was adopted by one of seventeen male police officers, three of the seven female officers (three of whom had narrated shifting strategies over time, thus blending two strategies over the life course (Accommodating and Adapting, in addition to Working Hard and Having it All)) and three of the ten female police staff. Here, the approach is to be superhuman (typically 'superwoman') and work very long hours both inside and outside of work. This facilitates career progression within an organisation where working long hours is deemed a necessary condition of success, whilst enabling caring for dependents and having a family.

One female officer in this study was on both the TSS and the FTP and, as such, was in a distinct minority. The FTP is detailed above as an elite, highly selective, scheme, with only four officers from across Shire having a successful internal application, three male and one female. Her story clearly highlights the tension between being what she described as feminine and being successful in a masculinised and uniformed organisation. When considering role models and mentors within Shire she spoke of one senior female as doing it all, illustrating the 'work hard and have it all' strategy to facilitate the retention of femininity within a masculinised culture, in addition to combining work and family in an all-hours culture:

> *"She's one of these women that can run an entire family, an entire department, still turn up on time with her hair done and, you know, I don't know how she does it. I had a lot of time for her, she was genuine. "*
> (Female police officer, on both the TSS and FTP. FPOSW16, pp. 10-11.)

The picture painted is one of a successful senior female officer who can act ‘like a man’ and be ‘terrifying’ and successful in a masculinised environment and in a masculine way (being ‘strong’), yet also act in a way that is consonant with her gender in terms of appearance and family responsibility. The depiction is a feminist one, where women who work hard can have and do it all, but only within the prevailing social discourse about the appropriate role of women and men. In other words, she can achieve at work, but is credible for continuing to act ‘like a woman’, having her hair done and retaining a polished, feminine appearance, whilst also running a department and ‘running’ a family. The word ‘genuine’ is used by the above participant to describe that successful female officer, suggesting that women are only genuine if they adapt to male standards and a masculinised culture, whilst maintaining femininity in other ways (e.g. responsibility for the family and appearance). Gendered structures and processes are thus accepted in this female narrative and seen as something that women must resolve individually.

A female officer, participating on the TSS, similarly depicted a senior female colleague who managed to work hard and have it all:

> *“One lady … she had a wealth of experience, a wise lady … and she married that … whole … home life and work – because this has all been very work orientated, but it’s about striking that balance.”* (Police sergeant, TSS participant. FPOSW03, p. 20.)

There is no challenge, again, to the prevailing gender order and superstructure that renders it a woman’s role to combine home and work and try to succeed or have it all.

Another sergeant, also a TSS participant, narrated her own personal attempts at doing it all and the demands of combining a career with being the main carer for her young family, concluding that:

> *“… it's a very hard balance to have, with your family and your work life.”* (Female sergeant, TSS participant. FPOSB22, pp. 13-15.)

This female sergeant was working very hard, juggling working full-time in an unpredictable and very long working hours culture. She was also the parent with the personal responsibility for arranging childcare, despite having a demanding and full-time job. There is some evidence of guilt in this participant’s subsequent articulation that she felt that she had ‘not been around as much as she should have been’. Thus, women working within Shire Police are left feeling that it is their personal responsibility to do everything and that they are failing if they do not succeed in doing it all perfectly, evidencing Acker’s (1990; 1992) internal mental work substructure.

As highlighted, Shire had relatively few senior female police officers or staff, thus the above examples are more limited than might have been the case in a less gendered organisation. The one very senior female participant also articulated her own 'working hard to do it all' approach:

> *"You gave a year of your life up to do that studying, to qualify for the* [promotion] *exam. It was an hour every night and a bit more at the weekends to get through the syllabus.*
>
> *Even on our family holiday – we went to Florida that year – and in the afternoon my books would come out and I would study while* [husband] *took the kids off to the pool.*
>
> *So ...If I'm going to do this, invest all this time, when I haven't got a lot of time between working and looking after the children, I'm doing it once. Not doing it to fail."* (Detective Chief Inspector, female SPOC for the TSS. FPSPOCH31, p. 19.)

This female Detective Chief Inspector highlights the need to conform to the unencumbered man standard when pushing for promotion, to the extent of working while on holiday with the family. She was, indeed, able to have both the family holiday and the career, but through working in way that should not have been required by an avaricious organisation.

The only male participant to appear within this category was highly resentful and expressed considerable guilt over being 'required' to leave work 'early' (which was actually not early at all, but sometimes even in excess of his contracted hours) to drive his son to / from football. This male police officer was part of a dual career couple, whose wife worked as a secondary school teacher, and his son had been sponsored by a national UK football team:

> *"My son's a talented footballer .. so we have a lot of trailing around to do. He started secondary school in September and they pay for him to go to public school. He goes on the train every morning, but at the moment we're having to pick him up. So - I'm probably feeling over guilty – there's some days where I might be 'I'm leaving right now'. Three o'clock, I'm gone – no matter what's happening.*
>
> *And I probably overcompensate because - even though I've done my eight hours for the day, I've been in at half six – I still feel guilty about going at three o'clock and I probably overcompensate on other days".* (Male Inspector, on TSS. MPOSB13, p. 20)

The role of dual career relationships in locating male participants within either the Accommodating and Adapting or Working Hard and Having it All coping strategy requires further research, but there is a tentative suggestion that dual career police men may have a slightly greater propensity to devote more time and energy to non-work obligations, suggesting potential for revised family strategies over time.

3. Adopting a Gender Blind Perspective

Whilst many police staff and officer participants openly spoke of a gendered order, and/or the differing constraints faced by women within a masculinised Shire culture, there was also evidence of gender blindness. This attitude was evident in both male and female participants: fourteen of seventeen male police officers (two of whom also appeared within the Accommodating and Adapting category), one female staff (who previously depicted very traditional non-work roles for herself and her partner) and two female police officers (both of whom also narrated personal adaptation and thus also appear within the Accommodative and Alternative strategy category). These participants all expressly voiced the notion that Shire was gender neutral and that both male and female participants had equality of opportunity. However, personal narratives often simultaneously belied a gendered organisational culture; many male police officers, for example, overtly stated that gender was not relevant to opportunity to join either the TSS or to succeed within Shire, whilst also revealing stories about a masculinised, all-hours culture and a belief that domestic work was women's work.

Participants with this perspective typically cited the growth in numbers of senior women police officers as testament to equality of opportunity:

> *"I don't think anyone's looked at .. because they're female or because they're male. I think we go the opposite way. But for example, firearms is male dominated at the minute. And every time it comes out you can guarantee that application process will say 'we particularly welcome female officers or those from BME backgrounds'. I don't like it because .. if I applied to firearms, I want to get in there because I'm getting there on merit, not because I'm female.*
>
> *We've so many talented females that have got a voice now and have been good leaders and inspire people like me now … and they're really strong and they're really respected.*
>
> *.. I'd prefer to work with men, purely because I'm not hair and makeup, nails, that sort of girl, I'm a tomboy, and I just like to be in a lads' environment where they'll talk about sport and cars and things like that. And ... a lot of women take things to heart and are a lot more sensitive than guys."* (Female police officer, on the TSS. FPOSB17, p. 35).

The above participant, a female officer on the TSS, was a local representative for the British Association of Women into Policing and was clearly aware of historic difficulties and prejudice facing women within the police service. However, she overtly denied that gender was an issue within Shire Police today, before then reverting to the 'women are different' perspective when suggesting that women are more sensitive than men. This reinforces the point that all actors have agency, emphasising the importance of qualitative enquiry to develop an understanding of

the meaning and significance of gendered organisations to those within them. This particular officer had adopted a stance that protected her as an individual, claiming to be clearly different to other females within the organisation. However, she expressed the 'think leadership, think male' mantra outlined in Chapter 3, suggesting that *other* females were less effective leaders or officers who were sensitive and talked too much, other than those women leaders who were seen to be 'strong', thus contra-stereotype.

Other participants expressing a perception that there was no gender bias within the organisation typically cited the presence of women in the current Shire senior leadership team, highlighted by the following male officer:

> *"If you look at* [area] *command team at the moment, there's a fair mix of female and male officers on there. I don't see any issues in terms of equal opportunities nowadays in the organisation. I don't see that* [gender] *being a barrier."* (Male police officer, not on the TSS. MPNSH02, p. 35.)

This third attitude, therefore, applies to both male and female participants who believed that gender was no longer a barrier to success in the modern policing organisation, and that a few successful women were testament to equal opportunities.

The notion of a culture of gender equality and opportunities equally available to all was evident throughout the ranks, including among senior staff responsible for making key decisions within the TSS. A senior male divisional TSS SPOC, himself a Chief Inspector, articulated his belief in current equality of opportunity for males and females:

> *"Yes the gender split* [of TSS applicants] *was probably more males than females, but that's probably reflective of the numbers in the organisation anyway. So I personally don't think that we create an environment where you're restricted in your opportunities whether you're a male or a female at all."* (Male Chief Inspector, TSS SPOC. MPSPOCX30, p. 83)

Despite acknowledging, in passing, an organisation characterised by more men than women and with more males than females applying for the TSS, this officer articulated a reality for him of complete equality. Possible reasons for the skewed gender profile within the organisation - and among those applying for the TSS - are either not recognised by this SPOC, not considered, or not felt to be important.

There is evidence among narratives of awareness of *some* aspects of gendering within Shire Police (for example, mention of certain roles (e.g. operations) being male dominated, highlighting familiarity with horizontal segregation). Yet this is juxtaposed with an enduring belief among those adopting the gender-blind strategy that the organisation and its methods, processes and systems are gender neutral.

Moreover, where anyone other than the unencumbered male was seen to be disadvantaged, this was deemed to be the individual's problem, not the organisation's. This was articulated by a female TSS officer, herself dealing with juggling family, childcare, and her career:

> *"As an individual you've got to manage your own work-life balance … the talent scheme's not about how you manage your work, your home life is it, it's about what you're doing at work. And the only way* [gender] *would potentially put a barrier up is… if you know you can't push yourself to get promoted and things like that. Because it's long hours, you've got to study every night and things like that."*
>
> (Female police sergeant, on the TSS. FPOSB22, p. 22)

Through this lens, gender remains a woman's problem, not structural or organisational and gender is not perceived to be relevant to the TSS or opportunity to apply and participate. Gender divisions thus remain unrecognised and unchallenged, reinforcing and maintaining Acker's (1990; 1992) gendered forms of consciousness. This strategy and evidence clearly highlights participant attitudes of gender inequality being a problem that is now solved, pointing towards emergent anti-woke agendas almost a decade before this was widely recognised (Vinnicombe et al., 2024).

The above three strategies highlight alternative individual and personal strategies for resolving the work-non-work (notably family) conflict created by an avaricious, all-hours, organisation. The first two (Accommodating and Adapting and Working Hard and Having it All) depict the continuing gendering of the organisation, with an enduring ideal of the unencumbered man. In this context, it is women who typically have to work hard in order to have (or do) it all; women continue to bear the domestic burden and either adopt kaleidoscope life-course work-family strategies (family prioritised while dependents require this, career prioritised when circumstances shift over time) or sacrifice leisure and personal care in order to work long hours whilst spending time with family. These first two strategies remain unchallenged in part because of the third strategy, the continued prevalence of a Gender-Blind strategy and culture within the organisation. This third element reflects an interesting Shire paradox. The organisation itself recognises a need to increase female representation at senior levels, and in certain functional areas (see Section 6.2.1), yet the prevailing discourse is that the organisation is an equal opportunities employer, offering flexible working practice where feasible and valuing all staff through, e.g., efforts to offer talent development opportunities to *all* employees (the outer circle) and fair selection to the inner circle (TSS). Individuals identified as talented are potentially more likely to have heightened felt organisational obligation, reducing narrative around inequality which would be denigrating exactly that

organisation identifying them as talent. Considering opportunity to be equally available to both men and women avoids dissonance for the included and facilitates personal belief in talent status. Moreover, many of the excluded are hesitant to engage in discourse suggesting that gender is in any way linked to their experience, which is instead related to structural constraints or being on the periphery of valued networks (see Chapters 7 and 8), heralding wider societal discourse and attitudes discussed in Chapter 3. A few successful women within Shire were seen as indicating achievement of gender equality. However Shire was quite unique, having a female Chief Constable, which may partially explain such emergent discourse and reinforces the need to interweave contextual awareness into talent management analysis (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020).

Individual narratives depict an egalitarian organisation, with equal opportunities available for all. The masculine culture is thereby sustained, since men and women typically talk of women's (childcare / eldercare / time constrained) problems, which are women's issue to address, rather than being part of a wider narrative that acknowledges systemic and structural barriers to equality of opportunity.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the two available Shire talent management schemes, (gendered) espoused and practiced understandings of talent within a gendered organisation and has contributed three individual strategies for dealing with work / non-work conflict.

Calls for inclusion of meso and micro context within talent management research (e.g. Gallardo-Gallardo, 2020; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020; Garavan et al., 2021) are partially addressed, with exploration of Shire culture, to be further developed within chapters 7 and 8.

The above further highlights how lacunae within both local and national schemes lends itself to cultural norms, such as the extreme working hours depicted above, filling gaps and resolving ambiguities. This creates opportunity for gendered mental models and practices to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. A further contribution of this chapter is thus evidencing the continuing relevance of Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) gendered organisational theory to talent management and this specific policing context. Moreover, TSS and FTP language opacity creates opportunity for embodiment of gendered symbols and images, culminating in adherence to gendered persona and reproducing – not questioning – a gendered substructure.

Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 will explore the translation into practice of the TSS, politicization of talent management, and the lived experience of those currently participating on the TSS compared to the excluded.

Chapter 7 Empirical Chapter: The Politicization of Talent Management

7.1 Introduction

Despite an increase in talent management publications, there is a prevailing unitarist perspective (an assumption of shared organisational goals and values) and limited research into the ways in which individual agendas and self-interest might interfere with the 'rational' and formal organisational talent agenda (Swailes and Blackburn, 2016; Tyskbo, 2019).

In the context of Shire's gendered organisational culture (see Chapter 6) this chapter explores political aspects of talent management practice, extending nascent critical research from mainstream focus on MNEs to a single, UK, public sector organisation and to a UK policing context.

The significance of visibility – being seen and being heard –, intra- and inter-district variation and the role of line managers are considered, followed by the very specific role of mentors and sponsors in enhancing protégé visibility, links to social capital and its gendering. In addition to extending extant research around mentoring for women in policing (Laverick and Cain, 2014), a novel contribution is made through identification of the role of mentors as shields.

In this chapter I argue that time is central to talent management practice within Shire masculinised culture and that, within this cultural context, talent management is a process whereby talent is performed. Finally, a novel contribution is made to critical talent management theorisation through the development of a model of the politicization of talent management.

7.2 Individual talent visibility

Participants spoke of visibility to key decision-makers as central to being understood or recognised as talent. Visibility was linked to both physical proximity to key decision makers and proximity or fit with the extreme hours, physically strong talent ideal depicted in Chapter 6. Physical proximity to key decision makers at Shire matters, despite the relatively narrow geographical spread of sites (within a 20-30 mile radius in one UK county). Even very small differences in location and proximity may have a disproportionate influence on the closeness and visibility of those who might potentially be included in a talent pool.

Most male officers and several female officers and staff articulated this view that talent is someone who is visible and recognised by the senior leadership team, with physical proximity described as central to the process of getting known or seen as talent. A male TSS officer participant in the largest district at Shire discussed his own difficulties with 'being seen' due to his physical location and lack of proximity to key decision-makers. Individual visibility was also limited where individuals were within a specialised sub-unit (such as safeguarding). This can be contrasted with the role of the scheme itself in increasing visibility, as highlighted by the female officer below:

> *"I'll be at an advantage … the current senior leader team now know who I am. When they're sat round the table discussing these people that are wanting to be promoted, they'll say my name and they'll all say 'yeah, we know [NAME]'."* (FPOSB22, p. 9*)*

The TSS lead in one of the smaller districts, with experience of several larger Shire districts, reinforced this notion of being visible and close to key decision-makers in order to be recognised as talent:

> *"…it's still very political…about who's done a good job and who do we think's a safe pair of hands … You've got another candidate over here who they* [senior leadership team] *might not know but who's an equally good safe pair of hands…but they just don't know them. So you get this 'delicate' feedback about, 'you need to do something about building your profile'."* (MPSPOCX30, p. 29)

The implication is that physical proximity (where an individual is stationed) is essential to 'get noticed', which is in turn essential for inclusion in the talent pool and being seen as talent. The allusion to 'delicate feedback' highlights how there is no direct reference to visibility in decision justifications, but framing of this in more objective terms such as profile building. The non-visible candidate will thereby remain ignorant of actions they might take to become seen as talent.

A talent management lead in one of Shire's districts articulated a situation where even the size of district can affect individual visibility and propensity to be seen as talent:

> *"If there's … fewer* [people at smaller District] *… you can get to know people much better, much quicker, because there's fewer of them … You're going to know whose strengths and weaknesses lie in what areas and do a much better job of bringing that out than you would at [larger district] where you have … nearly a thousand staff."* (MPSPOCX30, p. 79-80)

The messy world of organisations, even those located in one region of one country, may incentivise managers who are making decisions about who is and who is not talent to use simplified heuristics in order to deal with real-world

overload and complexity, through the selection of who is visible and who they know. This extends extant literature depicting the role of physical proximity within MNEs (e.g. Mäkelä et al., 2010; Tyskbo, 2019) to a single UK policing organisation.

In addition to physical proximity, a more nuanced understanding of talent visibility - being 'seen' or 'heard', and the role of self-promotion – was depicted:

> *"*[Shire] *recognises people that talk a lot and make a big deal of themselves. Which I think is probably why … I'm only a sergeant … The people at the top are the ones that talk the most… Not necessarily do it, but talk it … the ones that want to be heard in meetings."* (Female officer, on the TSS. FPOSL06, p. 15)

Participant narratives suggest that performance in meetings, getting oneself noticed through talk, is key to being spotted and progressing. However, being 'visible' and 'heard' were seen as more difficult for female officers, to whom this was slightly 'alien':

> *"... speak with authority, loud, able to take control of a situation. … I was only small, so I had to become loud to be heard. I had to be larger than life, really… to stand out. But actually, being a woman, you stand out."* (Female officer and SPOC. FPSPOCH31, p. 47)

Where female is talked of as 'standing out' this was due to under-representation of women, not because of any innate ability to be heard. It is also interesting that the female officer and SPOC cited above explicitly referred to having to compensate for being 'small' by working harder to get noticed and be heard, resonating with discussion of a hegemonic masculinity characterised by a physically strong body depicted in Chapter 6.

Similar dissonance with a masculinised talent concept was also articulated by those male participants who were distanced from the prevailing talent norm. Two of the male staff participants, for example, highlighted a 'natural quietness' when talking about themselves and (not) being seen or heard. For males who do not comply with the hegemonic masculine ideal, there is a similar barrier to being 'visible' - and hence talent - as for Shire females. Male police staff workers are already different to the ideal since police staff are seen to be less valuable than police officers per se and men in such roles are seen to be acting against a gendered (male=masculine) stereotype, with staff roles seen as 'women's work'. Hence, as with female police officers, male police staff face a double bind as they do not fit with a gender norm of staff=female and officer=male, and neither do they fit with the idealised hegemonic masculinity of a physically strong body capable of coping with extreme demands.

Some male officers were also scathing of what was seen as requisite confidence or being loud enough to be heard. For example, a male officer who had applied for neither the TSS nor the fast-track spoke of 'talent' as being linked to certain buzz words:

> *"You could literally just stand there say: "Using resilience … confidence … being aware of the public's satisfaction with how I've dealt with this." You could just literally say those words randomly, you'd be getting the marks."* (MPNSL21, p. 21)

Similarly, a male officer from one of the larger districts, whose application for the TSS was unsuccessful, commented:

> *"The ones who shout the loudest about their skill sets often get the jobs, not necessarily based upon ability."* (MPNSL38, p. 22)

Male police officers who openly criticised a felt need for talent to be seen and heard were more likely themselves to have either had an unsuccessful application for the TSS, or to have otherwise distanced themselves psychologically from the organisation and not made an application at all; both groups are at the margins of a hegemonic masculinity requiring commitment to extreme working hours at Shire.

In addition to physical distance having implications for the likelihood of an individual's inclusion in a talent pool, so too does social distance and homophily. An example of this was one male police officer who had been on the British police rugby team. Through contacts made during a police rugby team tour opportunities arose for him to transfer into CID:

> *"I'd gone out on the rugby tour – when we were out in Australia on a rugby tour with the police – and one of the chaps who was out with us worked at the counterterrorism unit, and just sort of had a quiet word with me. And just said 'I don't know if it'd be something you'd be interested in but, if you are, then give me a shout when you're back at work' sort of thing."* [Male Detective Constable, MPOSL29, p. 7]

This officer was seen as socially similar to the detective sergeant who was also on tour, who subsequently alerted him to an opportunity for a trainee investigator's course, at that point not known to others in Shire and to which this officer then successfully applied. The rugby team at that time was unlikely to have been equally available to women officers or staff, reinforcing a hegemonic masculinity highlighted in Chapter 6. Difficulties of combining long working hours and such networking activity with caring responsibilities (see Chapters 6 and 8) can severely restrict possible benefits that might otherwise arise out of social networking.

Visibility as a concept, therefore, appears relevant to both male and female participants, with social distance (reduced visibility due to 'difference') being more relevant to female participants and those males not sitting easily within hegemonic masculinity or those rejecting the dominant Shire culture. Male officers most easily fit the ideal and were those who tended to speak unquestioningly of 'confidence', which was seen as 'natural' and thus not open to challenge. These findings extend nascent research highlighting women's greater experienced difficulty in being visible or heard; women are seen as 'naturally' quieter and not conforming to a hegemonic masculine ideal, contributing to the evidenced continuing relevance of Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) mental models and gendered organisation (Chapter 6 refers).

The implications of this for the gendering of talent management is further considered in Chapter 8 and enhancing personal visibility through a deliberate strategy of profile-raising is explored in section 7.5.

7.3 Inter-district variations and line manager parochial self-interest

Participants depicted inter-district variations in talent management practice, including the initial prominence or awareness raising of the scheme itself. Once aware, personal visibility was further affected by district or departmental size (see Section 7.2), political practices and local interpretation.

Inter-district variation is highlighted in the following quotation from a female officer, currently on the TSS, whose husband (also a (senior) police officer) works at the largest Shire district:

> *"I'd seen it on the intranet and then … my husband worked in* [largest district] *and he'd put one of his sergeants forward. The way that it had been sold to them was that if you don't go on this TSS you've got no chance of getting promoted … Then I was in another meeting where our sponsor said "We're not advertising it because if people can't be bothered to find it, then we don't really want that sort of person on the scheme."* (FPOSL06, p. 17)

This depicts a difference between the larger district, where a deliberate decision was made to prompt individuals to apply, compared to a different, smaller district where the leadership team had decided not to highlight the scheme as part of an almost pre-selection test of horizon scanning. Variability in the communication and promotion of the TSS highlights how political practices influence talent management even within a small scale, public sector, organisation and between different physical spaces, despite limited geographic distance.

Several participants also spoke of a quota system: different districts were allocated a maximum number who could be supported on the TSS from that particular district, raising the issue of political 'acceptability' of the TSS in practice and attempts to manage this through quotas. One police officer who had unsuccessfully applied for the TSS, discussed his feedback after not being selected:

> *"I found out that maybe that was a bit of a political decision. I don't want to say that I didn't get it just because somebody else got it, but I did hear that they had to spread it out, so a Sergeant got it, an NPT officer got it and a member of CID got it. So that it was spread across the different departments."* (Male officer, Not on TSS. MPNSX26, p. 15)

Having a quota system was seen by participants as an attempt to ensure representation and appease different voices in the organisation, but potentially at the expense of those with talent. It was possible to be overlooked in a smaller district if the quota had already been met, *or* in a larger district with a higher allocation but a political push towards representation across all departments.

Participants also spoke of different districts interpreting the scheme differently. The championing and interpretation of the talent management programme was seen as pivotal to its practice, yet was subject to this inter-district variation and internal political factors:

> "[Shire] *have got the TSS … but it's then run by the district."* (FPOSB22, p. 20 – female officer, on the TSS.)
>
> *"One of the main barriers goes back to politics … and the little five mini chief constables that we've got."*
>
> (MPOSB28, p. 27 – male officer on the FTP.)

For these participants there was not a single TSS, rather multiple schemes running throughout (the five Districts of) Shire and reflecting, at least in part, preferences and interpretations of leadership teams. The impact of strong district or departmental leaders is a distinctive aspect of Shire culture that may not be typical in other police forces or organisations, yet it had a marked effect on TSS outcomes and perception. This extends Zesik's (2020) political talent management behaviours from the perspective of UK-based HR practitioners to talent management practice as experienced by participants.

Moreover, these geographical influences were seen to prevail even within just one district, with multiple sub-stations and very powerful leaders:

> *"There are cliques and sometimes you know who has got the job before someone applies for it. Some people actually ask 'is that job taken?' before someone will apply, if it's going to be open, because people will perhaps know that that Superintendent or that Chief*

> *Inspector has somebody waiting in the wings for that role."* (Male Detective Sergeant, on the TSS. MPOSH01, p. 6)

This sergeant spoke of very influential local managers, whose preferences determined who would be appointed, promoted, or successful in a TSS application.

Although those in larger districts may experience difficulty in being 'seen', since it would be more difficult to stand out from a larger crowd, those in smaller districts faced potential difficulties with TSS opportunities for development:

> *"On my review team I've got someone from* [District] .. *he's a civilian member of staff who's on their talent scheme, but because they're such a small district* [they] *didn't have the facilities to be able to put him in a position that would develop him."* (Female police officer, on the TSS. FPOSB22, p. 17)

Participants across all categories other than police staff indicated that the parochial self-interest of line managers influenced talent management practice, with stories of district involvement in the process affording sufficient liminal space for inconsistency, favouritism and political factors to affect the doing of talent management. This is illustrated in the rugby tour story above, and e.g. the following quotation from a female staff TSS member, recounting a situation when her line manager's self-interest was directly opposed to TSS requirements:

> *"Immediately after I joined* (the TSS)*, I got a phone call … 'We want you to do a secondment on this review team. And it's three months and you start on Monday.' And my boss was like 'no chance. You can't … on a team with only four of us and we're stacked out, we've got overloaded with work'. She's saying, I can't let twenty-five percent of my team go, with no backfill."* (FSOSD21, p. 21.)

Line managers are thus central to the process of talent construction, with Shire line manager self-interest and personal agendas getting in the way of espoused TSS policy and practice. Similarly, the specific location of those with talent has implications for the likelihood of being 'seen' to be talent and for being able to capitalise on this.

The following section considers a further possible factor leading to practiced talent management being different to espoused – the role of mentors and sponsors.

7.4 Sponsors and mentors

Section 7.2 highlighted the significance of individual visibility, itself affected by both physical and social distance from decision-makers; the greater the individual's physical and social distance, the less likely they were to be visible

as talent. This section of Chapter 7 develops these arguments through consideration of the impact of talent sponsors and mentors.[15]

There was evidence of the central role of personal sponsors and political, non-formalised, aspects of the TSS when the scheme is being promoted and individuals are deciding whether or not to apply. A talent sponsor may be the individual's line manager, as articulated by several participants including this officer, prompted to apply for the TSS by her line manager:

> *"When the talent scheme was out it was him* [line manager] *that was saying, you need to apply for it … Maybe if I'd not had that push I might have thought 'oh well, I won't bother, I'll just carry on doing what I'm doing."* (FPOSB22, p. 7-8 – female officer, on the TSS)

This portrays line mangers having an impact on who is likely to apply, not only through their ability to nominate an individual for the TSS, but also through awareness raising. Indeed, it could be argued that line manager sponsorship increases the individual's self-confidence and potential view of self 'as talent' and self-perceived probability of success. This is implicit in the above narrative and reinforced by the following participant, talking of how being given 'the nudge' may be more acceptable to some than TSS self-nomination, particularly for those with a lower propensity to self-promote (articulated by several participants, both male and female, as self-confidence):

> *"It's easier to say, yes, I'm on the scheme, I was put forward by my sergeant, rather than say, yes, I'm on that scheme, I put myself forward because I think I'm really talented …"* (MPOSL29, p. 28 – Male officer, on the TSS)

The mirror or dark side of such sponsorship is perceiving oneself not to be a potential member of the scheme due, in part, to not being singled out (see also Chapter 8), as articulated by several participants, including this male officer:

> *"Then my frustrations come out, because why are A, B and C being given the nudge to go for it and I haven't been pushed in that direction?"* (MPNSH02, p. 26 – Male officer, not on the TSS)

Personal sponsorship by an individual's line manager can be a significant source of enhanced social capital and increased probability of a successful application to a talent management scheme. A loose interpretation of social capital is adopted here, whereby social capital is seen as advantage derived

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[15] Although sponsors here are interpreted as slightly less formal and possibly acting in a less structured way than mentors, the terms are often used interchangeably. Participants themselves often did not differentiate between the two, and there was typically an overlap in roles. One individual, for example, may simultaneously be line manager, mentor and sponsor.

from personal networks (Swailes, 2016); in this study, access to sponsors and mentors and wider social networks (such as the rugby team). Although the personal power of the sponsor or mentor him/herself can also vary widely, moderating the impact of that sponsor or mentor, all TSS participants talked of sponsors or mentors having a positive effect on their decision to apply and/ or their TSS experience.

The majority of those on the TSS had a mentor, with the opposite being true for the majority of those not on the scheme. Of course, this was expected since access to mentors is one of the benefits offered to those on both the TSS and fast-track (see Chapter 6). Potential benefits arising out of a mentoring relationship appear to have been multi-faceted, including increasing mentee self-confidence, visibility, access to knowledge, probability of TSS selection and ultimately promotion prospects. Both male and female officers were more likely to have a male mentor, although 2 of the male police officers and 1 of the female officers had a senior female mentor. Interestingly, of the (5) male and female police staff included in the TSS, two had senior male officers as a mentor and two had external mentors. This is not surprising given the staff / officer differentiation, the perceived lower status of police staff and the more limited availability of senior female mentors at Shire.

Participants spoke of an experience where personal visibility (see 7.2) and also profile building work was important for opening up opportunities to manage one's impression with strategic decision-makers, but that such visibility was itself influenced by those sponsors and mentors to whom one has access. One female staff participant, for example, spoke of having deliberately asked a senior (male) police officer to be her mentor and not someone more senior in HR (where she worked):

> *"He's progressed at a speed of knots and I don't doubt that he'll take over the world at some point. I feel it's important to have influences like that in your career. I don't necessarily feel that is there within my own department ..* [you need the] *context around the big picture, or you'll never do as well as you can."* (Female police staff, on TSS. FSOSW25, p. 8)

This mentor was someone this participant had encountered several years ago, when at Chief Inspector level, and with whom she had maintained contact. She articulated a deliberate strategy of choosing this person as her mentor as he was very senior and could provide a strategic overview and knowledge, and links outside her HR department. He also sponsored her involvement in a high-profile, highly visible, change management project, directly enhancing her own

personal visibility and managing a degree of political opposition from within her own department:

> *"Our Protected Services Crime Department is going through a massive change project .. and* [name] *wants a dedicated HR professional to look after everything. He has asked for it to be me. I don't think my management team want to let me go because of the other work that I've got, so there is a bit of politics going on."* (Female police staff, on TSS. FSOSW25, p. 8)

This female staff member spoke of making it clear to her line manager that she wanted to take responsibility for the change project but was aware of the internal politics within Shire. She had deliberately chosen to ask a senior officer, not police staff, to be her mentor. With relatively few senior female officers, this was also a male, who was sufficiently senior to be able to nominate her for strategic projects and powerful enough to be able to win political battles such as these to enable her to manage that project.

A female officer similarly articulated the significance of mentoring for personal visibility and TSS or indeed promotion applications. She had previously been unsuccessful in her promotions Board application, but was now more politically astute, having learnt how others had practiced presentations and interviews with senior mentors prior to the Board. She subsequently made a conscious decision to work with a senior mentor:

> *"He's really helped me and every time I've needed support for a job or I've needed support to get on the TSS, he's been there. He said to me 'if you need to come and do some work with me before you go for interviews or whatever, I'm here'. He's the Chief Superintendent."* [Female police officer, on TSS. FPOSB17, p. 13]

Working with a senior mentor was also seen as having a noticeable impact on personal confidence. The following female officers, for example, spoke of how this directly translated into heightened self-assurance:

> *"I was quite a shy PC. I worked hard, but doubted myself a little bit .. and Inspector* [name] *was always really supportive. He used to laugh and say "You will get there and you will achieve" and give me direction .. I think it's about gaining confidence as an individual."* [Female officer, on the TSS. FPOSW03, p. 17
>
> *"… It's nice to have that recognition, that support* [off her mentor] *.. It's that confidence I think."* [Female officer, on the TSS. FPOSB22, p. 6]

Having a senior sponsor or mentor to boost personal confidence, raise awareness of the scheme and support with preparation for applications was seen as central to many who were on the TSS. The dark side to this is that

those who do not have a powerful mentor or sponsor are likely to lose out, irrespective of talent:

> *"There's an element in the police of 'who you know' gets you further than 'what you know' and, unless you've got a best mate or somebody is looking out for you, you often get overlooked. I've never been anybody's best mate .. I've never been looked after, so I know that other people have had more opportunities in certain areas than I have just 'cause they know people."* [Female police officer, on the TSS. FPOSL06, p. 7]

This officer told a personal story of how 'friends' of a particular senior officer were known to get the easy jobs and promotions and be more visible, just because they were friendly with this officer. They were widely known as 'FoDs' (friends of Dick), with outsiders not being able to progress or be promoted and thus lacking in confidence to even apply.

In addition to personal propensity to apply, confidence and visibility, a small number of participants identified the role of mentors as a 'shield'. For example, one female staff participant on the TSS talked about her line manager ensuring that she was shielded from lower value-adding additional tasks and had, instead, a more strategic approach to the scheme with the maximum derived benefit for herself:

> "[Mentor] *said - you don't want the talent scheme just to throw a load of opportunities at you that are no good to you. You've got your day job still to do and to do everybody's PowerPoints is no good. You want the right opportunity .. quality opportunities, not just a load of opportunities. And he said 'if you ever feel like you're just going to get bombarded with these and you don't want to say no to them ..I'll act as a field and say, "No, that's not appropriate for* [name] *at this time'."* [Female staff, on TSS. FDOSD21, p. 31]

Mentors could be powerful influencers, increasing access to strategic developmental opportunities but also avoiding time-wasting on non-valued adding tasks. Mentoring itself – differentiated here as usually a more formalised process than sponsorship, although a line manager may become one or both – is often quite a complex interpersonal process. It is not surprising, therefore, that - in addition to influencing propensity to apply and probable success in talent management scheme application - individual experiences of mentoring within the scheme were said to vary, as highlighted in this quotation from a female staff TSS participant:

> *"I think* [the TSS experience] *is totally different depending on who you've got as your mentor and SPOC… I'd say it's certainly not consistent - I've been to some seminars where you're getting different views from people about … what level of involvement they're having with their mentor or what opportunities they might*

> *have had* [compared] *to what other people are getting." (FSOSD21, p. 30)*

Some mentors, as above, effectively promoted and shielded, in addition to helping source stretch, developmental projects. However, there was a general consensus that some TSS participants did not have equally supportive mentors, and/or did not have mentors who were themselves powerful enough to influence mentee outcomes:

This variable quality of scheme mentor was significant, since several participants – approximately a third of each of the four categories (male/female staff and officers) - talked about the importance of contacts and 'who you know' for deriving maximum personal benefit from the TSS

> *"I think how much you get from it* [the TSS] *is partly reliant on you being driven with it and it's partly reliant on having the right people supporting you, to point you in the right direction."* (MPOSL29, p. 32 – male officer, on the TSS)

One male staff TSS member similarly articulated a view that the seniority and influence of an internal coach or mentor has implications for the impact of the TSS on the individual, both practically – ease of access to certain resources, for example – and also emotionally, in terms of perceived investment and personal importance to the organisation:

> *"If you want to reach a senior level, then you need someone in a senior position because at senior level, I think it shows the commitment. It's a message saying, 'right, we're committed 'cause we're going to do this, regardless of the hours'."* [Male staff TSS participant. MSOSL12, p. 25]

This is a further example of how the lived experience of a talent management scheme can be very different for included individuals, even within the same organisation, simply because of variations in the experienced calibre and centrality or power of one's mentor. Seniority in itself renders a mentor more able to effectively act as a shield and is a signifier of acceptance or organisational commitment in a male-dominated environment. Moreover, a male mentor may prove more effective for senior police women given the decreasing availability of senior female mentors as one progresses up the hierarchy.

The dark side of mentoring revealed by participants was a lived experience of a lack of transparency and a political undertone to mentoring. This was narrated by both officers and also police staff, male and female, those included and those not on the TSS and highlighted in the following quotation from a female staff participant, not on the TSS, but working within HR:

> *"We just hear lots of things in HR … you will hear people come in and say, 'Right, I've got all these CVs, but … we know who we want.'"* (FSNSL36, p. 16)

The above stories of HR dealing with mentors and line managers depicts a nepotistic culture. Individual access to a powerful mentor is thus a pervasive factor influencing the lived experience of those within the organisation, from scheme inception through to prompting to apply, selection, sponsorship and profile raising.

This study highlights dissatisfaction with (lack of) transparency, decision-justification (rather than decision making) and the significant impact of mentors and sponsors on the decision to include individuals within the pool. That process is influenced by decision-maker distance from the individual, homophily bias (as in the rugby example) and individual visibility. Shire culture is described as one where networks, social contacts and homophily influence the TSS experience, despite it being a public sector, single country, context. Moreover, both the centrality and networks of an individual *and* that of their line manager have an impact. A contribution is made here to nascent literature highlighting the usefulness of mentors to women in policing (e.g. Laverick and Cain, 2014), though potentially not to the same extent as men (Swailes, 2017) given links between mentoring and the social networks described above. Moreover, a novel finding here is that mentors can also act as a shield, with more senior mentors being more effective and powerful in that respect.

7.5 Acting politically as talent

The above sections highlight political aspects of translation into practice of talent management, relating to what is 'done' *to* those who might or might not be labelled as talent. However, a small number of participants at Shire – all of them part of the elite FTP group - spoke of very deliberate efforts to act politically themselves, thereby enhancing their chances of selection into a talent pool. One male police officer, for example, spoke of how he deliberately targeted senior management about the FTP prior to its launch:

> *"I was really proactive. I'd gone and seen the Chief Superintendent before she even knew it was coming out - she still thought it was an external process and not an internal one. I'd been on the College of Policing website, I'd seen that it was internal, so I'd … almost got her support without her knowing what she was supporting … She gave me a verbal agreement that she would back me for it. So … you get opportunities that just fall in your lap, but other things you manufacture yourself." (MPOSX26, p. 24)*

This officer had described having a difficult acclimatisation into the police service after entering with a degree. He had spoken quite openly on joining Shire about his ambitions to progress through the ranks, which also made him the butt of jokes with some colleagues, in addition to being allocated more mundane tasks and being singled out for criticism. He narrated becoming quite proactive about his own role, having to learn to openly stand up to public criticism and what he called bullying, and managed to get a transfer to another team with less traditional views of an ideal recruit. He described having to learn these political skills in order to survive and to progress, but that also helped him navigate and garner support for the FTP.

This strategic approach and awareness of the significance of both organisational and also personal politics was echoed by another male FTP member:

> *"There are a few people upstairs on the first floor who control everything that goes on in this building .. there's one person* [in particular]*. So all you need to do is … upset … that one person ... they can make things very difficult … And they'll have people that they're friends with and that they've known for a long time. There's all this fair recruiting now and the police likes to be very open with its policies [but]... It's a load of rubbish…*
>
> *I'm on the right side of the politics. I'm quite good at playing it really. That's what it is, it's a game."* (MPOSB28, pp. 16, 17)

This officer was the youngest nationally on the scheme, by a margin of around two years, and was also university educated. He spoke of policing in very masculinised terms ('the boys toys playing out in the BMWs and catching criminals') and, as above, of having deliberately focused on the FTP. Indeed, he said that he would not have joined the police if that scheme did not exist, due to what he described as a deeply ingrained culture, whereby the only people who were promoted were 'time-served' and had been in the service for 20 years or so. Shire was referred to as having the potential to 'suck everything out of you' in the absence of political skills, self-management and career planning. This officer openly spoke of being politically astute, despite admitting to working 70 hours plus.

The only female FTP participant (also currently on the TSS) had, similarly, acted with a degree of political acumen and deliberately approached several mentors to garner informal support for her application:

> *"When the Fast Track came out, I went to see both of them* [Chief Superintendent and Superintendent] *separately, and the lady that I've told you about* [female Chief Inspector] *.. It's such a big thing and you need a lot of support, you need official support to go for it … So*

> *I went to them and said, "What do you think?" And they were 'Yeah, fine, just go for it.'"* (FPOSW16, p. 11)

It is interesting to note that the only participants who spoke of this kind of targeted and strategic approach to their career and talent scheme were those on the national fast-track programme. This might suggest that the more selective and elite the talent pool, the more relevant and central to organisational progression such political self-promotion becomes – and the more aware successful applicants have to become of the role of organisational politics.

Moreover, inclusion in a talent pool increases access to greater opportunities for self-promotion, enhanced and more senior (influential) networks and greater access to strategic language, in addition to heightened awareness of the 'rules of engagement' from a personal, political perspective. Being deemed to be 'talent' in itself differentiates such individuals from 'the rest'; it is in part a case of 'we think, therefore we are' talent and becomes a self-reinforcing process.

Indeed, MPOSB28's self-portrait was consistently one of a manipulative, politically astute and very confident officer, as illustrated in his depiction of the FTP selection process:

> *"They'd designed these tests to be unbeatable,* [they] *will test what you're actually like, not whether you can just regurgitate the competency framework. However, I've yet to come against a competency framework that I can't beat. I think that might be something to do with the sort of manipulative emotional intelligence side of it, in that I can be myself and be what they want me to be at the same time." (MPOSB28, p. 21)*

These findings suggest that those included in the (elite) talent pool are certainly aware of the importance of self-promotion, raising the question of whether one of the implicit qualities required to become talent – certainly what has been termed an 'A-player' or elite talent – is an ability to work politically. In other words, to self-promote, be aware of and deliberately pursue opportunities ahead of others and to position oneself optimally to benefit from those opportunities.

For the organisation, such an approach in practice may not foster the development of those with 'talent' but may generate greater deliberate self-aggrandisement and political behaviour - and reward those who act politically to ensure their self-concept as potential talent becomes reinforced in a virtuous circle. It is also interesting that the gender imbalance is greater on the FTP than on the TSS; political manoeuvring – more central to the FTP - may be more difficult for women to undertake to good effect, since such is generally seen to

be congruent with a male norm; therefore, women who do act politically are likely to be seen as acting contra-gender.

Having considered political behaviour by members of the super-elite FTP, the following section will now extend discussion of the role of extreme working hours in the doing of talent management.

7.6 Time to do talent

Evidence from Shire supports an equation of 'talent' with working hours, although the extent to which this became simply an accepted part of an individual's identity varied.

For example, in addition to political astuteness, greater identification with organisational norms may also be part of the elite talent pool profile. All four FTP participants spoke openly about the impact of the job on home and family, and how it can completely take over. Yet none of them really questioned this; they were aware, but saw it as inevitable, at least for the present if not indefinitely. However, there is greater risk to Shire with elite talent: they identify with the organisation, but are sufficiently politically astute to have high expectations of what Shire might do for them in return. Moreover, given their selection as potential future 'stars', the attitude of this group may well have a more significant impact on organisational outcomes than the views of those on the TSS or the excluded.

Female police staff were least likely to refer to long working hours and female officers the most likely to do so. Of the 2 female staff to specifically mention long working hours, one referred to this as a deterrent from applying for the scheme:

> *"It* [TSS documentation] *talks a lot about what you have to do, you'll have to do extra … e-learning programmes, you may take on other projects… Which is great, but … last year I wasn't confident I'd have the time to fit that in around what I was doing at work."* (FSNSL32, p. 14.)

This participant had changed role at the time of the first talent management scheme launch and talked about prioritisation of her new role, rather than the TSS. However, she subsequently spoke of greater familiarity with the scheme, suggesting that seeing a colleague participate had made her reconsider applying at the next opportunity. Seeing the TSS in action up close, albeit vicariously, may have made it more accessible and thereby mirror one of the functions of a sponsor or mentor.

As police staff tend to have comparatively standard contracted working hours, it is not surprising to note the greater prevalence of working hours in the narratives of officers. 5 of the 7 female officers referred explicitly to long working hours, either in terms of additional hours becoming expected of 'talent', or acting as an implicit barrier to either career progression or application for the TSS:

> *"Your shifts and things do interfere … there's many times when I've worked seventeen, eighteen hour shifts, or where I've gone home at eleven o'clock at night and had to be back in for seven o'clock the next morning. It's a very hard balance to have with your family and your work life. "* (FPOSB22, p. 14 – female officer, on the TSS)

This narrative highlights the implications of particular departments/divisions (in this case, CID) where working long hours is seen as synonymous with the job. Characteristic of extreme jobs (Gascoigne et al., 2015), this is an almost taken-for-granted aspect of Shire policing. There is an implicit assumption, therefore, that female officers are freely making a choice to undertake such roles and should not be seen to question long or unpredictable working hours and the difficulty of combining this with other commitments.

Certainly all participants on the FTP spoke of extreme hours and, for them, this was just the way things were:

> *"You see my face, I'm tired. … In October the* [FTP] *application form came out, my sister chose to get married the same week …, so I was sat … in a hotel room writing my application form. My hair was down here … from October to December I prepped for an hour-long interview, an hour every night at least.*
>
> *And then, after the interview we found out that the four candidates from* [Shire] *were successful to go to the national assessment centre. So I cut all my hair off because I didn't have time to play with that anymore."* (FPOSW16, p. 18)

The above female officer referred twice to her face and hair; for her, the extreme hours was a tangible, physical, thing. Her commitment to the fast-track scheme and her career had become embodied and, when pointing to how long her hair had previously been and then the current cropped cut, this became a symbolic signifier. Yet this is constantly depicted as her choice, implicitly reinforcing the prevailing masculinised norm and the unchallenging acceptance of an all-hours culture. Taking care of long hair was a feminised frivolity that she could not afford to spend time on.

Male participants on the FTP similarly conveyed the impact of very long working hours on home life:

> *"I went for it* [FTP], *was successful and … had to put some hard yards in, a lot of work off my own back outside of my day-to-day work, to be prepared for all these interviews, for all the assessment centres ... Put hours and hours of work in to make sure that I was in the best position to get through."* (MPOSX26, p. 25)

This evidence resonates with an identity work perspective (Tansley and Tietze, 2013; Swailes and Blackburn, 2016): as talent is performed, long working hours are accepted as what one does. In order to be considered as talent or to progress within the ranks, it is essential to have time to 'do' talent. Of course, there are gendering aspects of this process, to be further developed in Chapter 8; suffice it to say that equating talent at least partially to commitment, and commitment at least partially to extreme hours, immediately excludes many women for whom extra-role responsibilities are more likely to be significant. Moreover, there is an underlying assumption that this working pattern is unavoidable and that women have a choice to make: career or family.

Indeed, one of the male participants on the FTP explicitly referred to both women in general at Shire and also FPOSW16 in particular, indicating that:

> *"*[FPOSW16 name] *who's also on this scheme, is on about putting off having kids … because I think it's … unachievable for her to hope to get promoted and have children. So – they* [women] *pick one or the other."* (MPOSB28, p. 29)

Such discourse depicts long working hours as 'normal' and women as having a completely free choice. Indeed, as further developed in Chapter 8, female participants themselves tended to talk about flexible work arrangements and care-giving as 'their' problem to resolve. Wider structural and organisational constraints remain unchallenged; for example, questions such as why this is not seen to be an issue for men, why women are seen to have to make a choice, why long working hours and family are seen to be so incompatible, are not asked. With extreme working hours 'accepted' and the responsibility for dealing with such laid firmly at the feet of women, prevailing power dynamics are reinforced and never challenged.

7.7 Performing talent

This final section considers how talent gets done by those within the talent pool. There was evidence that talent pool participants had access to a different (strategic) language, liaised with other talented and senior people, accessed a wide knowledge base through TSS seminars and began to think of themselves as talent. This raises the question of whether talent is ever there, to be discovered or developed, or whether what and who comes to be talked about as talent simply 'becomes' talent.

TSS participants used terms such as ‘austerity’, ‘restructuring, ‘strategic’ and ‘partnership policing’ much more than non-TSS participants, the latter being more likely to talk of budgets and budget cuts, rather than engaging in the accepted and political face of austerity. Indeed, one female TSS officer specifically articulated her greater access to strategic language, as a result of which she now ‘becomes’ talent:

> *“… It* [talent]*’s like understanding … what are the politics, what goes on externally to the police that affects the way that we work, it's having that wider area of knowledge that … would probably make you more … I don't really like the term, talented, because it doesn’t make you more talented than anybody else, but they're showing that wider skill and knowledge set. “(*FPOSB22, p. 15)

The officer cited in Section 7.2 - who had not applied for the TSS - similarly talked of the significance of words such as ‘resilience’, ‘confidence’ and ‘public satisfaction’. Using this (strategic) language was part of the construction of talent, and those who were in the talent pool became acclimatised to this language through TSS seminars and their greater interaction with both each other and the wider leadership team. Indeed, talent pool participants depicted increased interaction with the senior leadership team (see Section 7.2) - and enhanced exposure to a particular type of experience (‘strategic’) - such that there emerges a shared notion of what talented people do, say and how they act.

This suggests that those on the TSS become, by definition, more talented, since they are deliberately exposed to this ‘wider knowledge set’ that the above female officer refers to, through TSS seminars. Of course, the above officer is also talking about her own view of ‘talent’ and how we recognise such, and her story is possibly a window to her own self-concept as increasingly ‘talented’ and more exposed to the ‘right’ sort of knowledge now that she is on the TSS. She thinks, therefore she is, talent.

Certainly, one female sergeant spoke of those included on either the TSS or the FTP almost becoming, through their different actions, talent:

> *“If you were to then look at one of our chief inspectors for example, who’s on the HPDS … she exudes talent, because … she wants to develop, she wants to attain a high rank, so she’s going to naturally be open to constructive criticism, to self-development, be open to strengths and weaknesses being highlighted … So she will act differently because she has to, that’s her role, that’s the way she is.”* (FPOSB17, p. 27)

The above narrative depicts talent as something that is performed; talent thus comes into being through the actions of those so labelled.

A contribution is made here to literature depicting the role of talent management in producing, not simply discovering, a talented individual (Alvesson and Karreman, 2007; Iles, 2007). It may be the case that it is impossible to universally define either talent or talent management, precisely because power plays and political behaviour are fundamentally linked to emergent values and interpretations, each of which will vary between organisations and intra-organisation over time. Such emergent labels and interpretations place a minority ('talent') in positions of greater power and influence to affect discourse and shared meanings, with further (power and organisational) distance between those labelled as 'talent' and those not so labelled. Prevailing discourse and power permeate the talent management structure, access to talent pools, opportunities for development and promotion and labelling (or otherwise) of a select few as 'talent'. This label in turn further reinforces that which is being practiced and translation into practice at the level of the individual, with a self-serving reinforcement of discourse and power. Talent management practice and those labelled as such thus come to perform talent.

7.8 Conclusion

This study supports notions of the politicization of talent management at a local, public sector, and single organisational level with implications for proposed talent management models and practice.

Several political factors and processes have been identified as central to Shire talent management, including personal visibility, sponsorship and mentors. Line manager parochial self-interest and power plays further influence probabilities of being selected for a talent pool and the experience once included, as does individual propensity and skill at acting politically – a skill never identified on any formal documentation.

This does not necessarily imply that individuals have no choices to make at all; there is scope for agency. However, a hegemonic masculinity of extreme working hours and acting politically within very differentiated divisions reduces the scope for agency for those not fitting the ideal. In this study, *some* clearly have to work much harder than others at being visible, noticed, getting in (to a talent management scheme) and getting on.

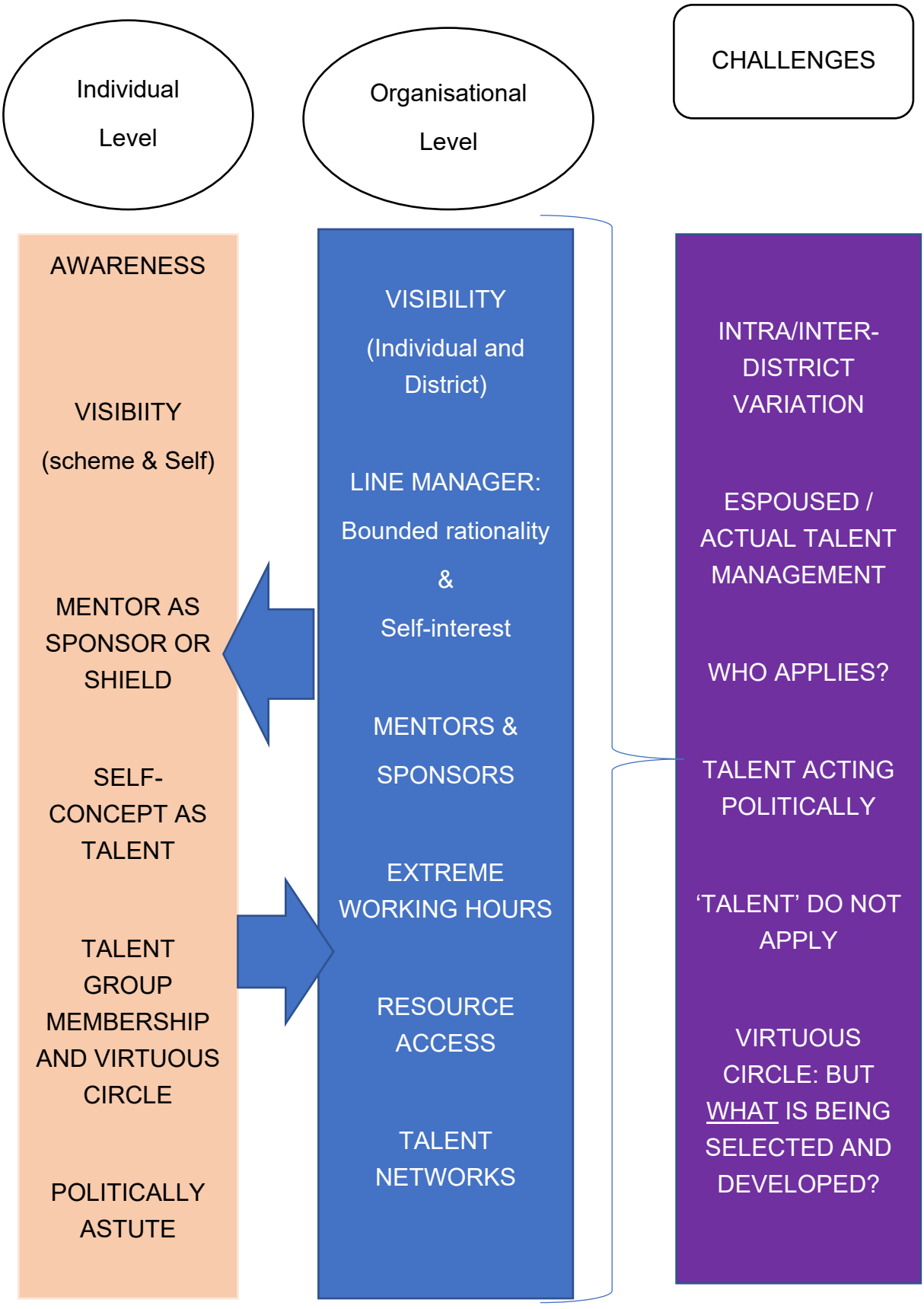
This chapter extends nascent literature depicting inter/intra departmental variation, homophily bias and the impact of distance and visibility (Mäkelä et al., 2010) and addresses calls to investigate the *process* by which espoused talent management differs from practice (Boselie et al.'s (2021) black box). Figure 7.1 depicts the multi-faceted political translation into practice of talent management:

line managers, senior decision-makers, mentors, sponsors and, indeed, ‘talent’ themselves all contribute to the lived TSS experience.

Further contribution is made to extant research on mentoring, confirming the significance of powerful mentors to both men and women in policing (Laverick and Cain, 2014; Astley, 2015), with a novel contribution highlighting the role of mentors as shields. A further novel aspect of this research is evidence of deliberate and distinctive political behaviour among the super-elite,

The following chapter will now consider talent understandings and the lived experience of those included and those excluded from Shire’s talent management scheme.

Figure 7.1 Model of the politicization of talent management



Source: Author's own model.

Chapter 8 Empirical Chapter: Doing Talent Management within a Gendered Organisation

8.1 Introduction

This chapter explores talent perspectives, followed by the lived experience of Shire participants. Three contributions are made: firstly, consideration of the impact of Shire's meso and micro context (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020) on talent understanding and practice. Secondly, Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) gendered organisation theory is extended to TSS and FTP practice within a policing context, providing detail of the *process* through which talent management becomes gendered and fleshing out the black box (Boselie et al., 2021) between espoused and experienced talent management. Finally, employee assessment (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) literature is extended, with elaboration of the dark side of talent management and explicit consideration of both those included and excluded. This addresses two substantive research gaps: possible negative reactions of those identified as talent, and the experience of those who are not so labelled.

8.2 Talent management practice: Who is talent in a policing culture?

To some, Shire offers equal opportunities to all participants. Those who view gender inequality as something of only historical significance to the modern policing organisation adopt a gender blind strategy (Chapter 6 refers) and view the TSS as gender-neutral HR policy and practice.

Others experience a prevailing hyper-masculinised culture within which the feminine and the non-traditional masculine individual finds it harder to progress. There is considerable evidence of a gendered conceptualisation and gendered doing of talent within Shire - those who do not demonstrate stereotypically masculinised behaviours and characteristics are typically not recognised as talent. This gendered talent management practice is particularly evident in two processes: talent conceptualisation and talent selection, each of which is now discussed.

8.2.1 Talent conceptualisation

Given the long working hours culture portrayed in Chapters 6 and 7, it is not surprising that talent itself comes to be performed as a masculinised, long

working hours, practice and that the part-time or flexible working individual is seen as less available and less committed.

Shire culture thus presents as a hegemonic masculinity, explicitly recognised by several participants. One sergeant, for example, described a masculine organisation where recruitment was predominantly from the local area, with relatively few women and other minority groups:

> *"*[Shire] *seemed to have quite a masculine culture when I came over* [from other district]*. I was horrified how many female police officers we had above Chief Inspector-there was just one or two… People come at eighteen, nineteen, very much local people. In homicide for example there's a rugby club that people go to or a golf club that people play for and I don't know many girls who play rugby.*" [Male Detective Sergeant, on TSS. MPOSH01, p. 28)

This sergeant reiterates the masculinised social networks outlined in Chapter 7. He was also married to a police woman, who he described as being 'slender', compared to his 'bulkier' physical build, but with a more 'intuitive' style. Whilst attempting to recognise female police officers, he thus reinforces a hegemonic masculinity where women are different and cannot achieve the ideal physical policing body (see Chapter 6). His story also highlights how Shire culture is experienced as a hegemonic masculinity in comparison to some other forces, highlighting the relevance of understanding the specific culture within which talent management is practiced.

Shire talent, therefore, tended to be seen as something or someone conforming to this prevailing masculinised culture. Talented people were deemed to be hardworking, devoting long hours to the job, and/or taking on additional projects in their own time, and were able to be seen and heard (see Chapter 7). This talent conceptualisation was described by each category of participant - male and female, police staff and officer – see Table 8.1.

Table 8.1 Representative quotations: talent conceptualisation

Female
Officer
"*A police officer's job is that you're going to work longer hours, you're going to work on your rest days."* (FPOSB22, p. 16)
Staff
"*It's putting that extra mile* [in]*, just giving it that bit extra."* (FSOSD21, p. 25)

Male
Officer
"*I think talented people … that comes down to drive. And if I say someone is driven, I think driven people work longer hours because they want to achieve more. And I think driven people are talented people."* (MPOSL29, p. 25)
Staff
"*Commitment to the organization or commitment in the tasks … going the extra mile… determination, dedication … it's above and beyond … I think it's inevitable - the more hours you put in, the more likely you are to succeed."* (MSOSL12, p. 17)

This understanding of what talent meant and what it looked like was central to a decision about making an application for the TSS and whether this fitted the individual's core concept - whether that picture was 'like me'. Thus, if the long working hours (Acker's (1990) unencumbered male) culture was endemic in the doing of talent, this might be expected to deter those who do not easily fit this mould from applying for the TSS in the first place. There was certainly evidence that this was the case. For example, this female staff member had not applied for the TSS:

> *"There might have been a Force email went round about talent management but ... I can't say I read it in detail. Probably because I thought 'well it's not going to apply to the role I'm doing or me'."* (Female police staff, not on the TSS. FSNSL33, p. 12.)

Given the small numbers of participants who had *not* applied for the TSS, examples of this deterrent effect are limited. However, there *is* considerable evidence of those who did fit the idealised, masculinised, conceptualisation of talent being sponsored or prompted to apply. So those who did not fit the ideal were more likely to self-deselect, and those who *did* fit were sponsored or encouraged to put themselves forward. For example, this officer was openly spoken of as being 'hard working' and was encouraged to apply specifically for the FTP:

> *"I saw Inspector B and he said, 'Look, these people have been to see me and you need to do this.' … I became aware that he sent an email to SLT about me … He's told my peers and people on his team that I was the hardest working cop that he's ever seen."* (Male police officer, on the FTP. MPOSL34, p. 19 and 22.)

This participant was seen by his superiors as committed to 'working hard' and was encouraged to apply, congruent with similar stories in Chapter 7.

Commitment, working hard and long working hours are central to the understanding of talent narrated by participants. Of course, this is partly linked to operational necessity, as highlighted in Chapter 4: policing is the service of last resort in the UK and is a 24/7 service, with certain roles and aspects of policing being unsuitable for flexible of part-time working (College of Policing, 2025a). Nevertheless, extreme working hours has a disproportionate impact on those with main responsibility for non-paid work obligations; this is more likely to be women, and more likely to be older workers (with child/eldercare responsibilities). An extreme-hours understanding of talent thus becomes a hegemonic masculinity and influences the likelihood of individuals themselves (de)self-selecting. A gendered talent understanding is, in turn, reinforced by the embedded ambiguity explored in Chapter 6, in addition to gendered talent selection processes considered in the following section.

8.2.2 Talent selection

Chapter 6 depicts vague formal TSS documentation, facilitating such lacunae being filled with a Shire masculinised, extreme hours, talent understanding. This section considers how the ensuing selection process was itself imbued with a masculinised connotation, self-fulfilling prophecies and underpinned by a foundation of gendered mental models and practices (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012).

Talent management scheme selection criteria are central to the doing of exclusive talent management and participants described how opacity exemplified in TSS documentation and criteria (see Chapter 6) was reinforced by practice. Illustrative quotations in Table 8.2 highlight limited awareness of what were felt to be vague criteria. Despite espoused practice being to publish selection criteria (see Chapter 6), these were either not communicated effectively and/or the TSS became a self-fulfilling exercise, with selection criteria interpreted in line with prior notions of talented individuals.

Table 8.2 Representative quotations: selection criteria

Female
“No, I don’t know the selection criteria.” Female staff, did not apply for TSS. (FSNSW10, p. 26)
“You had an interview, but I don’t know how that was scored … They were almost competency based questions, but very loosely competency based. I could be wrong … The same questions could have been asked of everyone, but I didn’t get that feeling.”

Female staff, unsuccessful TSS applicant. (FSNSL09, p. 28)
"That's never been laid out on the table … not to my knowledge anyway." Female staff, on the TSS. (FSOSL05, p. 25)
"No [I don't know what the selection criteria are] *… I just know there was an interview and I know people did get rejected."* Female officer, on the TSS. (FPOSL06, p. 19)
Male
"We had to do an application form. I think it was 250 words of why you thought you were suitable. And then the supervisor had to put in a good word for you as well. That was one of the things that let me down. My supervisor - she didn't go the whole hog, like some of the other supervisors had done." Male staff, on the TSS. (MSOSC20, p. 10)
"No [I don't know what the selection criteria are] *… I've no idea why I was chosen over other applicants or what specific attributes they were looking at."* Male officer, on the TSS. (MPOSL23, p. 28.)
"I asked a couple of times what I needed to prepare for the interview… And they said, "Just bring yourself along" and "No you don't need to prepare anything … So to be then told "I have got some prepared questions" came as something of a surprise." Male officer, TSS participant. (MPOSW08, p. 22)

Opacity and vagueness of selection criteria is one of the ways in which bias (such as gender bias, but also staff/officer, physically strong/ weak, centrally networked/not visible) emerges through Shire TSS practice, enabling the organisation to confirm pre-existing notions of talent without ever being challenged. If applicants are not able to clearly identify selection criteria, they cannot challenge them; moreover, published criteria can be used to justify the selection of those who were actually deemed to be talent *in advance of* the selection process.

In addition to the criteria themselves, more obvious mystification and bias is seen in the application of this selection *process*, where those believed to be talented were seen to be sponsored and selected *despite* application quality or interview performance on the day (see Chapter 7 for evidence of sponsorship of those seen to be talent). Many participants spoke of a direct experience of opaque or biased TSS practice, as highlighted in the following depiction of obfuscation and a skewed selection process:

> *"One of the times when I probably wasn't very happy was when I applied to go on the TSS and I wasn't successful…*
>
> *I went to be interviewed and there was just one person that interviewed me … in the Force there's always two people that are interviewing, so I thought, that's a bit peculiar…I just came away saying, "If I've got that, then … there's something wrong. There's no way."*
>
> *It wasn't that I didn't get it … It was just how it was run and the setup of it that I thought wasn't very professional."*
>
> (Female, police staff. Unsuccessful TSS applicant. FSNSL09, p. 26)

This personal account depicts obfuscation, mystification and the rendering objective of that which is practiced subjectively. The selection interview was carried out in a somewhat ad-hoc way, being narrated slightly differently by several participants (differences in what to take to interview, number of people interviewing etc.). Such opacity is evident in this successful TSS applicant's narrative:

> *"You had to sell yourself in an expression of interest in 250 words. After that your second line manager had to provide a reference and have a discussion about your suitability. My inspector phoned me up and said, "I openly support you on this". After that there was a … discussion - the feedback from everybody who's been through it has said, "Call it an interview." It's not a discussion, it's an interview. "*
>
> (Female staff, TSS participant. FSOSL05, p. 26)

Several participants similarly spoke of a process that included something described as a conversation, which then translated into practice as an interview. This rather vague, loosely interpreted, process ensures that HR systems, process and practice continue to be seen as gender neutral, while in reality they can serve to reinforce existing cultural norms and understanding of talent. Section 8.2.1 argues that extant talent conceptualisation within Shire is associated with long working hours, which itself becomes a hegemonic masculinity. In this way, talent management process ambiguity and mystification provides face objectivity whilst enabling cultural continuation.

This study was fortunate to recruit two participants who were themselves one of a very small number of 'SPOC's (single points of contact) within Districts or Departments charged with managing the TSS within their area – one senior male (Detective Chief Inspector) and one senior female (Chief Inspector). These participants were directly involved in TSS selection in addition to guiding others involved in TSS selection and management.

The male SPOC articulated talent management practice, specifically talent selection, as being about those individuals who you 'knew' to be talent anyway, *despite* the formal scheme:

> *"If you look at the four at* [district], *you wouldn't dispute it* [those who were selected for the TSS] *… this is the danger of … having criteria that are too restrictive really because you look at the individuals…and you'd have them by your side… at any time of policing, day or night…because of who they are and how they are.*
>
> *We know that these individuals…are the right kind of individuals.*
>
> *Because they're positive realists, they're problem solvers, they take responsibility … resilience, you know…but if you looked at the criteria for the TSS scheme I'm not sure whether it actually … says that."*
>
> (Male Chief Inspector, TSS SPOC. MPSPOCX30, pp. 74-77)

This Inspector referred to 'knowing' that those selected were 'the right kind of individuals', irrespective of the formal TSS scheme and associated selection criteria. Interestingly, he also used exactly those 'buzz words' and language referred to by the male officer in Section 7.2. Use of talent language is part of being seen as, and becoming, talent.

The female Chief Inspector, similarly, talked of those she would have identified as (or 'knew' to be) talented anyway:

> *"We did some semi-structured interviews. Well no, they weren't interviews, but they* were *really … it was called a facilitated discussion.*
>
> *When we came to do the short-listing - and I could only have five - You know, if somebody said to me, "Right, tell me who are your shining stars?" I'd have been pretty much on the money really.*
>
> *I like to think of myself as a bit of a talent spotter… rather than being a nepotist. And I like to identify people that I just think are really good."*
>
> (Female Chief Inspector, TSS SPOC. FPSPOCH31, pp. 41-44)

This female SPOC articulated an espoused talent management process, including the use of quotas highlighted previously, but also her own view that they had selected the 'right' people anyway. Shire senior leadership narrated a reality for them of already knowing what and who was talent (they can 'spot' talent, they're 'the right kind of individuals') independently of any talent management scheme. A selection interview and a submission of 250 words is no less gendered in practice than selectors simply sitting down and writing a list of who they perceive to be talent; whatever criteria were included within the scheme, leadership knew who talent was.

The process and talent management practice that was done thereby justified and objectified pre-existing notions of who were the talented within the organisation. Aspects such as who you know (resonating with 'FoDs', Section 7.4), who you network with - Iles et al.'s (2010) social capital - and being seen become part of talent practice, ensuring that those who do not conform to the dominant ideal are not able to be seen as talent. Talent does not get done for anyone who is o*ther*; that is, different to the ideal talent depicted in Sections 6.3 and 6.4, with a physically strong body that is visible, capable of withstanding extreme (paid) working hours, with the right networks and able to recognise and use the right talent language. This is experienced as a hegemonic masculinity as women are less likely to be centrally networked or have the 'right' policing body and are more likely to be seen as, or indeed are, the main family caregivers and thus less able to dedicate extreme working hours to the job.

Despite a façade of gender neutrality and equity provided by TSS formal systems, processes, paperwork and procedures, this study evidences continued talent management gendering through practice, extending Zesik's (2020) research from talent reviews to practiced talent management within a policing context. Objective rhetoric is replaced by managerial bias and self-affirming political decisions. Consequently, espoused TSS process is seen by participants to vary considerably from experienced practice, with implications for the organisation if a unitarist and RBV (Barney, 1991) premise prevails.

This section also contributes to emerging evidence of pluralist, emergent, talent interpretations (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020; Vardi and Collings, 2023) within a micro context and further extends unpicking of the *process* through which espoused and actual practice varies. The unencumbered man, capable of extreme working hours, is woven into enacted Shire understandings of talent, with examples of the continuing role of masculine networks (Acker, 1990; Williams et al., 2012). This enriches understanding of the maintenance of a gendered organisation (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012) through talent management in a policing context.

8.3 Being seen and selected as talent: the lived experience of the included

There is limited prior empirical research into the experience of those *not* included on talent management programmes, limited research considering potential negative reactions of those *included* on such schemes, and a dearth of research into *why* individuals apply or do not apply. The previous section considers some of the reasons for individuals choosing not to apply and the

selection process itself. This section contributes to research on the experience of those selected for the talent management scheme, and to limited nascent literature on the lived experience of the excluded, significantly from the perspective of those individuals themselves.

The experience of those included on Shire's TSS scheme was complex, with mixed reactions. This research was conducted approximately a year after the scheme's inception, affording sufficient time to elapse for negative, as well as positive, employee reactions to surface.

Positive employee reactions to being included in the talent management scheme included:

- A sense of recognition / honour / privilege / pride
- A feeling that doors to, for example, resources and promotion were being opened
- A sense of belonging to a (valued) talent group and talent network
- A belief that there was increased personal exposure to senior leadership at a strategic level
- Feeling motivated and more confident
- Optimism
- A sense of the TSS providing greater individual visibility and voice (which is then itself seen as linked to promotion, see Chapter 7)

This experience was across all employees – male, female, police staff and police officers – as highlighted in Table 8.3 below.

Table 8.3 Representative quotations: 'positive' experiences from those included in the talent pool

Female
"It's an honour to be on". Female sergeant. (FPOSB22, p. 19.)
"Obviously I'm proud to have been nominated. And, at the same time - because I thought there [are] *better people out there than me - I suppose you feel a bit humbled".* Female staff (FSOSW15, p. 18)
"I was very proud that I'd been selected ... It was nice to be recognised." Female staff. (FPOSL05, p. 13.)
"I was really proud …I was full of optimism and thought, yeah, brilliant." Female officer. (FPOSB17, p. 27.)
"I'm really chuffed to be selected for the scheme. It's really pleasing to be selected from a group of peers whom I hold in high regard, to be put

on something where it can't do any harm in terms of career progression, but also it's really interesting." Female sergeant. (FPOSH19, p. 25.)
Male
"I was delighted. I think it was an acknowledgement of the work I've done previously and the value of what I'd been doing." Male staff. (MSOSL12, p. 15)
"Fortunate for a start … I do feel kind of lucky." Male sergeant. (MPOSL23, p. 23)

In addition to the feelings of being recognised, fortunate, or proud to have been selected, two additional experiences were part of the narrative of the included. These were an impact on motivation and subtle changes emerging from in-group membership, in addition to the performative nature of being seen and included as talented, explored below.

Some participants narrated a feeling of increased motivation associated with what they saw as recognition from the organisation:

> *"I have pulled my socks up a bit recently because the talent support scheme has made me think about what I want a little bit more … it has given me the motivation to actually go and do it."*
>
> (Female sergeant, on the TSS. FPOSL06, p. 7.)

This links with changing the psychological contract, since more motivated employees will potentially expect more from the organisation, and is implicit in the above quote, for example. This participant is focusing on *her* career needs, expectations and wants. Thus, increased motivation can be a positive change for the organisation, but if expectations are not met, this can in turn become a negative experience (see discussion of unfulfilled promises below).

Male and female officers also articulated feelings of being fortunate, reinforcing such implications for how employees relate to the organisation psychologically – what they expect from the organisation in return for their effort and special-ness. This felt special-ness was in turn associated with feeling part of a valued talent group, the in-group, with enhanced access to the senior leadership team (see Table 8.4). Being part of the TSS talent group meant increased individual visibility, increased access to resources and having a louder voice – all of which are part of the vague but masculinised connotation of talent identified in Section 8.2.1 and the politicization of talent management practice discussed in Chapter 7.

Table 8.4. Representative quotations: access to resources, visibility and voice, among the included

Female
"You have a voice to the senior leaders because they invite us. We get shipped in for their leadership days and we get a set of questions about organisational challenges - what would you do with this? What do you think about that? … I think it's a bit of a ticket into things." Female sergeant. (FPOSH19, p. 25)
"Just by saying I'm on the TSS, it's opening more doors … probably with higher management. " Female staff. (FSOSD21, p. 27)
"It's about recognition amongst the senior leader team, so that if something comes up and they think 'Do you know [own name] *did that last time, so we'll put her back on this review team". It's about getting that recognition from those who … are the strategic thinkers now, or business planners."* Female sergeant. (FPOSB22, p. 9)
Male
"I understand that the TSS is not just about achieving the next rank but I think the majority of people are in it for that reason ... *The seminars that I've been to, really interesting. And it's nice to be included, to be reading more broadly … or training more broadly and looking at how other aspects of society influence what we do as a police force, because throughout my service* [I've] *never really had that input."* Male constable. (MPOSW08, p. 20.)
"I've got that structure now. And the support is immense, in terms of everyone's looking to support me. I've got SPOCs here, there and everywhere for things that … weren't there for nine years. " Male officer. (MPOSL34, p. 27)

The quotations in Table 8.4 highlight TSS participant feelings of being special, of being listened to by senior leadership, of having a voice that was heard. Increased opportunity to work alongside senior leadership was experienced as enhancing individual visibility, which many research participants had identified as being relevant to promotion. Chapter 7 depicts how those who did not easily fit the hegemonic unencumbered male model (Acker, 1990; 1992) - i.e. female officers, non-traditional (middle-class/highly educated) male officers, and all police staff – were less likely to be visible and seen as promotion material. The experience of some of those on the TSS seems to be that talent management practice might potentially address some of these structural or cultural

organisational barriers, but still possibly only for those who are willing to put in the additional work typically required of Shire talent.

The doing of talent was also associated with a sense of belonging to a special group for many participants, which was valued in and of itself and over and above enhanced access to resources and visibility. This staff TSS member, for example, narrated her in-group experience:

> *"I have found* [the TSS seminars] *really useful … just as a get together for everybody. Although everybody's not on the same one* [seminar], *they run a couple …because apart from the seminars we don't ever get together … so at least those days … you're getting to see who else is on it ..."*
>
> (Female staff, on the TSS. FSOSD21, p. 34.)

In this way, being a member of the talented in-group became performative: individuals in this group saw themselves – and were seen by others – as special and talented. They thereby had greater access to opportunity and resources that made it easier for them to be visible, to have voice and to be seen as talent.

There was certainly evidence that members of the TSS valued accessing seminars where strategic language was learnt and spoken, and several participants articulated having greater access to strategic thinking, for example awareness of a broader set of environmental factors affecting UK policing. Access to strategic language and thinking thus became part of the doing of talent within Shire and, thereby, talent was produced and reproduced through the TSS (see Section 7.7).

Through the very language and process of talent management, that which is discussed is brought about and liminal spaces become filled with what was culturally understood to be talent within Shire's context, marking a novel empirical contribution around the role of language in talent management practice and its performative effects. The performative nature of Shire talent in-group membership is evident in this narrative from an FTP participant:

> *"[*I feel] *Privileged* [to be on the fast-track scheme] *and, when I get those moments of doubt - 'oh gosh, am I in the right place?' - those moments of doubt have really gone down since I've met everyone across the scheme because there's a hundred people, and I've met everyone. And I'm starting to think, you know what? I actually belong here. I can do this. So I kind of feel like I'm possibly in the right place, but it's taken a little while to do it, to get that confidence."*
>
> (Male FTP officer. MPOSL34, p. 26-27.)

This officer highlights valued in-group membership and how this has enabled him to start to think of himself as talented. He has certainly derived personal

confidence from membership of the talent group and, as in Chapter 6, confidence it itself one of the elements identified as part of Shire talent. For this officer, he now thinks of himself as talented and thus is becoming and performing talent.

Having considered organisationally and individually positive aspects of the lived experience of the included, the following section highlights negative associations.

Negative employee experiences

There was emergent evidence that the experience of those included on the TSS was becoming more negative, including perceived false promises, increased workload, a negative perception from the out-group, and continuing structural barriers, as highlighted in Table 8.5 and Table 8.6.

Table 8.5 Representative quotations: false promises and limited promotion

Female
"There seems to be no direction. When we all get together … [at] the Force seminars, people are 'what are we actually doing?'. We're all coming here and we're listening to this information, but where's it all going … You're learning things that you've no opportunity to use… There was a lot of talk, [but] *there's not a lot of substance."* Female staff. (FSOSL05, p. 13 and 24.)
"I'd quite happily say I don't want to be on it [the TSS] because, for what we've had back, it's been appalling. It's been – not soul destroying … well, I suppose it has for some people because … it's false promises …" Female officer. (FPOSB17, p. 30.)
"Now I feel a bit … 'so what about it?' because it's not doing anything for me. It is making <u>me</u> do things. But it's not doing anything <u>for</u> me … and the opportunities they said were going to arise, I've not seen a great deal of anything." Female sergeant. (FPOSL06, p, 16.)
Male
"The TSS does nothing for me. What I was hoping was it was going to just pick me up and… make my life a bit easier … It doesn't do anything for me; if anything, it makes it a bit harder, a bit frustrating, because I felt like 'at last', and then it's failed to deliver." Male Inspector. (MPOSB13, p. 26.)
"I thought the reason for being on the scheme was that it was going to be something … But how is it different to the person who isn't on the scheme, who can get just as many opportunities? *At first I was really enthusiastic. …* [but] *I don't think I've been utilised… With the TSS, naturally you raise expectations. And I don't think that expectation has been met."* Male staff. (MSOSL12, p.14)

> *"It's … frustrating to be identified and then … the opportunities don't exist as they did a couple a years ago. It's a hard time to be on a scheme like this because … that natural flow of development isn't there. It's hard for the organisation to put it in place, because there aren't the roles to develop you into. … So* [I feel] *lucky and then equally frustrated."* Male sergeant. (MPOSL23, p. 26.)

These quotations depict growing dissatisfaction with the TSS, some 10 months after joining. In part, this reflects Shire's austerity context, limited resource and restricted possibility for internal promotions (see Chapter 4), as reflected by several participants, many of whom had applied for the TSS specifically to increase promotion prospects. The male sergeant above, for example, describes opportunities for promotion/development no longer being available (this was different to the FTP, which was explicitly linked to promotion). Indeed, one of the male staff TSS participants highlighted the organisational dilemma, speaking simultaneously about wanting there to be a clear route to promotion through the TSS, but also indicating in the same interview that it shouldn't be linked to promotion! This reflects, perhaps, Shire's expressed de-coupling of the TSS from promotion, but the prevailing understanding amongst participants that it *will* be somehow linked. Given the national austerity agenda, this was a catch-22 for both the organisation and participants, highlighting macro and meso contextual influences and contributing to growing evidence demonstrating the direct impact of context on talent management practice and effects.

Illustrative quotations in Table 8.5 depict emergent frustration, a soul-destroying experience, and false promises. Male and female, staff and officer, all highlighted declining satisfaction and motivation, with initially high expectations not being met. This is a contribution to nascent research on time moderating participant experience (Tyskbo and Wickhamn, 2022), suggesting decreased organisational attachment over time if talent management is implemented in a context where promised outcomes cannot be delivered. The TSS has thus raised expectations but subsequently failed to deliver, risking significant dissatisfaction and potential breach of the psychological contract or talent deal (King, 2016a; 2018) for individuals deemed to be current / future talent. Contrary to the RBV (Barney, 1991) talent management premise of increased value and organisational performance, unfilled organisational promises could have significant negative organisational consequences.

A further organisational implication arises out of perceived lack of direction with the TSS – see the above female staff quotation. This may have reflected the very recent scheme inception at the time of this study, with several participants

articulating a TSS that lacked direction, was not clearly structured and was insufficiently planned in advance. From a managerialist perspective, an implication of this experience is clearly to have detailed plans in place in advance of talent management scheme inception.

In addition to unmet expectations, TSS participants described emergent feelings that they had more work to do:

Table 8.6 Representative quotations: more work to do

Female
"The challenge at the moment is there's no progression… you're ending up with false hope … [And] *There's definitely a thing about you can't really say no, can you? "We've selected you so here's a piece of work for you to do and we'll be expecting regular updates on it". That's part of the work life balance thing … I've done some work at home but I won't do vast amounts. I don't have the time. I have my home responsibilities as well … "* Female sergeant. (FPOSH19, p. 18 and 32)
Male
"*I'm aware that ...one or two of them* [TSS talent pool members] *have gone: 'Oh they're going to ask us to do that aren't they because we're TSS' and it feels like we just get given extra, loads of extra work for not much gain."* Male SPOC. Detective Inspector. (MPSPOCX30, p. 62.)

Table 8.6 depicts a perception that the talent management scheme was associated with *more* work, which was experienced as difficult to reject due to TSS inclusion. The talent deal has shifted and, while participants felt increased obligation to the organisation (they were unable to say no), the lived experience was that of being expected to do more work, with possibly little personal benefit in the current organisational context. District SPOCs who were involved in managing the TSS, such as the inspector in Table 8.5, were aware of this Janus-faced nature of TSS membership, which further signals a potential backlash effect on the psychological contract or talent deal (King, 2016a) and implications for either employee burnout or reduced commitment over time.

Despite feelings of unmet expectations among TSS participants, there was an enduring in-group notion of themselves as talent, experienced as a valued social group by several members as highlighted under positive employee reactions above. However, they also articulated hearing negative comments from those who were excluded, expressing resentment, disapproval and/or denigrating either the TSS individual or the TSS itself. The following officer, for example, narrates negativity from colleagues who saw him as a potential threat:

> *"There's some negativity from sergeants and inspectors because they feel you're going to take their jobs, or you're going to leapfrog into their positions ...* [and, for those labelled as talent] *just the added pressure that then comes on you. You feel like you're walking round with talented blue lights above your head and everyone's looking to you and saying 'well, show us why you're talented'. So that sort of pressure comes with its own challenges."*
>
> (Male officer, MPOSX26, p. 38)

This officer also describes feeling that he was under pressure to perform 'as talent', with raised workload expectations of managers alongside potential colleague distrust. Exclusive talent management, or even hybrid schemes (with some developmental opportunities available to all, but additional opportunities available to a minority), thus open up significant potential for dissonance between the included and excluded, with in-group membership being a double-edged sword.

Part of the experienced dissatisfaction with the TSS for police *staff* was linked to the wider disadvantage felt by police staff generally. For example, one participant spoke of the difficulty experienced by police staff who are in a fixed role and have very limited opportunity to act beyond or outside that role, seen as being linked to opportunities for promotion. Police staff participants also articulated a perception that the TSS was inferior to the FTP for officers and was an attempt to placate police staff:

> *"It feels like it's been a bit of a sop. We're getting rid of a lot of support staff, opportunities are shrinking for promotion on both sides of the police fence, and this is something that will tick a few boxes, but won't necessarily get you anywhere. Now, particularly if you're support staff, you can't say we haven't supported you because you're on that* [TSS]*."* (Female Staff TSS participant, FSOSL04, p. 29)

The TSS was not seen to overcome prevailing organisational barriers faced by police staff, reinforcing the importance of understanding the organisational context into which talent management schemes are introduced.

This evidence contributes to growing awareness of the relevance of context to talent management practice, in this case the wider contextual backdrop of limited resource and pre-existent structural constraints within Shire. Context is significant at the national level, at macro (organisational) level, but also at the meso (departmental or, here, staff v police employee) and individual (micro) level, all of which affect the lived experience.

A significant note here is that the doing of talent management involves those included, those excluded, their peers, supervisors and senior management, all in the wider organisational, national cultural and economic context. Talent and

talent management are done and mutually produced by multiple organisational actors, each of whom may have differing perceptions, expectations, psychological contracts and experiences.

The following briefly considers mentoring as a very specific factor affecting the lived experience of TSS members.

8.3.1 Mentors for the included

Networking and mentoring were two key TSS activities. Participants were allocated a coach and encouraged to find themselves a mentor, though the activities of each was often interchangeable. TSS members articulated how scheme practice relied on particularistic factors, such as the motivation or time or involvement of their mentor, but could potentially add significant value to the TSS experience, as Table 8.7 depicts.

Table 8.7 Representative quotations: positive experience of mentoring

Female
"She[mentor]*'s really encouraged me, given me opportunities, to further and better myself … helped me get coverage … opportunities when I've had acting up. Was a great help and support when I was preparing for my boards. We'd get to work an hour early and we'd practice presentations."* Female sergeant. (FPOSW03, p. 19.)
Male
"So he [DI mentor] *sent* [the TSS] *through and said "Probably something that you should look at." And he phoned my sergeant and all that sort of stuff. So that's … created opportunities."* Male officer. (MPOSL29, p. 20.)

As illustrated in Table 8.7, both male and female TSS participants spoke of benefits arising from links with those perceived (by the mentee) to be high quality mentors. These mentors were both male and female, in either mixed or single sex dyads, and their impact on mentees began with enhancing probabilities of being selected for the scheme at its inception (see Chapter 7). Once on the scheme, mentors had a significant effect on the individual's lived experience. Both males and females narrated mentoring from male and female senior and influential superiors in a very positive way, influencing both their performance / probability of promotion and decisions to apply for the TSS. A contribution is made here to extant literature highlighting the value of mentors to women's progression within policing (Astley, 2015; Jones, 2017), though a

novel aspect is that TSS mentor gender was irrelevant to Shire participant experience. This reinforces the centrality of context-awareness to any analysis of talent management and the role of mentors: Shire was characterised by a distinctive Senior Leadership Team, of whom a significant number at the highest level (including the Chief Constable) were female, rendering sponsorship by those senior women a sufficient indicator of support for those lower down the organisation.

Whilst mentoring could enhance TSS participant development and scheme experience, there was also evidence of negative aspects, highlighted below:

Table 8.8 Representative quotations: negative aspects of Shire TSS mentoring

Female
"When I got nominated by the Business Development Manager…, she's done some coaching before, so I thought I was quite lucky ... and we had a coaching session. When I've spoken to other colleagues that are on the scheme they've had none of that, it's been a little bit pot luck as to what you get, who your SPOC [in this case, mentor] *is on the scheme."* Female staff. (FSOSW15, p. 18.)
Male
"On the TSS [my mentor] *was initially going to be an SLT member. But then they changed that … it's a sergeant who's my coach. But then I found out that had been changed, just through an email. So someone else - I think the SPOC - had decided on someone else and then that was changed."* Male staff. (FSOSL12, p. 24.)
"I never go and bother SLT ... I don't have a mentor or things like that. Whereas some people are very good at positioning themselves with a mentor, or they get support from SLT members. I'm not sure how, but ... I'm not that sort of guy." Male officer, FTP participant. (MPOSL34, p. 21.)
"It's not a question of what you know, it's who you know … You want the right people and you do a selection process. But to be honest, the people you want to do it are the right people to do it because they've got the most skills and are best suited, so they tend to win a process anyway. I very much feel that you get where you are in the police on reputation… " Male Inspector. (MPOSB13, p. 31.)

Pairing with a suitable mentor (whether male or female) was often more difficult to achieve for women and also men who do not fit the hegemonic masculinity

explored in Chapter 6. One way in which a highly masculinised Shire organisational culture influenced mentoring access was through requisite organisational approval of the individual's mentor, as described here by both male and female police staff participants. These individuals (seen as 'less than' police officers) spoke of practice that ensured pairing with perceived lower status or unsuitable mentors, with mentors being assigned based on 'pot luck' and changed without clear rationale.

Such accounts describe a doing of talent that reinforces the status quo *through* mentoring, for those who do not fit the dominant ideal or what the Inspector in Table 8.8 describes as the right 'reputation'. This is reinforced by the centrality of networks to finding an effective mentor, illustrated through the officer cited in 7.2 who obtained a useful mentor through the police rugby team tour. In that case, taking part in a rugby tour was fundamental to making senior contacts, which then influenced his career and perception as someone who was talented or had the right reputation. Indeed, the significance of networks is explicitly mentioned by one of the more senior participants on the TSS, the male Inspector in Table 8.8, who narrated an organisational culture characterised by nepotistic practice akin to the female Chief Inspector cited in Section 8.2.2. TSS members described occasions when their mentor had provided political support through deflecting additional work that would not necessarily enhance the individual's career, or ensuring an individual was released by their line manager to work on developmental projects. Mentor support with navigating organisational politics was also described in the context of enhancing individual visibility, or what one participant termed 'coverage' – see Section 7.2.

Shire mentors were thus experienced as central to navigating the organisational political terrain. Talent management is not an objective and gender-neutral tool, but rather something that embeds the current organisational culture within its practice.

8.4 The lived experience of those excluded from the TSS[16]

As detailed in Table 2.1, few empirical studies have explicitly considered those excluded from the talent pool or not labelled as talent. This section considers the experienced of those not labelled as talent, extending nascent Employee Assessment (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) literature.

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[16] It was not possible to recruit any female police officers who were not part of the talent pool. This analysis of those excluded from the TSS thus refers only to male and female police staff, and male police officers.

Participant narratives from the excluded depicted an experience that was generally negative, both for the individual and ultimately the organisation. Negative reactions included resentment towards the organisation and a revision of the psychological contract (with a reduction in perceived requisite employee input), but also notable shifts in trust in organisational leadership, HR and the talent selection process. Some of those not included in the TSS spoke of a deliberate decision not to apply. As highlighted above, a masculinised Shire understanding of talent meant that those who felt they did not fit the ideal were less likely to put themselves forward for the selection process, thus the scheme was not seen to be equally open to all.

Such individuals were much more likely to denigrate the TSS and talk of additional workload for those involved. Some of those who had an unsuccessful TSS application similarly subsequently reframed the TSS as additional workload – see the male officer cited in Table 8.9 below. This revision in TSS narratives may have eased personal dissonance for the individual, reducing perceived loss through not being selected. Moreover, re-framing the TSS as additional workload may actually be a desirable outcome for line managers, enabling the individual to maintain organisational attachment untarnished by an unsuccessful application.

Those who had applied for the TSS, but had not been selected, were much more likely to describe a negative effect on personal motivation, expressing resentment and lack of trust in the process. This extends extant literature highlighting the significance of procedural justice within policing (Keddie, 2023), with negative effects of exclusion from the talent pool being expected to follow a self-reinforcing loop. Those with little trust in the organisation, who then had an unsuccessful application, were likely to further lower their trust in the process and in Shire. This is highlighted in the detailed account of the male officer in Table 8.9 who applied for the TSS, but was not selected for the talent pool. His experience left him feeling very bitter about the process, describing the role of visibility and being heard within Shire (rather than necessarily being talented) along with changes to espoused practice, undermining perceived procedural justice.

This self-perpetuating loop was not limited to those with an unsuccessful application, however. The experience of the above officer is similar to a sergeant who chose not to apply, but with very similar reasons and narratives (see Table 8.9), highlighting the significance of organisational culture and the context within which talent management gets done. Shire context thus ensured that individuals do not need personal experience of an unsuccessful application

– they learn vicariously through 'the grapevine' and the experience of others, feeding into organisational stories about who does or does not get seen and selected as talent.

Table 8.9 Representative quotations: those excluded from the TSS

Female
"I just thought … you are just not going to be good enough … So it was completely deflating." Female police staff, unsuccessful TSS applicant. (FSNSL09, p. 18)
Male
""I think it's a blessing in disguise not getting on [the TSS*] … I see them* [TSS participants] *taking on more work, with not a lot of outcome from it … I think it's sometimes who shouts the loudest is perceived to be the most talented …* *That's a good one, its application process. You go along for a chat. That's how it's billed.* [But] *Arrive, it's a structured interview with six questions! Not about what you've done… 'we've changed it a bit since it was advertised and it's a structured interview'."* Male officer, unsuccessful TSS applicant. (MPNSL38, p.24)
"Maybe … some of the other lows would be… recently about the talent management scheme… Not being asked, or given a little nudge [like] *'this is coming out. Perhaps you should think about this'. I decided not* [to apply]*… ...I only know that through grapevines, rumours, that some other people were given a little nudge to go for it.* *… and we all knew the one person who was going to get onto that scheme was going…to be* [name] …*Why not just be transparent from the start and say,* "[name] *has been identified as having a particular talent for a senior leader. This is who we're wanting on this scheme." There's no transparency when it comes to things like this."* Male sergeant, did not apply. (MPNSH02, p. 11, p. 27)

The centrality of trust in the organisation and its processes is highlighted by the case of one male officer who was initially rejected for the TSS (and also an earlier application for promotion to segreant). This police officer spoke of his initial rejection motivating him to apply for the fast-track:

> *"I applied for that* [TSS] *… And I didn't get one of the places. I went for my feedback – she did say I didn't do anything really wrong, I just hadn't scored quite as high as everybody else. So I took that on board. Then the FTP came out about six months later and I thought 'well, they're not going to put me off, so I'll go for this as well'."*

> (Male officer, on the FTP, originally unsuccessful in TSS application. MPOSX26, p. 21.)

The above participant highlights that, for some, an unsuccessful application for a talent management scheme may potentially be a spur to further applications, if trust in leadership and the organisation is maintained. Perceived trust in fairness of the process and quite positive feedback - despite an unsuccessful application - was evident in this case. It may be, therefore, that the more negative aspects of exclusion from the talent pool can be moderated where confidence in the overall process, systems and procedures is maintained. Perceived organisational justice is thus imperative in mitigating more negative effects of talent management practice. Nonetheless, it is noticeable that this particular participant was reflecting on past experience from a now privileged position as a member of the FTP, not reflecting in real time, highlighting how narratives are constantly revised over time and in different contexts. Moreover, he was a male in a highly masculinised organisation, thus arguably much less likely to have been subject to the most negative aspects of the gendered doing of talent.

Accounts illustrated in Table 8.9 also demonstrate the very negative lived experience for those who were not supported by a mentor or sponsor, who were not 'given the nudge', who were not encouraged to apply. For example, one male sergeant cites being aware that others *had* been so nudged, effectively undermining trust in the TSS application process.

The evidence suggests that Shire talent management is done in a way that reinforces existing culture, endemic (masculinised) perceptions of talent, and prevailing management notions of who and what is talent *irrespective of* the formal process. The excluded (and, indeed, many of the included) depicted an organisation where line managers and self-promotion had a real impact on who was eventually included in the talent pool. In this way, procedural justice is not experienced as being done and the TSS is associated with potentially highly negative experiences for the excluded. Exclusion from the talent pool – whether that has been applied for or not - is very likely to be associated with resentment and disappointment, extending prior research (Sumelius et al, 2020) to a UK policing context. Exclusion is also likely to undermine individual confidence in one's own ability and self-worth, in addition to confidence in organisational justice, heightening deterioration of the psychological contract or talent deal (King, 2016a).

This study demonstrates the need to consider the lived experience of talent management at a local and individual level, that is macro, meso and micro

context (Wiblen and McDonnel, 2020). Awareness of and sensitivity to the context within which talent management is practised is essential in order to avoid both managerial pitfalls and highly negative employee experiences.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored talent construction and the lived experience of Shire included and excluded, contributing to nascent research addressing calls for the inclusion of micro-context (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). A contribution is made to understanding the social construction of talent (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020), depicting the *process* through which talent management becomes gendered and detailing some of the black box (Boselie et al., 2021) between espoused and experienced practice.

Shire context reinforces prior research highlighting a masculinised, all-hours policing culture, characterised by hegemonic masculinity, and work extensification (Scholarios et al., 2017; Yates et al., 2018). Given this organisational backdrop, it is not surprising that talent management practice was found to reinforce and maintain pre-existing notions of talent. Such pre-conceptions reflected and sustained an organisational culture where the unencumbered male (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012), and those who most readily conform to that ideal, were more likely to be seen as talent, to be sponsored as talent, to apply and to be selected as talent. This chapter thus broadens very limited prior talent management research adopting a gender lens, adding a novel empirical contribution through depiction of masculinised talent management rhetoric and language within a policing organisation. Gendered talent magic occurs (Ingram and Allen, 2019) within a masculinised, androcentric organisational context.

Employee assessment (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) literature is extended, with elaboration of the dark side of talent management and explicit consideration of the effects of talent management from the employee's perspective, particularly the experience of those excluded from talent pools (see Table 2.1). A novel contribution is made through depiction of the talent group performing talent: those who saw themselves as talent spoke to others who also saw themselves as talent, worked with senior leaders previously identified and promoted as talent, accessed and spoke a talent language and thereby became talent. Talent management is performative within Shire, extending Alvesson and Karreman's (2007) suggestion that HRM processes produce the individual, rather than discover him / her. Nevertheless, whilst the experience of the included was (at least initially) quite positive, there was also evidence of

negative individual and organisational consequences. The lived experience of talent management is thus a complex and nuanced one.

Those already disadvantaged within a policing context – police staff, non-traditional recruits and females generally – remained disadvantaged, despite claims by the organisation of a neutral and transparent talent management scheme. The excluded were much more likely to have a negative lived experience of talent management, although there may be potential for the organisation to mitigate this where trust in the process and senior leadership is maintained. Lack of transparency, opacity and ambiguity ensures that the practice of talent management within Shire is imbued with the gendered organisational context and politicisation of process and practice.

The following chapter synthesises findings from Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

Chapter 9 Discussion and Research Aims

9.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises key findings and demonstrates achievement of research aims, adopting theoretical generalisation to extend discussion beyond the case study organisation (Shire Police).

The nature and implications of Shire policing context are explored, with consideration of three individual strategies for resolving the consequential work / non-work conflict within an extreme-hours organisation. Talent management gendering and politicisation are considered, along with its performative capacity. Contributions to critical talent management theorisation are developed, including the dark side or Employee Assessment (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), presenting a critique of managerialist RBV (Barney, 1991) perspectives and extension of Acker's (1990; 1992) gendered organisation theory to talent management within a policing context. Implications for organisational and HRM strategy and practice are suggested. The final chapter draws conclusions from this thesis, highlighting empirical and conceptual contributions, with recommendations for further research.

9.2 A UK Policing Context

Aim one: To examine how talent and talent management are understood and translated into practice within the context of a large UK police force.

Talent management practice within policing is affected by the organizational context within which it is located, with extant literature consistently situating UK policing as a highly masculinised culture. For example, Silvestri's (2018) conceptual paper - using Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) theory of the gendered organisation – depicts a continuing gendered service within a complex web of inequality. Similarly, Brown and Silvestri's (2020) literature review highlights a police service in the UK that remains masculinised, with long working hours and a heroic masculine ideal - despite moves towards professionalisation and increased representation of women.

Notwithstanding decades of research and calls for reform – acutely highlighted by recent concerns over the running of the Metropolitan Police Force (Casey Review, 2023; BBC, 2025) - this thesis has demonstrated that UK policing continues to be

characterised by a culture of hegemonic masculinity. Shire evidence suggests that not a great deal has changed since Davies and Thomas' (2000a; 2000b; 2002a; 2002b) and Thomas and Davies' (2005) study of UK policing and the impact of NPM. The UK policing context continues to be highly masculinised (Silvestri, 2018; Brown and Silvestri, 2020), with an idealised strong (masculine) and ever-available policing body and enduring and embedded implications for gender (Casey Review, 2023; Zempi, 2020). Talented individuals are those who can prove themselves to be physically strong and able to withstand the punishing daily bodily toil of long working days, limited opportunities for self-care, and few breaks.

Physical image and fitness/physical dominance in a gendered and masculinised profession such as policing is one way of reinforcing the hegemonic masculinised physical ideal (Perrot, 2019). I argue that the ideal police officer within Shire Police remains a masculinised one, reinforcing Davies and Thomas' (2002a; 2002b), Thomas and Davies' (2005) and Turnbull and Wass' (2105) prior research. This thesis evidences how many women and non-traditional (relatively more educated pre-entry) men, in addition to police staff, feel somehow lacking the physically strong, masculine, body and have a self-concept of not quite fitting the image of an ideal organisational incumbent. Anyone who is different to the norm of a physically strong, masculine and unencumbered (Acker 1990; 1992; 2012) police worker – particularly, but not exclusively, a police officer – encounters barriers to being seen as talent. Clear analogies might be drawn here with the masculinised identity of Davies and Thomas (2002a; 2002b) and Thomas and Davies (2005), and Turnbull and Wass' (2015) extreme work culture within policing. Non-traditional and non-ideal type Shire workers are not as highly valued - including women, but also non-traditional male recruits to the organisation.

Given the established and continuing prevalence of hegemonic masculinity in an androcentric policing organisation, talent and talent management practice is thus gendered. Like a stick of rock, talent management documentation is piped through the middle with gendered, masculinised, depictions of talent. Talent management language itself embeds a masculine culture through notions such as commitment, keeping abreast (in one's own time), and 'natural' (i.e. masculinised) authority. Anyone who wants to be seen as talent has to adopt a model of 24/7 and ever-available working – the ideal unencumbered man (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012) – since talent works long and extreme hours. This is analogous to the prevailing policing culture in Australia, as considered in Keddie's (2023) conceptual paper, where the ideal officer is masculinised and located in a masculine body. In this

context, anything and anyone other than masculine is marginalised and systems, processes and procedures are unquestioned and seen to be gender neutral, despite evidence to the contrary

Non-traditional talent (more highly educated entrants, women and policing staff) are pre-judged as being less than talented, a judgement that is re-affirmed by the talent management documentation. Formal TSS and FTP documentation included both explicit (through what is written) and implicit (through what is not written) gendering. *Explicitly*, embedded language and phrasing disadvantaged those with caring or other non-work responsibilities, unable to be available to the *greedy* organisation (Davies and Thomas, 2003) on a 24/7 basis. Phrases such as ‘commitment’ and ‘taking on additional tasks’ are imbued with an understanding of talent doing more, but without the time required to do so. Since it is women who tend to bear the brunt of the domestic burden (Lyonette and Crompton, 2015; Mc Munn et al., 2020; Garcia, 2022; Parry, 2024) this language precludes many women within UK policing from being included as talent.

Implicit gendering was evident through extensive talent management documentation lacunae, allowing cultural (masculinised policing) interpretations to permeate talent management practice, thereby sustaining the hyper-masculinised status quo. Hegemonic masculinity filled the gaps that the documentation left wide open, thereby sustaining the masculinised policing culture in a manner that did not raise questions as there was no overt evidence or documentation to challenge, only that which was not written down or said.

The translation into practice of Shire’s talent management scheme thus reinforced the masculinised notion of an effective police worker, culminating in participants being most likely to be male and police officers. These incumbents were deemed more suitable to be included as talent, in line with nascent investigations into UK policing (Brown et al., 2021; Casey Review, 2023; Charman and Tyson, 2024). Moreover, as in previous studies (British Association of Women Police Officers, 2014; Scholarios et al., 2017) police staff continue to be absent from career structures and promotion pathways. This is in sharp juxtaposition to espoused public sector (policing) equality rhetoric, extending Daubner-Siva et al.’s (2017) inclusion/exclusion paradox; despite public sector equality rhetoric, practice exemplifies exclusion and a male talent norm.

Faced with an androcentric and avaricious organisation characterised by an all-hours culture, those working within this policing context assumed one of three

strategies for dealing with consequential work-non-work conflict. These were named Accommodating and Adapting; Working Hard and Having it All; and Adopting a Gender-Blind Perspective, and were practiced by male and female staff and officers. Some individuals (both male and female) acknowledged but accepted the gender order, with wider organisational and societal structures unchallenged and it being seen as the individual's responsibility to accommodate work and/or home (non-work). Other individuals - all but one of whom were women in this study, with the one man within this remit being part of a dual career couple - similarly accepted the prevailing gender order but deemed it their personal responsibility to work harder in both work and non-work spheres in order to achieve a career and have a family. Within this strategy (typically) women often adopted a life-course career, varying work and non-work commitments over the life- and family-course. A third strategy - assumed by almost half of all participants - was that of being gender-blind; gender, gendering and the avaricious organisation were generally not recognised by those adopting this strategy. If any acknowledgement *was* given to the implications of extreme working conditions and the potential conflict between paid work and non-paid work, this was unquestioningly seen as a problem that would *naturally* have to be resolved by women since non-work was *women's work* and time-poverty was their problem to resolve. This thesis thus highlights a notion of gender inequality now being solved, indicating prevalent anti-woke agendas prior to more widespread evidence (Vinnicombe et al., 2024).

The UK policing context is one very distinct example of the relevance of context appreciation in research into the meaning, interpretation, understanding and practice of talent management, addressing calls to consider context as potentially influencing talent management practice (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024).

9.3 Talent management gendering, politicisation and performativity

Aim two: Through a feminist lens, to understand how, and to what extent, talent management practice is gendered, politicised and performed.

As highlighted above, talent within a UK policing context remains that which adheres to a model of competitive masculinity, disadvantaging many women, police staff and non-traditional entrants who do not fit the talent ideal of a physically strong body capable of working extreme hours.

This doing of Shire talent ensured a superficial objectivity of process (a formal HRM system, associated documentation and a selection process) juxtaposed with a lived interpretation laced with implicit assumptions about what – and who – is talent. There was evidence that the common understanding of who or what was talent (that is, physically strong, unencumbered and willing to work extreme hours whilst denying personal physical needs such as rest breaks) permeated the entire process. Pre-application, opacity of talent management documentation and communications, combined with organisational process ambiguity, enabled the organisation to practice social magic (Ingram and Allen, 2019) without ever being challenged.

For those who were seen or wanted to be seen as talent the psychological contract or talent deal (King, 2016a) shifted the balance further in favour of the organization, such that additional work or extra projects were expected by both the individual and the organization, and discretionary effort was the norm. Those who did not feel a personal fit with an androcentric model of always-available talent were likely to self-deselect. These individuals were much less likely to apply for a talent pool through a talent selection process that they felt was biased in favour of others. Shire reinforced implicit talent understandings in advance of any formal selection process through informal sponsorship or encouragement of those already deemed to be talented. Social capital was thereby central to how talent selection got done. Individuals with the right contacts in the right places were more likely to have a view of themselves as talent, more likely to believe that others saw them as such, more likely to apply and to be selected for the talent pool.

This extends nascent research highlighting potential benefits arising from mentoring relationships in a talent management context (Laverick and Cain, 2014; Astley, 2015), while confirming the complexity of such. For example, mentors were more likely to be male, as may be expected from a male-dominated policing context with generally lower availability of senior women (Laverick, 2023; Home Office, 2025b). However, both male *and female* members of the talent pool were able to benefit from effective *male and also female* mentors. There was no evidence that women in this talent pool were more likely to benefit from a male, rather than female mentor (contrary to Astley's (2015) research into UK policing), although this may reflect the particular organisational setting and the *relative* availability of senior females to undertake that role. This study further highlights the significant role of not only mentors, but notably *sponsors* in facilitating talent visibility, recognition, selection and opportunity for development and further self-

promotion through high-profile tasks. A novel finding here was that mentors can also act not only as a sword – enhancing visibility for example – but also a powerful shield, protecting the individual from non-value adding tasks, which may be a key aspect in what I argue is a highly politicised talent management process.

The formal talent selection process itself reinforced pre-existing understandings of talent. Both those involved in the selection interviews *and* those who applied (or did not apply) had a lived experience of that process simply confirming who was already seen as talented within the organization. Moreover, in a gendered and avaricious organization, understandings of talent are innately gendered; thus, the formal process is underpinned by implicit assumptions and practices (Acker's (1990; 1992) mental models) that reinforce and sustain a gendered status quo.

In practice, the strong hyper-masculinised context and culture identified by participants was at odds with a professional project, with highly educated entrants from middle class backgrounds feeling a lack of fit with the policing culture. This, and the continued limited number of senior women in policing, may in part account for policing itself continuing to be deemed a 'semi-profession'. Rather than feminisation, often cited as the key hurdle in occupational attempts to move towards professional status, the opposite is true within Shire Police, where (lower) *classed and physical masculinity* creates problems for professionalisation, and indeed for non-traditional police officers and police staff.

As highlighted above, organisational culture thus fills lacunae that talent management documentation leaves behind. Liminality and ambiguity enable not only gendering, but also local interpretations to permeate what is actually done and for political factors to influence talent management process and practice. Similarly to MNEs (Mellahi and Collings, 2010; Huang and Tansley, 2013; Tyskbo, 2019) this study demonstrates the role of local actors when talent management gets done. Departmental or divisional managers, even within a single-country, relatively geographically proximal organisation, have a marked impact on who and what is seen, selected and developed as talent. Moreover, line managers do talent management in a way that is bounded by factors such as Shire district quotas, limited visibility of some organizational actors (given their own bounded rationality (Simon, 1983; Mellahi and Collings, 2010)) and differential access of individuals to social networks and opportunities to make oneself more visible. Women, in particular, do not have the same access to social networking activities (for example, the previously-cited rugby tour) that might raise their profile and

probability of being seen as talent, since visibility is a key factor for boundedly rational line managers and those responsible for how talent management is practiced. The shift from an espoused rational talent management process encapsulates a gendered culture, itself further reinforced by political practice. Shire Police, however, was distinctive for its 5 districts and associated highly powerful ‘mini-Chiefs’, along with localised recruitment and associated (gendered) networks. This extends Thunnissen and Boleslie’s (2024) research highlighting the significance of context awareness and rich contextual immersion in order to fully understand talent management practice. The extent of politicization within a policing context, therefore, requires further research in other Forces with varied internal structures.

An individual can also raise their own profile through political behaviours, such as deliberately sourcing influential mentors and sponsors prior to talent pool selection. In this way, nepotistic practice and the selection of those similar to current leadership further reinforces organizational culture, irrespective of talent management documentation and espoused practice. A cautionary note to the organisation is that the politically astute members of a talent pool can also use their own position and perceived value to the policing organisation to further self-promote. If this does not fit wider institutional aims, of course, the politically wise may not be those whom the organisation actually seeks as talent yet may become increasingly central and senior over time. There is evidence that the politically astute super-elite (those in the FTP talent pool) are actually those who either start off, or end up, with a strong identification with organizational norms and values, thus becoming a self-perpetuating cycle. Such individuals may, however, have higher expectations *of* the organisation, a factor relevant to their retention and motivation over time.

The identification and selection of individuals for the talent pool is thus influenced by political factors and gendered practice. Moreover, the talent pool and talent management practice is also highly likely to be performative. Those included in the talent pool identify with the talent group - an in-group membership that is valued - they attend talent seminars and other events where talent talk is practiced (through the use of, for example, strategic language), and they have increased access to the senior leadership team and strategic projects. Those identified as talent have heightened access to resources and networks, which in turn increases their personal visibility and political astuteness. Thus, contrary to Kravariti and Johnson’s (2020) conclusion that talent in a UK public sector context is intrinsically

linked with notions of public service for the greater good, *some* talented people here – the in-group, and particularly the super-elite or A-players – are political actors who perform talent, with the doing of talent management becoming a self-perpetuating process. Figure 7.1 provides a diagrammatic representation of the politicization of talent management.

9.4 Critical debate and theorization: the dark side of talent management

Aim three: To inform critical debate and theorization of talent management, specifically the dark side of talent management.

I argue that findings of Shire talent management politicization and gendering inform critical thinking and theorization of talent management, with a novel addition of the politicization process (Figure 7.1) fleshing out the black box (Boselie et al., 2021) between espoused and experienced talent management practice. This thesis further adds to limited nascent research exploring gender within talent management practice (Makarem et al., 2019), highlighting the production and reproduction of gender through gendered discourses, subjectivities and practices and confirming the enduring gendered policing organisation (Acker, 1990; 1992). A novel contribution to critical debate is demonstration of the performative aspect of talent management practice, notably through in-group membership, visibility and social capital, and shared language.

This research extends what I term the dark side of talent management through critical appreciation of talent management politicization, and also Employee Assessment (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) theorization, with explicit focus on not only those included within a talent pool, but also the excluded. This study highlights how those who are included within the talent pool experience both positive and negative (individually and organizationally) consequences, reinforcing notions of a Pygmalion-Golem effect (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). Positive experiences were heightened in the initial phase of talent selection and included feeling recognised, optimistic and more motivated. This positivity was intensified through membership of a valued in-group, which was also a self-reinforcing cycle; individuals who were part of the talent group associated with others in the group, saw themselves as talented and were exposed to strategic language. They were more likely to have increased opportunity to work with and become more visible to senior leadership, which reinforced perception of the individual as talented. The value of this to the

organisation crucially reflects the value of who and what was selected as talented in the first place of course, and whether this process selected those whose talent might best fit the *future* needs of the organisation.

Over time, I argue that the lived experience of those included in the talent pool is more likely to become at least partially negative, suggesting longitudinal shifts in what it means to be talent (supporting Tyskbo and Wikhamn, 2022). Negative aspects identified here included reduced confidence in the organisation to fulfill the institutional part of the talent deal (King, 2016a) through perceived unfulfilled promises. Moreover, there was evidence of shifting understandings of the very essence of what it meant to be talented, as this was increasingly seen as having *more* to do and heightened felt pressure or obligation and work intensification.

Those who did not apply for, or who were not selected for, the talent pool were likely to re-frame their psychological contract and thereby minimize cognitive dissonance. A felt prior lack of fit with the talent ideal was associated with a personal decision not to apply, which was beneficial for the individual, minimising investment in a process that was likely to be unsuccessful, thus reducing experienced regret. Similarly, from a managerialist perspective, the organisation reduced unnecessary investment in those who did not fit the ideal, although there was a significant risk that those ultimately selected for the talent pool would simply maintain the status quo and would not disrupt the organisation towards requisite change (Casey Review, 2023). There is also evidence that others learn vicariously – that is, those not personally rejected will nevertheless experience similar shifts in the psychological contract and lowered trust in organizational and HRM systems and processes.

The group with the most noticeable Golem effect were those who applied but were not selected for the talent group. Individuals in this category are highly likely to revise their psychological contract and reduce their personal investment in the organisation. There was also evidence that these individuals experienced reduced perceived organizational justice, lowering their trust in talent management, HRM and organizational processes as a whole. However, extending Keddie's (2023) Australian study, this thesis highlights how those who experience a higher pre-existing, and maintained, trust in the fairness of the process through, for example, positive feedback and mentoring post-process, *may* not experience all the negative aspects of an unsuccessful application – although evidence here is limited.

Politicisation, gendering, performativity and unintended employee experiences all challenge the rationalist RBV (Barney, 1991) talent management premise and underpinning managerialism. The dark side of talent management may negate potential organizational gains, particularly over the long-term and notably for the super-elite who are skilled political actors, capable of manipulating processes to their own advantage. Talent management within Shire was interwoven with the organizational culture, ultimately performing that which was already embedded, rather than simplistically adding value as suggested by an RBV theoretical lens.

9.5 Implications of talent management practice for organizational and HRM strategy

Aim four: To consider the implications of talent management practice for organisational and HRM strategy

Talent management has risen to prominence in a context of competition for scarce skills (Collings et al., 2022) and significant and unprecedented external threats: a global pandemic, Brexit for UK-based organisations, accelerated social, political and technological shifts (Farndale et al., 2021; Yousif, 2025) including employee pressure for homeworking and reduced hours (Vaiman et al., 2021) and a more challenging and volatile HRM environment (Al Jawali et al., 2022). UK Policing is also facing renewed criticism over embedded bias and misogynistic, sexist and racist cultures (Casey Review, 2023; BBC, 2025), further increasing pressure on the organisation to achieve organisational, cultural and HRM change.

Such environmental pressure notwithstanding, evidence from this study indicates that talent management practice is not achieving the change demanded by a public served by what is experienced as a gendered organisation. Talent management and HRM lived practice is falling short of all but continuation of the prevailing culture.

Significant questions need to be asked, therefore, about:

- the aims of UK policing; what are the fundamental goals that HRM should serve; what are the changes that need to be made to ensure a better fit with policing of the future rather than the past; and

- what kind of talent would serve the policing organisation of the future, and how might this be effectively translated into practice.

Mentoring has been adopted within this UK police force as a tool to develop, shield and sustain those selected as talent. Certainly mentoring has potential to foster change in the gender composition of the organisation (Jones, 2017) and there is evidence here that both women police officers and police staff value mentoring as an approach to support them as they navigate the organisational terrain. Mentoring policies and approaches must be evaluated for embedded gender bias, but might ultimately form a useful part of a package of measures focused on achieving change. However, the value of this ultimately depends on wider cultural shift; mentors can only support greater equality and change if they themselves are not part of a wider hyper-masculine policing bias. Moreover, given the prominence of nepotistic practice and the entrenched role of informal sponsors within Shire, wider cultural change may well be difficult to achieve (Brown et al., 2021; Casey Review, 2023).

Additional organisational and HRM policies such as flexible working and other aspects aimed at improving work-life balance might also support organisational change and a move towards greater equality and diversity (Kravariti and Johnson, 2020), notably so within UK policing (Dick, 2009; BAWP, 2014; Yates et al., 2018). Yet, as highlighted above, any policy aimed at valuing diversity and the role of women within UK policing must ultimately address the current, gendered, policing culture.

The inclusive-exclusive paradox (Daubner-Silva, 2017) also remains evident within Shire amid the challenges of resource pressures and NPM juxtaposed with public calls for greater transparency and accountability (Casey Review, 2023). Yet if UK policing is to achieve the change increasingly demanded, inclusivity, a more gender-representative police officer and staff base, and culture shift is essential. Given persistent evidence of low workforce morale, mental illness and stress combined with high leaving rates and work-life balance dissatisfaction (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025; Porter and Gavin, 2025), I argue that UK police organisations must re-evaluate the highly politicised and gendered backdrop to talent management and HRM policy and practice. UK policing remains an extreme-hours and politicised organisation, with significant documentation lacunae that is filled with extant culture. TSS and FTP practice are two examples of this within Shire, with post-data collection research highlighting similar ‘black box’ (Boselie et al., 2021) espoused-experienced HRM policy gaps in areas such as agile working (Charman and Tyson, 2024).

HRM strategy should be part of a review of UK policing culture and policing strategy generally, with the development of a partnership and interwoven approach whereby HRM – and talent management within that – can support organisational change.

9.6 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn together the findings of this thesis and demonstrated achievement of research aims. The final chapter highlights empirical and theoretical thesis contributions, with recommendations for practice and further research.

Chapter 10 Conclusions, Contributions, Recommendations and Final Reflections

10.1 Introduction

In this thesis I aimed to examine the understanding and translation into practice of talent management within a large UK Police Force, specifically its gendering, politicisation and performance, and to inform critical talent management debate and theorisation. Achievement of research aims was considered in Chapter 9. This chapter presents overarching thesis conclusions followed by discussion of the three conceptual, and one empirical, contributions. Finally, strengths and limitations are considered, with recommendations for future research.

Shire Police afforded an opportunity to study talent management in a public sector, but also an all-hours and avaricious organisation. In the context of recent focus on the London Metropolitan Police Force (Casey Review, 2023; BBC, 2025) this thesis confirms a dominant androcentric and masculinised policing culture. Despite policy initiatives driven by groups such as BAWP, and increased numbers of senior female police officers, Shire Police was masculinised, with a hierarchical, physically strong and extreme-hours working context supported by gendered mental models and practices and the unencumbered man ideal (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012). This thesis highlighted how that policing culture was felt to be problematic not only for women within the policing organisation, but also for men who did not fit the traditional policing model of a hyper-masculinised, physically strong, heroic body – including men who were highly educated and/or police staff who were in perceived lower status roles. Such men, and women, felt a disjoint with the modern policing culture, despite the rhetoric of NPM and professionalisation (argued by Dick, 2009, to have 'transformative potential'). Moreover, although flexible or part-time working was available to individuals, requesting such was seen as virtually surrendering any chance of career progression.

Talent management, as one tool in the HRM armoury, might have been deemed to offer alternative transformative power. However, I argue that organisational culture and context is central to talent management practice. Lacunae and ambiguity become infused with the context within which talent is performed; consequently, talent management in this policing context was conducted in a masculinised, all-hours, hyper-competitive and politicised way that ensured that those already seen as (unencumbered) talent were confirmed. HRM practice was also performative; those who were already seen as talent were selected as talent, saw themselves as talent and accessed resources that increased their talent status and perception. I propose

that talent management thus ‘does’ talent: it produces and reproduces talent, rather than seeking out, selecting and developing talent.

This thesis makes four contributions to theory and research. Firstly, it contributes to theorisation of the gendering of talent management, highlighting pervasive gendered mental models, discourses, subjectivities and practices (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012) within a policing context and the impact of this on talent management practice. Critically, I argue that talent management documentation lacunae become imbued with organisational culture, such that talent management embeds the gendered status quo. Gendered understandings fill the spaces left behind by vague - and in some cases explicitly gendered - talent management documentation and espoused practice. This study thereby develops understanding of the way in which a gendered, androcentric organisational context underscores the gendered performance of talent management.

A second contribution is made to critical talent management theorisation, notably through problematising managerialist, rationalist approaches and an RBV (Barney, 1991) underpinning. I argue that politicisation of talent management – as depicted in Figure 7.1 – contributes to understanding the black box (Boselie et al., 2021) between espoused and practiced talent management. I further extend dark side theorisation, notably Employee Assessment (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), focusing explicitly on those excluded from the talent pool and unintended outcomes, particularly over time as individuals move out of the initial euphoric talent selection phase to a more nuanced understanding of organisational demands and the revised psychological contract.

Thirdly, a novel contribution is made through identification of three strategies adopted by Shire participants dealing with an avaricious, hyper-masculine, organisation. These include a gender-blind perspective, assuming gender inequality to be a problem that is now solved, heralding subsequent societal attitudinal shifts towards anti-woke agendas and a view of gender equality initiatives having now achieved what they initially aimed to do (Vinnicombe et al., 2024).

The empirical context of talent management practice within policing marks the final contribution of this thesis. Policing is a nested organisation, influenced by national HR frameworks and College of Policing Initiatives such as FTP, but with significant devolved responsibility, including the TSS, FTP nominations and opportunities to be visible as talent. I argue that Shire’s meso and micro context influences talent management practice, contributing to nascent literature highlighting the need to locate talent management within contextual parameters (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024).

The following sections consider these contributions consecutively.

10.2 The gendering of talent management

This thesis makes a unique contribution to understanding the *process* through which talent management gendering is performed, following exploration of the lived experience of those included, excluded and those managing talent management practice. I argue that this demonstrates the impact of Acker's (1990; 1992; 2012) gendered mental models and practices on talent management within this policing context and provides insight into the black box (Boselie et al., 2021) between espoused and experienced practice.

Amid repeated calls to research potential gendering (Swailes, 2013; Festing et al., 2015; Böhmer and Schinnenberg, 2016; Yates et al., 2018; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Makarem et al., 2019) my thesis depicts a subtle yet consistent gendered doing of talent and talent management within an androcentric policing culture. It addresses two of the questions raised by Festing at al. (2014; 2015), namely 'how' and 'why' talent management becomes gendered. I argue that this gendering is done through what is said, what is unsaid, and what is practiced.

Shire talent management language and documentation – such as evidence of higher-level operating (more work) and commitment to self-development – explicitly embedded notions of ideal talent reflecting a masculinised, physically strong and ever-available worker. Language is thereby a mirror reflecting that which is staring you in the face; a masculinised organisation cannot mask its androcentric culture through language. Moreover, as highlighted above, context is crucial when it comes to talent management practice; lacunae within talent management policy and documentation inevitably become permeated with the organisational culture within which that policy is practiced. Within a hyper-masculinised, all-hours culture – as at Shire – it is likely that understandings of talent will be riven with notions of hegemonic masculinity and an experience of talent meaning working hard, long and unpredictable hours. Given the skewed domestic burden weighing most heavily on women (Mc Munn et al., 2020; Garcia, 2022; Hassard and Morriss, 2024), this inevitably means it is easier for men to be seen and selected and perform as talent. Within an organisational culture embracing the ideal unencumbered man, practice also became self-reinforcing: men were more likely to have time to network and obtain mentors and be personally more visible than women. Male police officers were more likely to have the social and culture capital (Ingram and Allen, 2019) necessary to be recognised as talent. Where the organisation normalises extreme working (long and unpredictable hours, physically demanding work) and talent is

itself masculinised, personal cultural and social capital are themselves gendered, reinforcing a masculinised understanding of talent. Political processes (see Section 10.3) further sustain gendered talent management practice.

Acker's (1990; 1992) unencumbered and heroic man is thus ideal talent within a gendered policing culture, reinforced within an androcentric organisation. Gendered mental models, discourses and subjectivities (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012) permeate what is said, what remains unsaid, and what is practiced.

10.3 Critical talent management theorisation

The second contribution of this thesis is to critical talent management theorisation. I argue that this contribution includes four elements, all of which comprise the dark side (emergent unanticipated, frequently undesirable, individual and organisational consequences (Handley, 2014)) of talent management: talent management gendering, politicisation, Employee Assessment (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) and performativity.

As Chapter 2 depicts, despite the absence of a ubiquitous theoretical base much nascent talent management literature is based on the RBV (Barney, 1991) theoretical premise of increased value, achieved through differentiated architecture and practice aimed at enhancing strategic capability. However, as considered above, the gendered understanding and practice of talent and talent management challenges this simplistic assumption, since much of the talent that women possess is ignored, undervalued or invisible. Organisations thus risk overlooking significant opportunity to enhance resource value, particularly in hyper-masculine organisational contexts.

I further problematise talent management RBV underpinnings and argue a contribution to critical theorisation through the identification and exploration of politicised talent management practice within a geographically focused, single-organisational context, depicted visually in Figure 7.1 (Model of the politicization of talent management). Critical consideration of talent management challenges its managerialist and unitarist underpinning (McDonnell and Wiblen, 2021), with organisational power and politics largely absent from RBV theorisation. Aspects of practice previously identified within MNEs, including individual (talent) visibility proximity to decision-makers, inter- and intra-district variations in practice, line manager parochial self-interest and bounded rationality (Mäkelä et al.'s (2010) off-line processes), were found to affect who were seen and selected as talent within Shire. Despite the case study organisation being relatively proximal geographically and on a much smaller operating scale compared to MNEs investigated in previous

talent management research, this thesis has identified very similar political factors at play even on this small-scale, public sector, stage. Individuals who were located close to, and who were visible to, key decision-makers (due to involvement in high profile projects or inclusion in a rugby tour, for example) were much more likely to be seen and selected as talent.

Some of those included in the talent pool were themselves astute at behaving politically for personal gain (demonstrated, for example, through increased efforts to self-promote and be involved in key projects alongside senior leadership). This demonstrates how talent management practice may actively select effective political players rather than talented employees who can improve organisational performance. These politically astute were more likely to be men within this study. Men – the unencumbered male (Acker, 1990; 1992; 2012) – generally had more time to devote to political behaviour and were more likely to have time to network and develop personal visibility than women. Both non-traditional men (male police staff and non-traditional (more educated) police officer entrants) and women faced similar obstacles to self-promotion in an organisational context where they did not fit the heroic masculinised norm. A novel contribution is made through identification of a particularly politically astute FTP super-elite: such individuals may have greater organisational identification and impact and may also be much more damaging if they become disillusioned, demotivated or leave.

A notable element of my contribution to critical talent management (dark side) theorisation is consideration of the employee, or what Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2015) term the Employee Assessment conceptual framework. Despite increased employee focus post-2016 (Thunnissen and Boselie, 2024), few empirical studies have explicitly focused on the effect of talent management on those excluded from the talent pool (see Table 2.1) (De Boeck et al., 2018), notably only CIPD (2010), Ford et al. (2010a; 2010b), Swailes and Blackburn (2016) and Sumelius et al. (2020). This thesis contributes to theorisation through its explicit focus on both the included *and* the excluded and the effects of talent status on the lived employee experience, understandings and narratives around talent and talent management within a UK, single public-sector organisational context. I thereby unpack some of the employee-related talent management black box (Boselie et al., 2021) between espoused and experienced practice.

Inclusion in the talent pool within this UK policing context was associated with several positive employee outcomes, including feelings of pride, enhanced motivation and confidence, a sense of belonging to a valued in-group, and a view that doors were being opened to future promotion through enhanced visibility and

voice. However, at the point of data collection – almost a year post-inception of the talent management scheme – there was evidence of emergent negative (from a unitarist perspective, negative for the organisation; from a health and wellbeing perspective, negative for the individual) experiences and narratives. Over time talent pool-included employees – both male and female – started to experience unfilled promises (specifically of promotion), a feeling of work intensification and extensification with no additional reward, continuation of existing structural barriers to promotion (which the talent management scheme was unable to address) and a felt antipathy from those excluded from the talent pool. This evidence makes a further empirical contribution through the identification of a possible timeline of employee reactions to talent status, with many participants constructing a talented self that had evolved and become increasingly disenchanted over time. Although longitudinal considerations were not a specific aim of this thesis, thus making it impossible to draw conclusions as to the point at which reactions and narratives changed, there is a degree of congruence between this finding and models from other areas identifying a shift in perception with the passing of time (see Tyskbo and Wickhamn, 2022).

Participant narratives from the excluded certainly depicted a negative experience, both for the individual and the organisation. Unsurprisingly, the experience of those excluded from the talent pool was likely to be more negative from the start, with reactions including reduced motivation, resentment towards the organisation and a revision of the psychological contract (and consequential reduction in perceived requisite employee input), with reduced trust in the organisation and its leadership, HR and the talent selection process. A notable contribution from this thesis was the differentiation between the experience of those who applied for the talent management scheme and were subsequently rejected, and those who chose not to apply in the first place. Those who had decided not to apply for the scheme were much more likely to have pre-existing negative views of the organisation, its HRM processes and senior leadership. For these individuals, they were likely to have a view of themselves as not fitting a (masculinised) norm of talent within the organisation and were likely to denigrate the scheme and its members, viewing talent management pool inclusion as additional workload without commensurate reward. From a managerialist perspective, this self-deselection may be preferable to an unsuccessful application, the latter having a more deleterious impact on employee motivation, confidence and trust in the organisation. Perceived procedural justice (Keddie, 2023) is thus much more likely to deteriorate where those excluded from the talent pool had previously applied and been rejected. This finding raises ethical and practical questions about transparency of HR and talent management

processes and the breadth of the pool from which talent might be drawn (see Section 10.6).

The final element of my contribution to critical talent management theorisation is through novel identification of how talent is performed within a UK policing and public sector context – that is, its performative effect. Those included in the talent pool became part of a talent in-group, and as such had greater access both to strategic language and the senior leadership team. Talent thus began to think of themselves as talent, to talk with other people identified as talent, and had greater access to senior leadership who spoke the same talent and strategic language. In this way, those included in the talent pool became part of a virtuous cycle and increasingly thought of themselves as talent, developing a talent self-concept that was self-perpetuating. Talent thus was as talent does, and talent management may well create, rather than identify and develop, talent. Akin to Alvesson and Karreman's (2007) suggestion regarding HRM generally, this thesis suggests that talent management may perform or produce talent, rather than discovering the talented individual.

10.4 Individual work-life balance strategies

Police staff and police officers found ways of coping with an avaricious organisation and extreme, unpredictable working hours. A third, novel, contribution of this thesis is the identification of three such strategies: Accommodating and Adapting; Working Hard and Having it All; and Adopting a Gender Blind Perspective (see Chapter 6).

1. Accommodating and Adapting

This strategy was one of acceptance of the prevailing organisational culture and its unpredictable, extreme-hours, work demands. Resulting tension between work and personal time was seen as the individual's problem to solve, achieved through various personal strategies including prioritisation of family, or prioritisation of work, compartmentalisation of different life spheres or indeed a variation of personal strategies over time as personal circumstances shifted.

Where men adopted this strategy they were more likely to compartmentalise work and non-work, to be within dual career households and be relatively educated and also higher-ranking within the organisation, with potentially lower experienced pressure to progress through the ranks and perform. Women who accommodated and adapted were the only participant group to do so through working part-time or by delaying focusing on a personal career so that they could undertake the family's non-paid work while dependents were more needy. Such women then felt able to devote more time and energy to paid work and less to unpaid work as their families matured

and / or left home, reflecting a life-course perspective, extending Böhmer and Schinnenberg's (2016) kaleidoscopic career concept to talent status and talent management practice. This longitudinal strategy was only found among female participants, who unequivocally assumed the role of main care-giver and acquiesced to a personal strategy that inevitably hindered career progression and personal development. It is further argued that a gendered life-course strategy is more likely within extreme-hours, hyper-masculine organisational cultures.

Of particular interest is the finding that although both women and men adopted this approach to careers and balancing work and non-work, the underpinning assumption irrespective of participant gender was that this paid work / non-paid work conflict was generally a woman's problem to solve. As highlighted in Chapter 3, women in this study assumed personal responsibility for the three Cs (cooking, cleaning and childcare) – an understanding shared by male participants (none of whom were the sole or main care-givers within their household).

2. Working Hard and Having it All

As with Accommodating and Adapting, this strategy similarly reflected a general acceptance of the prevailing gender order, an avaricious organisation and the notion that the work-life conflict was the individual's responsibility or problem to solve.

There are links here to Davies and Thomas' (2002b) and Thomas and Davies' (2005) identification of four subjectivities following their research into NPM in sectors that included UK policing. The competitive and masculine self within Davies and Thomas' study is almost a pre-cursor for the Working Hard and Having it All strategy identified in this research, since those aspiring to senior ranks in this thesis inevitably had to accept a 'cult of masculinity' (Turnbull and Wass, 2015), make themselves increasingly visible, and devote very long hours to the organisation. Interestingly, this and the Accommodating and Adapting strategy were most common for female participants, with only two women within this study falling within the Gender Blind category. In contrast, male participants were far more likely to fall under the auspices of being Gender Blind and only one of the male participants might loosely be categorised under Working Hard and Having it All. Yet he did so reluctantly, with significant expressed resentment at his non-paid work obligations and guilt *towards the organisation*, despite working above his contractual hours. This was a stark contrast to the women in this category, who almost unquestioningly accepted conflict between *their* unpaid work responsibilities and paid work for the organisation, seeing the consequential need to 'work hard' as *their* problem.

Rather than prioritising and accommodating either work or home, this strategy reflects an approach that attempts to be effective in all spheres, typically through

working extreme hours both in work and outside of work. The superhuman (or superwoman) thus becomes stretched in all aspects of life, with implications for personal health and wellbeing – and for the policing organisation faced with higher levels of burnout, mental stress and staff turnover (Houdmont et al., 2021; Phythian et al., 2023; Police Federation of England and Wales, 2025).

3. Adopting a Gender Blind Perspective

Unlike the first two strategies, this approach reflects an ignorance or denial of gender as relevant to the experience of those within the organisation, with an articulated belief that this policing context was characterised by equality of opportunity.

Whilst many police staff and officers openly narrated a gendered order and spoke of differing constraints faced by women within Shire Police culture, there was simultaneous evidence of gender blindness (Mavin, 2015). This strategy is more insidious than the first two since an essential precursor of change is the recognition of the current position and acknowledgement of potential bias. The assumption that gender is a problem that is now solved effectively prevents debate and challenging the status quo.

As highlighted above, men were far more likely than women to adopt a Gender Blind strategy. The minority of men depicting Accommodating and Adapting and the one man who portrayed a Working Hard and Having it All approach were all within dual career couples, which is an avenue requiring further research given the relatively small number of such participants within this study. Two of the three women appearing within the Gender Blind category also came within the remit of Accommodating and Adapting, reinforcing the aforementioned gap between life stories juxtaposed with articulated opinions on gendering, equality and the organisational culture. These women internalised prevalent discourse, despite contradictory personal experience.

The three work-life balance strategies identified in this study *all* further reinforce a general unquestioning acceptance of the wider societal gender order. Even those women narrating the Accommodating and Adapting approach to coping with working for an avaricious organisation accepted work-life tension as *their* problem to solve. There was no challenge of social and organisational cultures and structures that created this tension, which was seen as an individual problem to be addressed, either through alternative work-life balance strategies or through prioritising either work or home.

The Gender Blind Perspective in particular marks a tendency to assume that gender is no longer a barrier to career progression or individual quality of life, perhaps

reinforced through a reluctance to raise equality, diversity or work-life balance difficulties within the organisational setting (Toffoletti and Starr's (2016) 'unmentionable at work' construction). Given recent questions raised about UK policing, its equality and diversity record, and masculinised culture (Casey Review, 2023; BBC, 2025), this finding is not surprising, yet is indicative of an enduring and widespread organisational culture blind to the relevance of gender to the individual, the organisation, and society. Moreover, the prevalence of the Gender Blind perspective sustains a deficiency model, whereby women are seen as somehow deficient and having 'women's problems' (such as childcare). The wider narrative of how societal structural and systemic barriers create and sustain gender difference is never considered and gender is not on the agenda for discussion. Reasons for prevailing gender differences, both within and outside the organisation, are veiled behind a curtain of gender-blind and women's work narratives, anticipating subsequent wider societal shifts in gender discourse (Vinnicombe et al., 2024).

10.5 Talent management in a policing context

Finally, this thesis makes a unique contribution through its investigation of talent management within a UK policing context, a gendered and extreme-hours, hyper-masculinised organisation. Shire organisational culture influenced how talent management was practiced, acting as a lens filtering both what was said and what was left unsaid. The prevailing gendered organisational culture was thus intertwined with talent management practice.

Critically, I argue that Shire's unique environment (5 powerful districts and localised recruitment) had a marked impact on talent understandings, talent selection (with evidence of informal sponsorship, entrenched social networks and decision-justification), and employee experience. This highlights how rich contextual awareness is essential to fully understand the nature and practice of talent management and associated research implications, extending Thunnissen and Boselie's (2024) research within a European educational context to UK policing.

Despite some unique aspects, Shire's context also mirrors extant research demonstrating an extreme-hours policing organisation and the highly valued physically strong body. Recent focus on UK policing – notably the largest Force, the Met (Casey, 2023; BBC, 2025) – suggests that the broader culture and context for this thesis is not necessarily unique to this one organisation, but transferable theoretically to other UK police forces.

There is further empirical contribution to calls for research focusing on public sector organisations and the tensions therein (Boselie and Thunnissen, 2017; Collings et

al., 2017), notably between inclusive public sector tendencies and values juxtaposed with typically exclusive talent management practice (Daubner-Siva's (2017) inclusive/exclusive paradox; see also Vardi and Collings, 2023). This study found that exclusivity was the practiced talent management approach, despite attestations of perceived need for equity and inclusion. Notwithstanding public sector rhetoric, it may be the case that talent management is inevitably exclusive, which takes us back to the very heart of talent management definitions and meanings highlighted in Chapter 2. Certainly here, within this masculinised and extreme-hours Shire organisational context, talent management practice was unapologetically exclusive.

A significant implication of this practiced exclusivity within a public sector organisation may be an increased likelihood of widespread dissatisfaction with the organisation, its HRM practice and associated shifts in the psychological contract or talent deal (King, 2016a; 2018). This thesis suggests such a psychological shift, in some cases positive for the organisation (such as increased motivation) but also negative changes including reduced trust in the organisation, its leadership, and talent management / HRM processes. Empirical evidence from this thesis thus addresses one of the calls for further research within public sector organisations identified by Boselie and Thunnissen (2017), namely the meaning and perception of talent management within the public sector and its effects on employee behaviours and attitudes.

In practice, talent management exclusivity was not questioned by participants in this study; perceived (in) equity of process and procedural (in) justice were far less palatable. This has implications for the future adoption of talent management within UK policing – see Section 10.6.

10.6 Recommendations for HRM and organisational practice

Talent management is depicted as neutral, unbiased and equitable (Swailes, 2013; Swailes, 2020) and, indeed, organisations require employees to have a degree of trust in organisational HRM processes and practices. However, this study highlights how the introduction of a talent management scheme changes the psychological contract, and demonstrates how transparency of process (e.g. selection criteria and talent status communication) may not be sufficient to ensure that all employees experience the organisation and its HRM processes as fair and neutral. I argue that even a responsible talent management (RTM) approach (Swailes, 2020), whereby all employees performing above an agreed baseline are included in a talent pool, cannot resolve the way performance ratings and perceptions are themselves reflections of the wider organisational culture.

This thesis demonstrates the difficulties with attempts to develop a truly transparent, open and fair process, yet efforts to make talent management *more* equitable would offer potential advantage to public sector employers, particularly in view of the paradoxes and gendering processes identified above. For example, given the gendering of ostensibly rational and neutral talent selection criteria, an organisation aiming to build and sustain trust and confidence in procedural justice might involve stakeholder groups in the identification of such criteria. However, this thesis counters Baker and Keelan's (2017) suggestion that public sector talent management should be inclusive (to resolve the tension between diversity principles and the underlying individualistic and meritocratic ideology of exclusive talent management). The principle of exclusive talent management per se was not questioned or challenged within Shire and there was widespread understanding that UK policing was moving towards greater accountability and management metrics.

Of course, as two of the three personal strategies identified in Section 10.4 highlight, not all stakeholders are themselves gender bias-aware and inclusion of stakeholder groups in criteria identification and selection would not be sufficient to significantly reduce bias. Other actions, such as taking steps to support managers and leaders to become aware of unintentional bias and steps to address the misogynistic and androcentric organisational policing culture, would also need to be part of a set of gender equality tools and strategies to move towards a transparent, gender-aware and gender-fair organisation.

As highlighted above, not all of those excluded from the talent pool were equally affected. Those who had chosen not to apply for the talent management scheme had less negative perceptions, either because they had lower organisational commitment previously or because they modified their psychological contract and talent lens to frame talent status as not personally desirable (for example, viewing this as meaning doing *more* work, or not leading to promotion). This scenario was less damaging for the individual, since personal re-framing avoided cognitive dissonance, minimised wasted personal investment and reduced personal regret. If those who did not fit the organisational talent ideal were deterred from applying that might also reduce unnecessary HRM and management investment in formally processing applications that were unlikely to succeed. This raises an ethical and procedural HRM dilemma: should the talent management scheme be communicated as truly open to all applicants, or should some individuals (continue to) be prompted to apply while others are not so prompted? Should the scheme be communicated as one requiring additional individual effort? From a managerialist perspective, there may be grounds for NOT moving towards a gender-aware and gender-fair talent management system if it is possible to avoid the more negative backlash through deterring some

applicants from applying. Of course, this is not morally justifiable and may well create further future unrest, but it does raise the possibility through an RBV theoretical lens that organisations may need to fully work through what they are seeking to achieve from talent management, and which employees will have the greatest impact on organisational performance.

Those who applied but were not accepted for the talent management scheme had the most negative lived experience or Golem effect (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). Moreover, there is some evidence of vicarious learning and reduction in overall trust in HRM systems and perceived procedural justice from colleagues who witness others' dissatisfaction. For unsuccessful applicants it may be possible to limit damage to the psychological contract and perceived organisational justice if the individual's experience is generally one of a supportive HRM process, with positive feedback and mentoring post-process. Evidence for this was limited in this study however, and further research would be useful to tease out implications for the two different categories of excluded.

Mentoring – and its looser form, sponsorship - has a central role in the lived experience of talent management, influencing an individual's propensity to apply (through prior prompting or sponsorship), individual visibility pre-application (and thus likelihood of application success), individual visibility and 'becoming' talent post-pool inclusion, and acting as both a sword (supporting individual involvement on high profile projects, for example) and a shield (protecting mentees from low-profile but time-hungry projects) once a member of the talent pool. Certainly women (and men) within this study narrated positive experiences as mentees, with a mixture of both effective male and female mentors. There was no evidence here to support the view that women would benefit more from senior male (as opposed to female) mentors, but the case study organisation had sufficient compliment of senior females to foster female talent through same-sex mentoring. I argue that seniority or political power of mentor may well be more significant than mentor gender and will vary between organisations. Through a managerialist lens, the findings from this thesis also support the notion that effective talent management mentors may well foster employee effectiveness through enhanced social capital and development opportunities.

Although there is evidence that women seek out and value mentors in the talent management context, mentoring per se does not necessarily address gender invisibility within a given organisational culture (Dashper, 2019) and may sustain a gender deficit model if that is the context within which it is introduced. Mentoring may be useful for individual women, however – notably those with the Working Hard and

Having it All and Accommodating and Adapting strategies identified above – as a sword or shield within an androcentric organisation.

The final recommendation for HRM within policing refers to the masculinised organisation and policing culture. It seems that today's policing organisation pays attention to espoused equality of HRM practice, but that the doing of talent management and HRM is intimately intertwined with the policing context. Addressing the nature of such is beyond the scope of this thesis, yet is clearly an area where the public are demanding change if we are to continue to have UK policing by consent (Casey, 2023; BBC, 2025).

10.7 Further research

This thesis has highlighted several areas that might benefit from further research.

Firstly, additional investigation into the use of talent management within both a UK policing and public sector context. There are particular challenges facing both organisational categories, including the range of stakeholders, reduced resource, moves towards Public Sector Management and the tension between traditional public sector values and managerialist underpinnings and efficiency drives (Collings et al., 2017; Kravariti et al., 2023). How talent management is practiced within these settings, and how such challenges are met, would inform future HRM policy and process.

Additional qualitative, in-depth research that specifically focuses on the lived experience of both the included and the excluded would also be useful, particularly with a longitudinal research design alert to how this experience might evolve.

Finally, there is a huge gap in our understanding of how talent management performs gender. This thesis has made a small contribution, but further research is needed to enrich our understanding of the processes through which talent management becomes gendered.

10.8 Reflections on the research process, strengths, and limitations

This thesis has taken considerably longer to complete than I could have imagined at the start of this journey. I have encountered waves of personal, health and family traumas that have at times been overwhelming, significantly detracting from my PhD journey.

Nevertheless, I have realised that the talent management and gender problematics originally identified are no closer to being resolved than when I started my journey.

Talent and talent management remains topical – and is clearly not a fad – and talent shortages continue to challenge organisations. Both talent management and UK policing continue to be plagued by gendered inequality, which appear to be as problematic as they were at the start of this PhD.

The data collection strategy that I embarked upon in 2014/2015 is the cornerstone of this thesis, yet I might approach this slightly differently if I were at the very start of my journey. For example, it would be interesting to adopt a longitudinal approach to data collection, with a return to participants after approximately 18 months, in order to fully understand the shifts in participant experiences over time. I would also like to have added to the pool of female participants, particularly female police officers, although my participant profile broadly matched the overall composition of the organisation. I had intended to conduct focus groups at the start of this process but ran out of time to do so; this could be a useful approach since there was evidence of an in-group attitude and a self-reinforcing talent group process, and participants might have spoken slightly differently in a (single sex) group setting.

It might also have been interesting to include more formalised personal observational notes on the research process. Most interviews were conducted on site and within Shire police stations and Head Office. This facilitated a degree of observation through the eyes of a policing novice, though not a formal stage of the research process. For example, when interviewing the most senior research participant it was possible to observe colleagues opening doors for this individual and referring to him as ‘sir’. This was one tangible example of the hierarchical policing culture within the organisation.

Finally, I recommend that further research is conducted into the understanding and practice of talent and talent management within other extreme organisational settings. Organisational culture shapes how explicit statements are interpreted and fills lacunae in talent management documentation and practices. Studying other hyper-masculinised environments could provide deeper insights into the influence of culture.

10.9 Concluding comments

This chapter synthesises the main conclusions from this thesis, makes recommendations for HRM and talent management practice and for further research.

For me personally, this marks a fitting conclusion to my enduring felt experience as a woman working within masculinised organisational cultures. I began my journey researching gendered organisations through my Master’s dissertation, highlighting how women within academia find it much harder to make themselves heard. I hope

this thesis makes one small contribution to deepening our understanding of the role and experience of women within our organisations and society, since research, openness and education is our best route to equality. To use the words of Michaela Morgan (cited in Esiri, A., Ed. 2017) about the youngest ever recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize, Malala Yousafzai:

A girl with a book.

A girl with a book.

That's what has scared them –

A girl, with a book.

Appendix A Interview Questions (talent management champion)

Tell me about your TM policy and practice? (probe: how does it work? Who does what? When? How long been using? What documentation is there? – to view)

How do you think people in (co.) talk about talent?

How do you think they talk about the TM programme, what does it mean to them?

Have you had any feedback on TM programme, what people think about it?

Appendix B Contact e-mail, Briefing Document and Consent Form

Talent Management research: A request for participants (e-mail)

My name is Janet Handley and I am [role] at [organisation]. I am currently conducting research into talent management and career histories. [Shire Police] have given me permission to conduct this research within the organisation and to contact individuals direct.

The broad aims of my project – an essential part of my PhD, which is registered with the University of Leeds - are to develop an understanding of career paths in addition to how talent and talent management are talked about and translated into practice within the organisation. **You do not need to know anything at all about the 'HR view' of talent and how talent management might work; I am interested in individual careers and perceptions, not a corporate perspective.**

You are being invited to take part in a (maximum) one-hour interview during working hours as part of this project and will find further details and a consent form attached. Questions will be very loosely structured with an opportunity for you to discuss in depth your own career journey, how *you* might talk about talent, your own exposure to and experience of talent management (if any) and how *you think* it works within the organisation.

The results of this study will form part of my published PhD thesis. It is also anticipated that these findings will be published in scholarly journals and may inform future research projects. However, neither [Shire Police] nor individual participants will be identifiable in any publication and strict confidentiality will be upheld at all times.

No individual will be identified as a respondent to others in the organisation (including HR and line managers) and only broad thematic findings will be reported to HR. This is in complete confidence, with only myself and each individual respondent being aware of who has been interviewed.

If you agree to participate, you will also have the right to withdraw your consent at any point up to submission of my PhD. If you *are* able to participate – and I really do need participants to complete my research and thesis! – please e-mail me to this effect, indicating the best

way of getting in touch to agree on a convenient time and location for you. I have freed up several days throughout March, April and May to come to your location at a convenient time. (Note: due to data confidentiality, the initial e-mail has to come from HR; thereafter, if you volunteer to take part and get in touch with me, I can communicate with you direct.)

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards

Janet Handley
j.handley@hud.ac.uk Tel: +44 (0)1484 472050

Talent Management research: Briefing document

Aim

To explore and develop understanding of how talent and talent management are talked about and how talent management is translated into practice in an organisational context.

Objectives

- To explore how talent and talent management are talked about in organisations
- To investigate how employees make sense of 'talent' and talent management
- To develop an understanding of how talent management is translated into practice within an organisational context
- To explore the implications of talent management talk and practice for the (re)production of gender within organisations
- To explore how talent management might be theorised and understood from a gender perspective

Research Design

The context for this research will be UK-based public sector organisations (PSOs) and professional service firms (PSFs), which is theoretically justifiable due to the maturity of talent management practice in both sectors in addition to prior research suggesting differentiation. The aim is to conduct very loosely structured interviews with staff who work for a PSO/PSF with an operational talent management programme.

Individual interviews will last no longer than 60 minutes and most will be completed within 45-60 minutes.

The results of this study will form part of a published thesis. It is also anticipated that these findings will be published in scholarly journals and may inform future research projects. However, neither the employing organisation nor individual participants will be identifiable in any publication and strict confidentiality will be upheld at all times.

Individuals who initially agree to participate will continue to have the right to withdraw.

An exploration of talent management practice: Information sheet and consent form

You are being invited to take part in a research project on talent management.

Before you decide whether to participate it is important for you to have an opportunity to digest full information about the project, why it is being carried out and what will be involved. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact me if anything is not clear or if you would like more information.

This research project is part of my data collection for my PhD. I will be conducting a series of interviews and, possibly, focus groups to explore the practice of talent management and am interested in your views.

If you do decide to take part you can still withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give a reason for not wishing to take part.

Each interview will take 45-60 minutes and will be conducted either at your place of work or at an alternative mutually convenient location during normal working hours or other time convenient to yourself.

If you do want to take part I will contact you again within the next two weeks in order to arrange an interview (max. 60 minutes) time. Questions will be very loosely structured with an opportunity for you to discuss in depth how talent is talked about, how it is identified, your own career history and experience of talent management and how it works within the organisation.

There are no foreseeable disadvantages to taking part. All the information that I collect during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. All interviews will be recorded digitally on audio media, which will be used for transcription, illustration and analysis purposes only. Other than the interviewer and scribe, no individuals will be given access to the original recordings.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people taking part it is hoped that this research will help to advance our knowledge of how talent management works and our understanding of how it affects individuals.

The results of this study will form part of my PhD thesis, which will be published. It is also anticipated that these findings will be published in scholarly journals and may inform future research projects. However, you will not be identifiable in reports or publications and strict confidentiality will be upheld at all times.

If you want to discuss this further or want more information please contact me on edu8j4h@leeds.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking time to read through this information. If you agree to take part you will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form (see below) to retain.

Consent to take part in Talent Management: An exploratory study

	Add your initials next to the statements you agree with
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet (21.11.14) explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be used in relevant future research in an anonymised form.	
I agree for the interview (and, if relevant, focus group) in which I participate to be digitally recorded	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Janet Handley
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant will receive a copy of the participant consent form and information sheet. A copy of the signed and dated consent form will also be retained by the researcher in a secure location.

Janet Handley Nov 2014

Appendix C Interview Questions (Those included and not included in the talent pool)

Following e.g. Squire, 2008; also Czarniawska, 2010, for whom 'career descriptions' or 'an historical descrption' (p. 63) prompts narrative.

OWN STORY

Can you tell me about how you came to be in your current role?

(Can you tell me about your progression in the company / career history? What is your career story?)

(Following Hollway and Jefferson, 2010; Reissman, 2008.)

TALENT MANAGEMENT

Preamble re. TM prog

Talent

What do you think talent is? (prompts – what sort of words? How is talent talked about? What does the word 'talent' mean to you?)

What do you think talented people do? How do they act? (possibly probe re mentoring) – can you give me any examples?

TM

How did you first become aware of the talent management programme? What was happening at the time, what were you doing in your role (i.e. 'where were you then')?

Tell me what happened when (firm) introduced talent management (if there) / what happens as part of the programme?

Similar to Czarniawska, 2010, who advocates use of phrases such as : can you tell me the story of ...? 'can you recall when you first stared to talk about reorganizing..'...'what happened next?' (p. 63)

Can you remember a particular time when people were included in the talent management programme or when you became aware of someone specific being included? (How do you think people get seen or talked about as talent?)

How do you feel about having a talent management programme? (is it good/bad – for co. / individual?)

Appendix D Individual Interview Questions

Explain about research project, participant info sheet etc. Interested in life history and also talent / talent management.

AIDE MEMOIRE FOR RESEARCHER

OWN STORY

1. What is your **current role** in the organisation?

Main responsibilities (e.g. management of others / leadership)?

2. I'm really interested in your life / career history and how you ended up being (role).

Could you describe your life story so far as if it were a book, with different chapters in it? Clearly unfinished, but might be say 2-3 or poss more chapters. Can you tell me what the chapter headings would be and what might be in the chapters? For *your* story so far?

3. Can you tell me about any **people** who've had a **significant** effect –positive or negative - on your progress, your career? How many people would you say? Can you perhaps talk about each of them, their influence? (Limit to 3 max.)

4. Can you tell me about any **periods in your career when you've been particularly satisfied / motivated or perhaps unhappy?**

5. Have you faced any major challenges and/or opportunities in your career?

Are there any barriers to success in your current role? Is it similar for all in the co?

6. How do you switch off from work? Do you have any **pursuits or responsibilities outside work (**caring responsibilities / hobbies etc.) that might **distract** you from work?

TALENT

1. What do you think ***talent*** is? (prompts – what sort of ***words*** *would you use to describe*?

- Is it **defined by your employer?** If so, how? **How do YOU define / understand it?**

2. How do we ***recognise*** / know talent? (How) Do we '*know' talent*? What kind of characteristics and abilities are necessary for someone to be seen a talent in your co?

What do you think talented people ***do*****?**

How do they **act**? – can you give me any examples? How do you think people get seen or talked about as talent?

3. How do you think people ***feel about some being seen as talent?*** How do those NOT included in the pool people view those who are identified as 'talent'?

TALENT MANAGEMENT

1. How did you first ***become aware*** **of** the talent management programme generally / in your organisation? **How did you hear about it? What were you doing at the time in your role?** Can you remember what people said about TM being introduced?

2. What are the ***processes i****nvolved in talent identification* – formal / informal? Application and selection? Nomination? How does it work in practice? **What do you need to do to become seen** as talent?

How *competitive* is the selection process (if elite / exclusive)? Should it be more or less competitive?

Do you know what the selection (of talent) criteria are? If not, what do you THINK they might be?

Do you think the selection criteria for identifying talented people are effective? For the org? For individuals? Does it lead to selection of the most talented people?

Probe re ***mentoring*****,** sponsors. Are these relevant to being identified or selected as talent?

3. Have you ***participated*** in any talent development programs / aspects of talent development here? (i.e. Are you in talent pool?) (probe how / if decided not / what factors relevant?) ***How did / do you feel about being in / not included in talent prog?***

How do you *feel about (co.) having a talent management programme*? Is it necessary to have a TM prog – is there a talent shortage?

4. Would you like to see anything **different in / changes** to TM prog?

Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about the talent management programme / how it works or how it is talked about?

GENDER (to ask if not emerged)

1. Do you think that all employees have an equal chance to be selected as talent? Do men and women have an equal chance of being identified as talent? Why / why not?

Are there any particular challenges and / or opportunties that you think females / males – as a group - face in the talent management process / selection? How could these be overcome?

Thank for time

Appendix E Illustrative Findings – Overview

Category	Code							
Staff-female	**Talent** = hardworking (long hours), motivated:FSOSD21; FSNSL09; Talent(TSS),FSNSL09 – should be inclusive (FSNSL36) FSNSL32- some do long hours artificially Talent = those who are listened to (not nec loudest) in meetings (FSNSW10) Talent = 'looks' professional (FSNSW10) Talent= should vary dep on context (e.g. accounts v. officer) – FSNSL32, (not TSS) Talent = being confident! motivated, take responsibility FSNSL33, p. 10		Not aware of **selection criteria**, opaque (– nether on TSS; , FSOSW15, FSOSL05 – are on TSS – but also felt did not know criteria.	Mgt aware of who on TSS, but this knowledge (that line mgrs. Know at all) is very opaque – not transparent: FSOSD21; FSNSL09	**Inc on TSS:** Positive view from others- FSOSD21- recognition; FSOSW15 – honoured, humbled; privileged; FSOSL05, 'proud' TSS Viewed as opening doors: FSOSD21, More **structure** would be useful (FSOSW15, Staff)- in terms of quals in particular 'proud' of being on TSS (FSOSW25)		Powerful **male mentor**: FSOSD21 *Without* powerful mentor, could end up with MORE work to do: FSOSD21	Encouraged by **line manager** to apply: FSOSD21; FSNSL09l; Line mgr can help with **confidence** to apply (FSNSL36) **Self-interest** of line manager can get in way: FSOSD21	**Process:** Differences dep on district; or HQ v district; or 'quality' of line manager:FSNSL09; FSNSL36; potential for nepotism FSNSL36; egs of – FSOSW15 ;)

	Talent=								
	Lang = diff for 'talent' and 'non-talent' (my notes – all female staff talk of e.g. austerity if on TSS, plus one senior HR female not on TSS); others talk of reviews e.g. , FSNSL33 cutbacks and restructuring (FSNSL33) Women = harder to be heard; being listened to =	**Not** selected – attributes to flawed process (FSNSL09); **words** used in int=particularly hurtful (FSNSL09) **NOT** selected – belittled, stupid (FSNSL09)	**'not talent':** lack of **confidence** (FSNSL36 FSNSW10); but also by one of those ***<u>on</u>*** the TSS (FSOSW15) Ltd time to 'do' TSS (p. 14, FSNSL32) **Exposure** (through e.g. friends) to TSS can make it seem more accessible – FSNSL32 applied due to	Useful for TSS people to get together – but not articulated WHY (FSOSD21)	PT workers-less access to opps in general (FSNSL09) PT workers – poss issues with promotion (FPOSH19), p.	**Career-** Those with children (F) – family dominates career story FSOSD21; FSNSL36); F with no kids – doesn't (FSNSW10, FSNSL33, C,FSOSW15– but with the latter her personal life did have an impact (IVF etc) and was a key part of her story	**Gendered stories** FSOSW15 – FSOSL05 – both told stories of gender playing a signif role in the career. – bullying and harassment, plus own personal story; – post R when on mat leave, offered FT and not PT but unable to apply for any other job; seen as mum and not	**Quotas** – and not all staff units equally disempowered; (on TSS, FSOSW15) had only a 'phone interview as IT had a no of places and only her as nominee; and her nominee was powerful	More visibility and greater representation **on TSS of officers than staff**: FSOSD21

	part of being seen as talent! (FSNS W10)						a worker. And childcar e and combini ng both seen as HER proble m		
	Lang = militar y (e.g. FSNS L36) – marchi ng, riot shield s, Foot soldier s (p. 25)	'**Good cop'**- male (FSN SL36,)	Diff views of **good leader ship**: FSNSL 36 – words around prof'nal service ethos – linked to HR/ CIPD? ?; FSNS W10: masculi ne constru ct and succes sful women adopt masculi ne style FSNSL 32(not on TSS) – comma nd and control is negativ e	TSS seen as linked to **promot ion**: (FSNSL 36), not on TSS	**Choice not to apply –** perceive d extra work and disencha nted with wider issues in Force	**Good mgr**- those not on TSS = supporti ve (FSNS W10, FSNSL0 9, FSNSL3 6, FSNSL3 3); but also female staff **on** TSS- FSOSW 15 – *but* she'd had a particula r experie nce that was extreme ly destructi ve in terms of her confiden ce	HR – emotio nal labour (only said by FS; NOT FSNSL 09 and not FSNSL 36)	EG **of bullyin g and structu ral barrier s** to promoti on: FSOS W15 (but she interpre ted as nepotis m and NOT gender) ; Structur al barriers when on mat leave (FSOSL 05)	Diff opps for **'staff' v officers** generally: FSNSL36, FSNSW10 What Staff SAY = not seen as imp. – (FSNSL33) Linked to clothing and physical appearance (the uniform): FSNSL33) Staff not as visible (FSOSL05) Officers not aware of what police staff can do contractually and actually (FSOSL05, p. 25)

Staff-male (both on TSS)	**Lang** – MSOSL12= similar to female staff on TSS – talks of austerity	**Talent** Commitment, 'extra mile, exceeding expectation – and more hours! (MSOSL12) Staff v officers (MSOSC20) – more difficult for staff to be noticed / heard; AND its about 'knowing people' you work with rather than e.g. int. Also, David E, MSOSC20, need to be	**Very aware of selection criteria** MSOSL12= very critical of the approach and prefers a performance in current role measure than a one-off int; he also says that criteria only became available AFTER applied (p. 20) (MSOSC20) also criticised reliance on selection interview and not	**Inc on TSS**: original 'delight' became Disappointment; not delivering on what expected; opportunities not forthcoming (MSOSL12) 'pleased' initially, but no structure (, MSOSC20) Particularly difficult for staff as ltd opps to act extra role (MSOSC20, p. 8-9 And extra tasks more difficult to fit into current	**Selection=** Very competitive (MSOSL32)	**Good mgr=**supportive (MSOSL12 MSOSC20)	**Staff v officer** MSOSL12, officers have a more defined rank structure to progress through, which does not exist for staff. And staff roles being downgraded. Similar MSOSC20.	**Mentor** The internal coach or mentor appointed has a symbolic value as well as potentially opening doors (MSOSL12)	**Promotion** (MSOSL12) –not linked to promotion but thinks it should be;

		‘pushing self’ and ‘take on other things’ (p. 8)	performance in previous role.	job as well as doing extra (p. 11), David E, MSOS C20 Compares unfavourably to police officers (MSOS C20)					

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