**Rethinking racism in policing: why we must move beyond individual and micro conceptions of racism**

Racism in policing has been conceived of in numerous ways. In 1981, [Lord Scarman](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen102) traced racism to a ‘couple of bad apples’, denying that ‘institutional racism’ existed. In 1999, [Lord Macpherson’s](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf) inquiry into the police investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence found the Metropolitan police force ‘institutionally racist’. [Baroness Casey’s](https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/baroness-casey-review/update-march-2023/baroness-casey-review-march-2023a.pdf) recent review of the Metropolitan police force has found that little has changed since the Macpherson Inquiry, declaring the force institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic. Following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the US in 2020, the National Police Chiefs’ Council announced a [race action plan](https://www.college.police.uk/support-forces/diversity-and-inclusion/action-plan) for England and Wales to tackle racism in policing. However, [The National Black Police Association](https://www.nationalbpa.com/wp-content/uploads/NBPA-statement-on-suspension-of-support-for-NPCC-and-CoP-Race-Action-Plan.pdf) have withdrawn their support for the plan, arguing that the views of Black individuals and civil society organisations are still not listened to or valued by the institution.

In their research with a British police force, [Dr Bethan Loftus](https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article-abstract/48/6/756/398439?redirectedFrom=fulltext) found that racism was more likely to operate in ‘covert’ ways, shared primarily by white, heterosexist males in backstage ‘white spaces’. Other academic research has supported this, citing the rapid decline in overt racism in the institution following the Macpherson Inquiry[[1]](#footnote-1). In spite of the apparent decline in ‘overt’ racism in policing, Black and Black mixed race people continue to be [‘perpetual suspects’](https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-98240-3). They are more likely to experience police use of force, restraint, taser, stop and search and stops under section 60 (to name a few). They are less likely to receive adequate treatment as victims and have lower confidence levels in the police than their white counterparts. Between 2017 to 2019, I conducted 600+ hours of observations in an anonymous police force that I’ve called ‘Greenshire’. The research also included interviews with officers of differing genders, ethnicities and rank. This research offers renewed ways of thinking about racism in policing, drawing from [Bonilla-Silva’s](https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781538151419/Racism-without-Racists-Color-Blind-Racism-and-the-Persistence-of-Racial-Inequality-in-America-Sixth-Edition) work on racial ideology. He shares:

Subscribing to an ideology is like wearing a piece of clothing. When you wear it, you also wear a certain style, a certain fashion, a certain way of presenting yourself to the world. The style of an ideology refers to its peculiar linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies (or race talk), to the technical tools that allow users to articulate its frames and storylines.

He argues that society is organised into hierarhal divisions along the lines of ‘race’, class, gender and others. This results in groups with different racial interests. Dominant groups tend to justify, defend or accept the racial order and create racially based frameworks to justify the unequal status quo. The paper upon which this written piece is based outlines four racially based frameworks utilised by the police officers I observed and interviewed. Here, I will briefly explore two. The first is individualisation. During interviews with police officers, they conceived of racism as something which was tangible and measurable. Many officers explained that they had never ‘heard’ or ‘seen’ anything racist during their service and that they saw ‘everybody being treated fairly’. Their definitions appealed to simple, micro and individual understands of racism. Structural and institutional understandings of how racism operates did not feature in police conceptions of racism. For example, the police diversity training was written by five diversity trainers, all of which were retired police officers. The training did not explore structural or institutional understandings of racism. Instead, new recruits were told that if they held racist viewpoints this needed to be ‘left at the door’. By individualising racism, racial inequalities in police practices were maintained or increased during the research period. For example, the stop and search rate of Black individuals increased from 8 to 12 times more likely in comparison to their white counterparts in ‘Greenshire’. Black individuals were also more likely to be searched under section 60 and were more likely to have the Taser used against them.

The second racially based framework is what Bonilla-Silva calls [‘racial stories’.](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13569310306082) Throughout the research, police officers shared racial stories about ethnic minorities. These stories usually followed a pattern of the negative portrayal of ethnic minorities and a positive portrayal of the officer or institution. During an interview with Paul, a white male Chief Superintendent, he stated:

*You can’t trust Travellers. I remember one of my first experiences of policing, it’ll always stay in my head. I was called and told I needed to go and arrest a Traveller man. I remember leaving the station and driving the car to the site. I turned up there and looked around, thinking ‘this is different’. I got out the car and knocked on the door to make the arrest and this Traveller man grabbed me. He really beat me up, I mean I was really beaten up. I mean really beaten up. I had to call for loads of back up. I mean loads. I was in hospital all night. It’ll always stay with me. They fight different Traveller men, they fight dirty.* (Paul, White Chief Superintendent, January 2019).

Interestingly, this story took place after observations of diversity training where a Gypsy Liaison Officer provided specific training to new recruits on how to interact with Travellers[[2]](#footnote-2). This training taught new recruits that they would be frequently interacting with Travellers in their role as police officers. Many police officers shared racial stories of their interactions with Gypsy and Traveller communities, revealing a collective representational world which conceived of Gypsy and Travellers as inherently deviant and criminal. Paul’s story begins with what [van Dijk](https://awspntest.apa.org/record/1987-98114-000) calls a ‘position statement’, when he shares ‘you can’t trust Travellers’. He then backs this up by drawing upon his experience with one Traveller man. The behaviour of the Traveller man then becomes attributed to all Traveller men (‘they fight different, they fight dirty’). These racial stories had effects, with Paul no longer allowing officers to turn up to Traveller sites single crewed. This meant that the enhanced police presence and surveillance at Gypsy and Traveller sites became a normalised and routine part of policing practice.

My research offers new ways of thinking about how racism manifests in policing contexts. It argues that we must move beyond micro conceptions of racism to think about racism as an ideology which results in collective racially based frameworks. These frameworks are shared and collective and work to support, justify and defend the unequal racial status quo in policing. Doing this allows us to think about why - despite diversity initiatives, diversity training and the increased institutional awareness of racism through [race action plans](https://www.college.police.uk/support-forces/diversity-and-inclusion/action-plan)- policing continues to disproportionately harm and target ethnic minority groups in the UK and beyond.

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1. See: <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2005/oct/ho-stephen-lawrence.pdf>, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781843926504> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Traveller Movement (2018) has critiqued Gypsy Liaison Officers for reasserting negative stereotypes of Gypsy and Traveller communities, see here: <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Policing-by-Consent-Report-long.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)