



Legitimacy, Specialism, and Sexual Violence: Officers' Narratives of Broken and Repaired Trust Towards Procedural Justice and Normative Alignment

Arianna Barbin¹ · Mark Manning¹ · Kari Davies² · Miranda A.H. Horvath¹

Received: 3 November 2025 / Accepted: 9 August 2026
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Abstract

Public and media scrutiny has raised concerns around police officers' abilities to prevent and deter sex offending, eroding public trust and compromising legitimacy beyond repair. Despite this, the relationship between self-legitimacy and the specialism for sex offences is under-explored. The study addressed this gap by drawing on constructivist interviews with 26 police officers. Participants emphasised the importance of investing in nationally recognised specialist practices to restore public trust and procedural fairness. For sex offences, specialism promoted legitimacy: internally by reinforcing officers' confidence and role clarity; externally by improving credibility and victim engagement. Misalignments between public expectations and officers' capacity were highlighted. Prioritising effective specialism could help constabularies rebuild public confidence for the investigation of sex offences and crime more broadly.

Introduction

According to Herbert (2006, p. 481) “the dilemma of legitimacy plagues no state institution more doggedly than the police”. It is therefore no surprise that in the last decade, discussions about legitimacy have featured widely in police literature in so far that it relates to their claims to rightful exercise of power. However, there are variations in the meaning of this concept and as Tankebe (2012, p.104) previously cautioned that ‘adequate theorisation has lagged behind empirical evidence’. For example, Weber (1978, p.215) proposed three types of legitimate authority: the first premised upon a belief in the legality of an authority, the

second, an established belief in the traditions of an authority, and finally, on charismatic grounds arising from a devotion to the sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an authority (Roth & Wittich, 1979). There is little doubt that police claim to legitimacy may be premised upon the legality of their authority. However, more recently, Beetham (1991, p.10) suggested that an essential feature of legitimacy “is that it meets certain normative criteria about how those in power have obtained their power” and, importantly, “how they exercise it”. Beetham (1991, p.235) also stressed the importance of seeking out “regular expressions of consent”, with normative alignment between the police and the public being associated with a higher likelihood of obedience to the law (Huq et al., 2016). Further, Tankebe (2012) questioned whether the idea of legitimacy had been conflated with concepts such as trust and confidence. Drawing upon the work of Beetham (1991) and Coicaud (2002), Tankebe (2012) sought to test whether the public perception of police legitimacy may be comprised of four factors: effectiveness, distributive fairness, procedural fairness and lawfulness, and his results supported these hypotheses. This led him to suggest that police researchers had persistently used these factors as predictors of legitimacy, as they are a measure to reassure the public that authorities are acting in their best interest (Worden & McLean, 2017). However, the authors believe that there remains an argument that legitimacy is

✉ Arianna Barbin
abarbin1@bournemouth.ac.uk

Mark Manning
M.Manning4@UOS.AC.UK

Kari Davies
kadavies@bournemouth.ac.uk

Miranda A.H. Horvath
m.horvath2@uos.ac.uk

¹ Institute for Social Justice and Crime, University of Suffolk, Ipswich, UK

² School of Psychology, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

strengthened when police practices align with the expectations and beliefs of those whom they serve (Bradford, 2026). This proposition reflects the principle of normative alignment, whereby authority is considered legitimate when its actions, priorities, and use of power are consistent with the values of those being subjected to it (Khan et al., 2026). Normative alignment goes, therefore, beyond police desired outcomes, and concerns the perception that authority is exercised in accordance with shared expectations (Jackson et al., 2020). Within policing, legitimacy may be consequently weakened if there is a disconnect between the public expectations of police practice and officers' capacity and willingness to meet those expectations (Martin & Bradford, 2019). Procedural justice has often been identified as one of the key mechanisms through which such normative alignment is established and maintained, as fair and respectful treatment signals that authority is being exercised in accordance with accepted norms (Pyo et al., 2025; Tyler, 2006). In this respect, UK policing is fundamentally rooted in the concepts of legitimisation through policing by consent (Tudor, 2023). This means that while the police role is to exercise authority, control, and punish crime, they must also do so through the legitimate exercise of that authority and control (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). In this sense, legitimacy can be conferred by the public's belief in the police's authority, a positive perception of which influences their willingness to abide by laws and regulations (Bradford & Jackson, 2011). In line with Tyler's legitimisation model (2006), "via the actions and practices of the police and criminal courts, justice institutions can demonstrate impartial service to the law, as well as fair, respectful and even-handed wielding of power" (Jackson et al., 2012, p. 4). Tyler's (2006) model suggests that the legitimacy of the criminal justice system (CJS) is closely tied with the conduct of those who represent it, underlining that legitimacy is not solely linked to procedural outcomes, but also – and perhaps most especially – to the way power is exercised. Notably, Beetham (1991) highlights that one of the reasons why the public defers to power holders, such as the police, is when they recognise them as moral agents. When the public calls for help, they expect the police to do the right thing in the right way (Manning & Wood, 2025). Therefore, through everyday actions and encounters with the public, the police and other members of the CJS have the power to reinforce public perceptions that the law is applied fairly and that they are worthy of trust (Hanway & Hambly, 2023). This concept underscores a crucial relationship between procedural justice (PJ) and legitimacy (Kuen, 2024), which has been investigated both in policing and criminology for its documented role in shaping the public perception of fair and legitimate encounters with police officers and members of the CJS (Tyler & Blader, 2003; Tyler, 2003). In its theoretical contextualisation, PJ

shifts the focus to how police personnel interact with members of the public as well as those directly affected by crime, as 'procedurally just' encounters have been shown to impact future public compliance with the law, as well as shape perceptions of trustworthiness and institutional legitimacy (Crawford et al., 2016; Tyler, 2006). As trust in the police is equivalent to trust in the state, the police increase the legitimacy of the state by demonstrating sensitivity to the needs and expectations of society (Yesberg et al., 2021). Procedurally just encounters can, in this sense, foster police legitimacy by demonstrating that police responses align with victim-survivors' expectations of fairness, competence, respect, and accountability; supporting trust as a result (Hohl et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2024). This distinction is fundamental within sex offence investigations, where perceptions of legitimacy are often linked to victim-survivors' willingness to formally report these offences, engage with investigations, and maintain confidence in criminal justice processes (Smith et al., 2025; Webster & Oxburgh, 2021).

In England and Wales, considerations around legitimacy and procedural justice are becoming particularly relevant in the policing of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO), following sustained public, institutional, and academic scrutiny (Barbin et al., 2024b; Harding et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025). Such experiences include reported disbelief, victim-blaming attitudes, and insufficient support when engaging with the police and the criminal justice system (Gekoski et al., 2026). Hohl and colleagues (2025) suggested that these dynamics (e.g., reduced trust and confidence in the police, increased victim attrition, and concerns around the procedural fairness of investigative processes) may undermine trust in the police, prompting the need to reconceptualise the theoretical assumptions of legitimacy and procedural justice for sex offences specifically. Within and beyond sex offences, these concerns highlight the need for future research in this space to consider legitimacy as a dynamic concept continually negotiated through interactions in association with the concept of procedural fairness (Chan et al., 2023). Consequently, RASSO policing constitutes a useful context to examine how legitimacy could be constructed, challenged, and potentially repaired through specialist police practice.

When legitimacy is undermined and trust in the police is compromised, as it has been for sex offences, the consequences extend beyond single encounters or specific crime types, straining even further public dissatisfaction, media portrayal, social tensions, and perceptions of police work (Rogers et al., 2024). As police officers are an essential part of the social fabric of the communities they serve, they can be limited in their ability to effectively do their job in the absence of trust and confidence from the public (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). For this reason, both research

and policy documents argue that policing strategies should be designed to maintain public approval, respect, and support, with legitimacy often serving as an extrinsic indicator of successful policing (Farrow, 2023; Hanway & Hambly, 2023). Barbin and colleagues (2024), pinpointed challenges associated with measuring police success and specialist competence, as these are frequently assessed based on the quality of encounters with community and public members or external key measurements and used as a benchmark of what should be improved (College of Policing, 2023; IOPC, 2023). In line with this, some authors have suggested that moving away from extrinsic towards intrinsic measures of success might be necessary to improve police policy and practice (Hibberd, 2021). Adequately measuring legitimacy might be, however, just as complicated, given that most of the data available are also based on public perception of police work (Peyton et al., 2019).

Bottoms and Tankebe (2013) proposed a *dialogic approach* to investigating legitimacy, involving an ongoing dialogue through which power holders make claims concerning their legitimacy, which are moderated by the audience's response to those claims. In line with the previous paragraph, the dialogic approach contextualises legitimacy as a relational process in which powerholders (e.g., the police) and audiences negotiate what constitutes appropriate and acceptable use of authority (Martin & Bradford, 2019). Jonathan-Zamir and Harpaz (2014) also advocate for this approach, arguing that legitimacy should be viewed as an ongoing, dynamic, and bidirectional dialogue in which systemic understandings of police effectiveness equally rely on public views of police work as well as officers' perceptions of self-effectiveness. Jonathan-Zamir and Harpaz's (2014) perspective adds further value to understanding how public expectations of police work may clash, or be misaligned, with the police's understanding of their legitimacy and of their purpose as they prevent and prosecute crime. For example, Jonathan-Zamir and Harpaz (2014) identified that sampled police officers grounded their perception of legitimacy on external measures of success, like crime outcomes and rates, rather than in the PJ processes, which community surveys consistently show to be more valued by the public. While this distinction is not often explored in the literature, it is particularly relevant to specialist RASSO investigation contexts, where victims might prioritise communication and respect over case outcome (Walley et al., 2025), and officers may associate legitimacy with their ability to achieve a charge. Research by Manning (2019) also revealed that police officers have a tendency to express their perceptions concerning the source of their legitimacy to be rooted in the rule of law, which Dixon (1997, p.2) highlights is a central tenet of police claims to legitimacy. These findings highlight a potential misalignment between internal

and external conceptions of legitimacy, drawing attention to the significance of police self-perception in shaping institutional priorities and practices. The dialogic model is therefore valuable as it allows considerations for understanding how police officers understand their own legitimacy, while simultaneously recognising that such claims are moderated (or challenged) by external audiences. Beetham's (1991) work on *The Legitimation of Power* also reinforces the need to consider legitimacy from the standpoint of staff and powerholders, rather than relying solely on members of the public or third-party agencies involved in policing (Cram, 2023). Thus, recent work emphasised the importance of moving beyond public perceptions alone to fully understand and measure the foundations of police legitimacy, shifting towards intrinsic measures of success, and aligning public and police expectations (Barbin et al., 2024, 2025).

Another crucial aspect is the acknowledgement of different types of 'audiences' through which legitimacy is assessed, each bearing different perspectives on what constitutes procedurally just, aligned, and effective policing (Nix et al., 2019). These audiences may include the general public, victim-survivors, witnesses, suspects, experts, institutions, and other stakeholders, all of whom assess effectiveness based on their own values, experiences, and expectations (Bexell et al., 2020). A comprehensive understanding of legitimacy, therefore, requires considering this diversity of viewpoints. While it was outside the scope of this study to gather insights from all possible audiences, the approach underpins the importance for police officers and forces to understand how their legitimacy is affected and whether the public's expectations of 'successful police work' align with their vision of specialism (Jackson, 2018).

Legitimacy, Specialism, and Sex Offence Investigations: The Current Study

In this paper, specialism is defined as any training, role, unit, or function requiring tailored procedural knowledge aiding the investigation of RASSO. As the concept of specialism remains undefined in practice (despite being used in policing), part of the study was dedicated to understanding how procedurally just processes and specialist practice could be used to repair trust in the police and promote better normative alignment. As such, specialism is considered here as any form of expertise and career requirements that police officers perceive as contributing to investigative quality, victim engagement, and public confidence (Robinson & Davies, 2025). While officers' insights on legitimacy and lack of training have been previously discussed in the literature (Kassem & Erken, 2025), the empirical relationship between legitimacy and specialism within the context of sex offence investigations is under-researched, despite its relevance

to contemporary debates requesting systemic institutional reforms within policing (Harding et al., 2024). Several papers have highlighted, for instance, how entrenched sexism, misogyny, and harmful stereotypes within police forces hinder effective responses to sex offences, affecting victims' experiences, the integrity of investigations, legitimacy, and male officers' interactions with female staff (e.g., Feilzer and Loftus 2024; Gekoski et al. 2023a, b; Turner 2024). In this context, Angiolini (2024) reported that investigative failures within high-profile sex offending cases – like that of Sarah Everard – have further eroded public trust and compromised public legitimacy of police work (HMICFRS, 2021; Hohl & Stanko, 2015). Recent scholarship work has attempted to address the importance of police legitimacy and procedural fairness from the perspective of rape and sex offence victims, by focusing on how policing processes affect victims' sense of safety, validation, and capacity to meaningfully engage with law enforcement when trust is broken (Hohl et al., 2025).

While it is known that victims' willingness to engage with the police and the CJS is inherently linked to their perceptions of procedural justice and institutional legitimacy, preliminary findings from Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB¹) suggested that police forces substantially lack specialist skills for the investigation of sex offences (Bradford et al., 2009; Hohl & Conway, 2016; Stanko, 2022). This lack of specialist skills was associated with slow-paced and poor case progressions, high levels of victim attrition, and lower victim engagement with the police; effectively undermining victims' opportunities for fairness and raising concerns about systemic procedural injustice (King et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025). While procedural justice is not currently delivered (or investigated) as a nationally recognised specialist framework for RASSO in England and Wales, its principles increasingly underpin contemporary discussions of victim-centred practice, specialist training, and RASSO reform (Johnson et al., 2024).

As part of Operation Soteria's outputs, some researchers have also started discussing how investing in professionalism and organisational justice might result in legitimacy being internally supported, promoting better learning outcomes and wellbeing (Williams et al., 2022). While professionalism and specialism are often used interchangeably, they refer to conceptually different aspects of policing. On the one hand, professionalism is typically concerned with

maintaining broadly consistent standards of conduct, ethics, competence, and accountability, regardless of crime type or role (Martin, 2022). Although specialist practice may be seen as one expression of professionalism in policing, the current study is concerned specifically with specialism and its perceived contribution to legitimacy for the investigation of sex offences. Evidence from a systematic literature review of specialist policing of RASSO suggests, in fact, that specialism – and not professionalism *per se* – could better equip officers to deliver trauma-informed and victim-focused sex offence investigations (Dalton et al., 2022), effectively improving victims' experience to have more procedurally just support after coming in contact with specialist police officers. Despite recommendations to improve specialist practice in relation to sex offending to promote legitimacy, some authors noted that while key policy interventions, such as Home Office circulars, often encourage forces to adopt best practices or implement structural changes, their non-mandatory nature meant they lack the necessary coercive force to enforce compliance (Gekoski et al. 2023a, b; Heydari 2019). Other evidence suggests that specialism effectiveness is contingent on the availability of adequate resources and organisational support across constabularies (Barbin et al., 2024), meaning empirical connections between specialism and its potential to influence legitimacy in policing are challenging to make. In addition to these constraints, despite the prospective benefits of specialism documented in national and international literature, officers' specialist career pathways do not appear nationally defined in England and Wales, with specialist officers frequently being reallocated to generalist policing duties to cope with demand, leaving untrained staff unequipped to effectively deal with sex offence reports (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2024). While recent developments associated with Operation Soteria Bluestone (e.g., the National Operating Model and specialist training pathways) have sought to address some of these challenges (HMICFRS, 2024; Stanko, 2022), questions remain regarding how officers perceive specialist provision aligns with their career development needs and its contribution to legitimacy in practice (Barbin et al., 2025).

Evidence from (Neyroud, n.d.) suggests the importance of improving nationally approved specialist pathways to improve officers' competence, due to the potential value they could bring to enhancing public trust and legitimacy. Integrating this, Bradford and Quinton (2014, p.1041) stressed that organisational support and organisational justice play a crucial role in “shaping police officers' assessments of their own legitimacy”, reinforcing the idea that internal alignments are crucial to support officers' perceptions of self-legitimacy. Cooper and colleagues (2026) also reported that a lack of organisational justice negatively impacted officers' ability to provide effective support to victims, alongside mentioning a lack of organisational investment in their learning.

¹ OSB is a Home Office-funded programme aimed at improving how rape and serious sex offences [RASSO] are investigated in England and Wales (UK). The programme, which fostered collaboration between academia and policing, included six pillars: suspect-focused investigations; targeting repeat offenders; PJ and victim engagement; learning, development, and wellbeing; data and performance; and digital forensics. OSB outputs include the development of a national operating model [NOM] that is currently being piloted across constabularies.

Although specialism is not explicitly mentioned in these publications, there is scope to connect these challenges with missed opportunities for specialist development beyond the available RASSO training outputs (Home Office, 2024).

Amidst this, questions were raised about how specialist developments might affect both internal understandings of legitimacy and the broader democratic mandate of the police in an overall climate of dissatisfaction with police work (Tyson & Charman, 2023). These contradictions mean that little is known about officers' perceptions and lived experience of specialism as an implementable and effective tool to repair public trust and legitimacy in police work. While the study uses existing literature to contextualise known connections, such as those between police legitimacy and public trust or between normative alignment and public cooperation (Brantingham & Uchida, 2021), it focuses on showing how officers themselves perceive these dynamics within the specific context of sex offence investigations. More specifically, through a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach, the study aimed to shed light on how officers understand the relationship between specialism and police legitimacy within sex offence investigations. As such, it explores whether police officers conceptualise specialism as a mechanism through which legitimacy can be strengthened or undermined, particularly in relation to public expectations of fairness, accountability, and a more effective response to sexual violence. Equally, it provided a basis for conversations outlining how specialist knowledge, units, and skills might be perceived in relation to shaping procedural fairness, victim engagement, and institutional trust. Through these lenses, the study contributes to the growing body of work that views legitimacy not as a one-way judgement imposed by the public, but as a dynamic, reciprocal process shaped by internal beliefs, professional identity, and public dialogue, adding novel insights on its relationship with specialism and sex offending.

Moreover, although police legitimacy may be evaluated by multiple audiences, the current study specifically examines officers' understandings of legitimacy in relation to specialist investigative contexts where victim-survivor engagement is a priority. The study, therefore, aligns with a theoretical focus that looks at policing from the lenses of a dialogical (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012) and relational approach (Schoon, 2022) to legitimacy, placing police officers as active participants in the ongoing negotiation of legitimacy with the public.

Method

The study employed a CGT (Charmaz, 2014) approach to secondary data analysis of data relating to a broader investigation into police specialism in England and Wales. While the use of CGT for this type of analysis has received some

criticism due to concerns regarding researchers' distance from the data collection (Whiteside et al., 2012), this study addressed such limitations by drawing on primary data originally collected by the authors. The study did not aim to present the fully developed CGT framework, but instead to highlight some of the theoretical concepts co-constructed with the participants to link specialism with legitimacy. This is a novel approach in this field. The theoretical categories presented in the following section provide the first documented understanding of officers' perceptions of navigating and experiencing specialism as a tool to improve legitimacy, normative alignment, and procedural justice for sex offence investigations. Most importantly, while the data is grounded in qualitative and quantitative findings that preceded this work (Barbin et al., 2024; 2025), this study expands reflections on legitimacy, procedural justice, and normative alignment for specialist RASSO investigations through officers' perceptions and insights.

Sample

A recruitment advert was created and shared on social media, targeting current, former, and retired police officers who worked/had served in England and Wales. The advert was shared via academic and policing-related contacts and digital spaces, including on the College of Policing's research map. The advertisement was not promoted through paid advertising. Having worked or working in sex offence roles and teams was also not a requirement for participation. Police officers interested in contributing were invited to contact the researcher directly via email or through a Google Form link, with thirty-five police officers responding to the advert. After follow-up emails, twenty-seven interviews were conducted (77.1% response rate). One participant was removed from the study after they mentioned having worked outside of England and Wales for most of their career. The remaining twenty-six interviews were included. Of these, 10 participants provided written consent before the interview, and sixteen officers provided oral consent at the beginning of the interview. Oral consent was recorded and transcribed. No participants withdrew from the study.

The final sample included 26 participants employed at – or no longer working in – 19 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales (44.2% territorial coverage). Seven were female police officers (27.0%), and 19 were male (73.0%). Their reported ranks were: Police or Detective Constable; Sergeant or Detective Sergeant; Detective Inspector; Chief Inspector or Detective Chief Inspector; Superintendent or Detective Superintendent; Chief Superintendent; and Assistant Chief Constable. Other trainee or active ranks included Trainee Detective Constable and Acting Sergeant. Some interviewed detective officers were accredited as PIP (Professionalising Investigator Programme) levels 1 to 3 and

had been working in or supervising Crime Investigation Departments (CIDs) in England and Wales.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded online via Microsoft Teams and lasted on average 60 min. In line with CGT guidance (Shim et al., 2021), the order in which the questions were asked and the depth of the prompts changed slightly as more information was collected. Memos were produced at the end of each interview, allowing for immediate considerations to be recorded as data collection continued. Participants' transcripts were anonymised to prevent identification.

Ethics

The Research Ethics Committee at the University of Suffolk approved the study [RETH(P)22/009_23/013] on the 2nd of January 2024. Anonymity and privacy were prioritised throughout all stages of the research. Participants could use any email address to sign up to the study and were not required to turn on their cameras during the interview, helping to conceal their constabulary affiliation. During the interview, they were under no obligation to answer all the questions, nor pressured to do so. Interview transcripts were anonymised when any identifying information about the participant, or similar identifying details of anyone else, were unintentionally provided during the interviews. Once the recordings had been transcribed and redacted where required, they were deleted. Participants were assured their force would not be informed of their involvement. Informed consent was obtained for the use of anonymised data in the thesis, publications, and conference presentations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was focused on the CGT conceptual development of pre-identified categories (Barbin et al., 2025). In line with this, initial and focused coding were refined to expand on recurring patterns related to legitimacy, specialism, and PJ. As this was a secondary analysis of data originally collected by the first author, the coding process was informed by pre-existing memos and categories, supported by the authors' enhanced familiarity and analytical sensitivity with the researched topic. Coding was a reflexive and iterative process, allowing for the co-construction of nuanced categories grounded in participants' narratives and experiences, in line with Charmaz (2014).

Findings

The analysis of interviews with the 26 participants allowed for the theoretical development of several interrelated

categories that illustrate how specialism within sex offence investigations is perceived as a tool to improve PJ and institutional legitimacy. The categories described in Table 1 reflect the officers' understandings and lived experience of both internal and external influences on policing practice, revealing a complex interplay between professional identity, public perception, and organisational constraints. These categories are the product of an iterative constructivist grounded theory process (Charmaz, 2014), summarising how researchers moved from broader concepts (initial coding) derived from the interview transcripts, through a refinement of how codes might be connected (axial coding), to the final theorisation of the categories described in this study (theoretical coding). The concepts and categories listed under the first two columns pertain to the analysis, while the latter (theoretical coding), is unique to this study and

Table 1 Categories development and description from initial to theoretical coding

Initial coding	Axial coding	Theoretical Coding (Categories)
Sex offences: socio-cultural and legal implications for specialism development	A connection was made between specialism enhancements and investments, and potential improvements in police legitimacy.	Validating legitimacy through specialist competence
Specialism: the relationship between public view, legitimacy, and media representation	Overview of the role of media scrutiny and public scrutiny in deterring change in policing, as well as depicting police (in)effectiveness.	Media, scrutiny, and accountability
Polarity, expectations, and stereotypes of police culture	Includes quotes focused on the concept of "policing by consent" and public expectations of specialist work when dealing with sex offence investigations. Contrasts and misalignments were highlighted, hence the term 'polarity' previously used.	Public consent and the burden of expectation
Organisational identity: misalignments between individual needs and organisational practices	This concept was too broad and was divided into two potential categories. [1] Outlines possible out-of-policing hindrances (e.g., court or criminal justice-related) to repairing public and victims' trust in relation to maximising specialism investments. [2] Describes the need to align internal and external pressures and expectations to promote change in both sex offence investigations and broader legitimacy narratives. This seems to be an issue specific to policing and police culture.	External constraints and tensions Professional identity, misalignments, and systemic change

described in detail below. These categories summarise how officers think about legitimacy through specialism, while negotiating public expectations, organisational realities, and broader criminal justice challenges.

Validating Legitimacy Through Specialist Competence

Participants consistently described specialist training, roles, and experience as fundamental to improving the legitimacy of police responses to sexual offences. When reflecting on the explicit relationship between specialism and legitimacy, most officers noted that advanced skills in interviewing, evidence gathering, and communication have the potential of enhancing the perceived fairness of the investigative process from victims' perspectives. Specialist competence was seen as crucial not only for achieving better investigative outcomes, but also for reinforcing the credibility of officers in the eyes of victims and the wider public.

"I would say specifically trained officers [could be] given extra skill sets to deal with certain types of offences to improve how they're investigated [...] having interpersonal skills, empathy, an eye for detail [...] a sort of willingness to think outside the box about where to obtain evidence from victims and suspects, interviewing skills" (*Officer 017*).

In this view, legitimacy is constructed not only through investigative outcomes but through *how* those outcomes are achieved. The skills described by participants, including empathy, communication, and victim engagement, align with key dimensions of procedural justice, particularly dignity and respect, trustworthy motives, and opportunities for victim-survivors to have a meaningful voice throughout the investigation. These concepts are encapsulated in PJ principles that prioritise respectful treatment, voice, and transparency for victims (Tyler, 2006). Officers described specialist roles as enabling a more victim-centred and procedurally just process, where victims were perceived as more likely to experience respect, clear communication, and engagement with police staff, which in turn may reinforce public confidence and institutional credibility:

"Operating with compassion, in a professional setting to safeguard, inform, and support victims from the offence to conviction [...] That would be the raison d'être of a RASSO [rape and serious sex offence] investigator." (*Officer 016*).

Beyond technical skill, specialism was associated with increased confidence and empathy in handling sensitive

cases. Officers described feeling more capable of delivering just outcomes and being more attuned to the needs of victims, which they linked to greater procedural fairness, and how these criteria should be reflected in national standards. In underlining this, officers raised concerns about the unspecified provision of sex offence specialism across forces, suggesting that legitimacy could be further undermined if victims were to receive vastly different levels of service depending on geographic location the incident took place:

"I do think there should be a proper process to ensure that the right people are selected and trained to investigate sex offences [...] We should definitely have a more robust selection process of police officers going to fill specialist roles. We also don't have national a national place for us and these should be, so if you happen to get sexually assaulted in London, or if you happen to get sexually assaulted in North Wales, you get the same level of service [...] And the same experience of all my experience with the same level of trained officer who comes along to investigate your crime, because at the moment it's a lottery" (*Officer 010*).

"[The definition] should be nationally enforced because you need a corporate approach to the way that policing delivers its services [...] Throughout the whole of UK police and international policing, because we also receive a number of complaints from victims that have been attacked abroad or outside of our jurisdiction" (*Officer 016*).

Media, Scrutiny, and Accountability

During the interviews, the role of the media and that of the public in shaping or narrating police successes and failures was raised by multiple participants. Officers were then asked to provide their rationale on if and how this relationship can affect the morale of officers responding to sexual violence, leading to diminished staff retention and impaired legitimacy or public support:

"If you get sexual offence investigation wrong, it significantly impacts the organisation, the victim and the public [...] it has a significant impact on the public and their confidence in how we do the work. So that is very much in the minds of people in my current role as to making sure we retain public confidence, and we do a good job, retain legitimacy [...] and the public service expectation is high for those [sex offences] specialist areas" (*Officer 021*).

Officers who investigated sex offences reported that since the scandal focused on the Metropolitan Police Service for institutional failures in addressing sex offences and violence against women, public criticism has impacted the perceived legitimacy of all police forces. For some participants, the intersection between public opinion and media scrutiny has made it even more challenging to attract officers wanting to specialise in areas under intense scrutiny, like sex offences:

“I mean that there has been about the likes of the Wayne Couzens [...] When you get something like that happens and [...] it’s in the media, on the news [...] the damage that it does to the reputation of policing, you know your heart kind of sinks because you need people’s views and for all of the good work that a hundred officers may have done [...] it’s all ruined” (*Officer 023*).

Participants also mentioned how public and media-driven pressures makes investigating sex offences more challenging at the court stage than any other crimes. These challenges feel exacerbated by the absence of specialist sex offences training offered to police staff before starting their duties within sex offences teams. Officers report being left to navigate complex case dynamics that involve the court system, judges, and juries; with the certainty that best evidence is rarely enough to bring justice to victims:

“Even though we follow it all the way through, and we’re there at trial [...] it’s out my control. All this work that I’ve done, I’m now handing out to people that I absolutely do not dwell in and that in some cases, do not trust at all, to do the right thing. I’m handing it over to, you know, a 70-year-old judge who does not want to be doing rapes, that all he wants is murder and all the fancy once. It was so unsafe. An then it’s criticism, criticism, criticism [...] and it’s your fault one doesn’t get convicted. I feel responsible” (*Officer 012*).

Overall, according to most participants, the media and victims’ experience of the court system play a crucial role in directing public support or discontent towards officers’ investigation of sex offences, contributing to putting officers in a worse light than judges or other members of the CJS. Most importantly, some of the participants reiterated that, within this scrutiny, media outlets reporting feels unbalanced towards police failures, with successful policing stories being brushed under the carpet. While officers recognised the importance of showing both bad and good policing stories, they commented that the media fails to show that, in most circumstances, officers reported, at the

time data collection occurred, being asked to investigate these offences, having had no access to specialist curricula, units, and training from their constabularies. In highlighting this, they suggested media outlets should also focus on the misalignment that occurs within specialist expectations and practice to improve legitimacy.

Public cConsent and the Burden of Expectation

Some of their answers revolved around the intrinsic nature of policing in England and Wales by consent, and the public indirectly ‘dictating’ police investigative focus and effectiveness. Officers described how public attitudes and expectations shape strategic decisions and the top-down allocation of resources based on areas of policing that the public would like to see developed. As one senior officer articulated, legitimacy is not simply maintained through performance metrics, but through an effective perceived responsiveness to public concern:

“Policing in the UK comes from a place of consent and policing being drawn from society. Now there’s certain accusations [...] and a huge amount of work to make sure that we are representative of modern Britain. But, generally, we come from a place of policing by consent and vicariously because of that we police society’s norms. We’re pleased to do what society thinks is important [...] There’s particular areas of policing that we’d love to do more on, but when you are being scrutinised in a public place as a senior officer, you have to demonstrate an interest in the motivation in what the public who are paying their taxes want you to police. That’s what we are going to focus on because we have limited resources, and we have to maintain public confidence and legitimacy. We are public servants, and we maintain that through public confidence and through being successful in the things the public wants us to do. Has the public always been significantly interested in how we investigate sexual offences? I don’t think they have” (*Officer 021*).

This quote reflects an implicitly dialogic understanding of legitimacy, where officers perceive public expectations as weighting operational priorities and determining which policing functions are seen as legitimate and worthy of investment. This notion of the public *dictating* legitimacy’s terms reveals a tension between demand and delivery, with RASSO specialism being characterised by a misalignment between public expectations and organisational realities. Officers reflected, for example, on the potential public expectation that sex offence investigations are conducted only by specialists, even as the infrastructure, training, and

resourcing required to meet this expectation remain insufficient. The discrepancy between public assumptions and organisational reality was framed by participants as a source of pressure, adding potential reputational risks to forces, and reinforcing the idea that specialism is not prioritised to the extent that the public is led to believe it is:

“I think that if they were to release that to the public, there’s going to be a massive amount of uproar as to ‘Oh my God’, I thought it was specialist officer that was looking after my case [...] but the thing is, that especially for these [sex offences], there really isn’t much more [specialist training] to it” (*Officer 005*).

For participants, this misalignment represents something more concerning than a resourcing issue. It reflects, in fact, a potential breakdown in normative alignment, whereby public assumptions of specialism and investigative capacity exceed what forces were able to deliver in practice at the time the data were collected. Overall, officers suggested that misalignments between the expectations of specialist provisions and constabularies’ capacity to deliver to such expectations can further strain the attempts to regain legitimacy, highlighting a critical area in need of systemic change.

External Constraints and Tensions

Participants seemed committed to the notion of both legitimacy and PJ in relation to specialism and their positive views of specialism more broadly. Despite their commitment, many officers described systemic barriers that limited their ability to deliver effective and specialised investigative practices for sex offending. More specifically, higher-ranking officers in the sample appeared particularly frustrated with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), court procedures, and evidential thresholds that officers felt were out of step with the realities of sex offence investigations. These challenges were seen as both undermining the efforts of specialist officers and eroding victim confidence, compromising the legitimacy of police work as a result:

“I think it’s the patriarchal society that we live in rape and domestic abuse [...] there are some outwardly, misogynistic police officers, ex-police officers, and obviously [...] I know you can’t say names but [...] they are very victim blaming, very [...] it’s just an accepted crime and we’re dealing with it as long as we’re showing that we’re dealing with it, and we make it top of some agendas [...] The courts don’t really take it seriously, unless it is a stranger, kidnapping, or weapons are involved. That’s my feelings, and it’s a problem” (*Officer 012*).

While officers underlined that most career pathways might be driven by personal interests that transcend culture, they admitted that roles that are perceived as less aligned with traditional roles associated with policing, like the investigation of sex offences, might be unintentionally stigmatised, undervalued, or not attract the same numbers of officers wanting to specialise. The overall perception was that officers looking to become sex offence specialists might be less inclined to do so due to recent policing scandals and the increased level of media scrutiny for sex offence investigations. This resistance might affect a police officers’ desire to specialise in the first place, as they weight the potential for career development against the culture that is effectively dominant in their departments, making repairing trust difficult:

“There’s a lack of confidence and competence on the part of some of the gatekeepers around sex offences in relation to the way that we deal with victims [...] it does not attract the right people. It’s [specialism for sex offences] not anywhere near where it needs to be, but that will require a new mindset, potentially different legislation, punishment, and certainly a streamlining of judicial processes to get hearings” (*Officer 011*).

Overall, there was a shared perception that the legitimacy police sought to build through specialist practice could be undone by decisions made elsewhere in the system or by a broader lack of prioritisation within constabularies. This theme highlights a structural disjuncture between procedural ideals and institutional realities, where legitimacy is co-produced and expected as a foundation of good police work, but whose influence and execution are perceived as being outside of the control of individual police officers.

Professional Identity, Misalignments, and Systemic Change

Police officers raised concerns that recent government-based reforms and budgetary decisions impacting upon specialism development may not align with the practical expectations of officers wanting to specialise, leading to inefficiencies and dissatisfaction with policing organisations which may, in turn, lead to perceptions of a lack of organisation justice. The discrepancy between individual potential and organisational practices influences the lack of prioritisation and focus on specialist staff development and investment in specialist skills, both for policing in general and for sex offences more specifically. According to the participants, the misalignment between officers’ needs for training and extrinsic organisational targets makes it difficult for staff

members to deliver adequate service to victims reporting sex offences, amid high caseloads and fast case turnarounds:

“I don’t feel that we’re equipped to react in an efficient, effective, and professional manner due to predominantly the workload that officers and staff are facing. So the mindset is there and the absolute desire from my personal experience to assist [sex offence] victims and those related to the victims and affected by such serious crimes is there, but I don’t think that there’s the organisational ability to provide a sufficient or an appropriate level of focus to victims in an effort to bring perpetrators to justice or to provide safeguard” (*Officer 016*).

This misalignment was mentioned by several participants who linked it to affecting staff retention and the ability of higher-ranking officers to recruit individuals who might want to make a career in areas of policing which require specialism. Some participants faulted poor organisational practices which do not prioritise officers’ workloads and support, potentially making specialist roles unappealing for recruits. One officer stressed that more tailored investments toward specialism could help police forces attract and retain more highly skilled officers:

“Recently, I’ve been involved in trying to recruit to specialist roles, it’s not seen the same way by the current generation of young cops, so the specialist roles [like] CID, RASSO [...] that kind of exclusiveness, that kind of specialism as a desirable place to be, seems to have been eroded over the last few years or some of that is to do with workloads. Some of that has to do with perception [...] some of that is probably to do with investment in general policing to make it a more attractive place to retain people because one of the problems as a manager you always have is [...] you’re always losing people, specialist departments [...] and it’s usually the good people you’re losing” (*Officer 021*).

When discussing these issues, participants displayed a shared disappointment that the system’s goals rarely align with staff prioritisation and investments that go beyond specialism, extending to policing more broadly. Challenges associated with organisational change among police forces included the emphasis on external measures of success and the reliance on third-party specialists, often at the expense of internal feedback, wellbeing of officers, and legitimacy. In support of this, Colombo et al. (2023) reported that when institutional change was not in line with the culture, needs, and structure of the police force, police officers were

significantly more likely to display exhaustion symptoms, later developing into burnout. Interestingly, some mid-to-high-ranked police officers interviewed were very critical of police chiefs’ attitudes towards policing reforms. As part of the discussion, they emphasised that police chiefs are likely to implement change within the police force even if counterproductive for the officers working in that force, as this is a way to advance their careers and/or secure their legacy:

“I believe police is a political football now and chief officers unfortunately would rather appease politicians and the media than actually appease and look after the public and look after their staff” (*Officer 014*).

In this regard, Schafer and Varano (2017) reported that several policing reforms have failed to bring successful outcomes as high-ranking officers do not actively engage with police staff when planning and implementing force-specific change. Agreeing, some of the officers reported that change proposals are mostly oblivious to staff challenges, work capacity, and needs, leading to dissatisfaction and resistance from lower-ranking officers:

“We’ve got a saying in a place called reinventing the wheel because you’ll get again part of the promotion system is one of the things is to become a senior officer [...] you have to implement change. So as evidence of change you’ll get people who come in and say, right, so I can get an example for my promotion board [...] I’m going to get rid of this department or I’m going to do different things to this department [...] so even if the department’s working well, if it’s not broken, they’ll come in and do what they want to do, not for the benefit of the department or the people it’s meant to serve [...] but as an example for that promotion board. And then they go off and do the promotion board, and then that department’s left like that [...] that’s been a constant in my 30 years in the job” (*Officer 015*).

In line with this, evidence from a United States sample underlined how successful implementations of change from high-ranking positions, like in the case of chief officers, were highly dependent on their attitude towards organisational problems and needs (Schafer et al., 2020). Overall, participants reported that when changes are implemented without adequate consideration of officers’ perspectives, increased stress and antagonism were registered within the force. Reconciling organisational and officers’ directions could be a first step to ensure officers’ satisfaction, productivity, work capacity, and role retention, leading to healthier legitimacy and procedurally fair processes. These

challenges are exacerbated for sex offences where the specialism guidance, career development, and drive for change are minimal.

Discussion

The study identified five interconnected and co-constructed categories showing, for the first time, how specialism, legitimacy, and procedural justice intersect in the context of sex offence investigations. These categories illustrate the structural, cultural, and organisational challenges officers face, while offering insight into the pressures shaping theoretical and practical perceptions of legitimacy among current, former, and retired officers in England and Wales. The first category presented raised concerns around specialist definitions and provisions, calling for systemic change regarding sex offence investigations. Change requests included clearer national standards, improved training pathways, and more consistent definitions of what it means to be a specialist, so that the same level of care and efficacy can be provided consistently at a national level. Without such measures, specialist roles risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive, potentially damaging the very legitimacy they are intended to uphold. The findings suggest that legitimacy, PJ, and specialism might be more closely intertwined than previously researched, as they represent tools or “measurements of the extent to which members of the public trust and have confidence in the police, believe that the police are honest and competent, think that the police treat people fairly and with respect, and are willing to defer to the law and to police authority” (Fischer, 2014, p. 2). Similarly, evidence from the literature shows that when victims perceive their interaction with the police and probation officers as attentive and fair, they are less likely to reject the police as an authority and more likely to be satisfied with police interactions after reporting a crime (Barkworth & Murphy, 2014; Wells, 2007). In this sense, making victims feel believed and heard, especially in a sexual violence context, might help victims gain a sense of normative alignment and improve the perceived legitimacy of policing practice regardless of the case moving forward to the hearing stage (Barber & Tankebe, 2024). From a legitimacy perspective, these interactions may also foster normative alignment by demonstrating that police responses reflect the values and expectations of victim-survivors around the concepts of appropriate and just treatment following a sex offence incident. By contextualising these findings through the lenses of available literature on procedural justice and legitimacy, the study moved away from victim-focused interactions with police officers, without undermining its well-documented exploratory validity (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021; Hohl et al., 2025).

On the contrary, the authors suggest for systemic change to happen and improve victim engagement and support, especially for cases of rape and sexual violence, new conceptualisations or relational legitimacy are required, with attention to dynamics, like self-legitimacy, and audiences – such as police officers – that are often under-documented. Similar shifts in focus, looking at the relational nature of legitimacy and procedural justice were also pinpointed by Meyerson and colleagues (2021) as well as Schoon (2022). Developing from these already well-established concepts, this work consolidated the value of specialism in policing to improve how victims are treated (by specialist or general units), as an integral and crucial factor to improved effectiveness, legitimacy, and fairness within sex offence investigations; a concept which is being under-researched and overlooked in England and Wales.

Police officers interviewed reported that despite specialism being hardly discussed, having the chance to develop specialist skills within institutional contexts that endorse and protect specialism, could improve their ability to provide for victims and investigate sex offending more confidently. As already stressed in the introduction to this research, PJ and legitimacy have been linked in the literature to the idea of a fair process and to the fact that people’s perception of fairness is strongly impacted by the quality of their experiences and views of the police, for which victims should feel treated with dignity and respect, be given a voice, experience objective and transparent decision-making, and perceive police officers’ recommendations as trustworthy (Cram, 2023; Tyler, 1997; 2001). Expanding on this, the findings added that officers’ ability to actualise procedurally just interactions with victims is dependent on their specialist experience and confidence that they possess the required skills to adequately support victims. As such, participants framed their ability to communicate effectively, show empathy, and explain decisions as parts of PJ’s expectations. In support of this, recent work from Robinson and Davies (2025, p.1) identified domestic violence specialist units as “pathways towards procedural justice, [leading to] higher victim satisfaction, better safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes, and enhanced tradecraft, teamworking and morale amongst the officers involved”.

These concepts are linked with the second category developed in this study, which underlined how the response to sex offending is closely intertwined with broader socio-cultural concerns and legislative dynamics, particularly when investigative outcomes are shaped and influenced by misogyny and rape myths (Gekoski et al., 2023b). More specifically, the findings further shed light on the role of media coverage in moderating public discourse and sentiments towards the police, aligning with evidence from Succar and colleagues (2024), while adding specific considerations on

how media outlets can shape the perceived legitimacy of police responses to sex offences. For instance, officers noted that media commentaries on high-profile cases, such as that of Sarah Everard (Horvath & Brown, 2022), have rightfully and understandably exposed serious police malpractice, vetting concerns, and cultural issues intrinsic to the policing of rape and sex offending. At the same time, such narratives appeared to exacerbate an already existing legitimacy crisis, amplifying public distrust and extending internal dissatisfaction beyond single constabularies and individuals. A recent video-investigative report from BBC Panorama, further highlighted the presence of normalised and widespread internal sexist and racist biases that directly affect officers' interactions with victims (Polglase et al., 2025). Although in a different cultural scenario, Oliveira (2022) showed that experiencing or witnessing negative encounters with the police decreased public perceptions of procedural fairness, consequently harming legitimacy. In line with this, interviewed officers reported that the influence of media coverage directly affected their work, with even committed and competent officers not being able to escape the shadow of institutional failure once amplified by news reports. Officers also reported that these public concerns have eroded morale across constabularies, making it more complicated to recruit and retain officers within sensitive investigative areas, like sexual violence, due to the higher media scrutiny compared to other crime types, dissuading them from pursuing specialist roles. From a research perspective, media narratives appear to operate both as a mechanism of accountability and as a mirror reflecting systemic weakness, foregrounding the need for structural and cultural reform that policing is struggling to implement. These dynamics intersect closely with the persistence of misogyny and rape bias within policing, which continue to undermine procedural justice and the perceived legitimacy of police responses to sexual offences. Overall, strengthening and protecting specialism within policing is believed to offer a potential pathway to address these challenges by promoting skilled and professional integrity across constabularies, improving investigative competence, and embedding consistent standards of victim care and procedural fairness. While several national initiatives are presently seeking to strengthen specialist training provision for RASSO (Home Office, 2024), officers continue describing challenges relating to cross-force consistency, resourcing, and organisational support. Some of the recent training initiatives, launched as this study was completed, such as the new Specialist Sexual Assault Investigators Development Programme (SSAIDP), might provide an answer to some of these challenges (College of Policing, 2024). Overall, the findings underscore that the relationship between specialism and legitimacy remains an important area of concern which should be further explored.

While these concerns reflect a broader documented crisis of institutional trust, wherein legitimacy is not built on procedural justice (Tyler, 2006) and mediated by public narratives of what counts as symbolic failures (Loader & Mulcahy, 2003), specialism appears to be a tool that is yet to be maximised. Policy-makers looking to enhance legitimacy for the investigation of sex offences should not only account for the complex interplay between media representation and police-public interaction but also look at how they can support and endorse specialism more effectively. Crucially, specialism could serve as both a corrective to the reputational damage highlighted by media exposure and as a vehicle for restoring public trust through demonstrable expertise, transparency, and legitimacy in the handling of sexual violence cases. This is even more important when the burden of procedural expectations is placed on under-resourced and under-specialised officers, which was the third category identified in this study, highlighting profound misalignments between public expectations for specialism and sexual violence versus the available human and financial resources available to constabularies. This category reflected on the performative aspect of legitimacy in which policing must outwardly appear procedurally just, even when internal capacities effectively fall short of delivering specialist provision (Rowe et al., 2024). The findings highlight a potential gap between public expectations of specialist response to RASSO (regardless of specialist training) and officers' perceptions to align to those expectations; adding into research linking normative alignment with the dialogic understanding of legitimacy (Jackson, 2018). Officers, in turn, experience the weight of this expectation, balancing limited resources with a desire to meet societal norms and maintain institutional credibility – even more so for crimes that have been highly scrutinised like sex offences. While evidence from the literature supports the idea that police ability to effectively deter and investigate crime is related to the level of cooperation from members of the public in reporting crimes and confidence that the police will take their case seriously (Hanway & Hambly, 2023), this is undermined if policing does not appear to have the adequate tools (e.g., skills, investments, specialisms) to prove their words are matched in practice. In this regard, Kassem and Erken (2025, p.130) reported that the absence of specialist training and scarcity of resources for specialism were two of the main factors contributing to the lack of trust in the police and other correlated contemporary policing challenges, for which “strengthening accountability, integrity and officer training [can] rebuild public trust”. Although Kassem and Erken's (2025) study looked at cybercrime and fraud, the findings from this research support and expand their argument for sex offending, a crime that has so negatively influenced police legitimacy, it is now being labelled

as compromised beyond repair (Harding et al., 2024). Compromised legitimacy has, in turn, been linked to the decriminalisation of rape, which has made it difficult to understand what steps should be taken to specifically improve procedural justice and legitimacy within sex offending (Tudor, 2023). Preliminary findings from Operation Soteria Blue-stone (Stanko, 2022) also highlighted how the challenges associated with rape and sexual offences, paired with resistance to change how these crimes are investigated in the first place, have hindered public trust in the police and highlighted some of the systemic, legal, and socio-cultural failures of contemporary policing (Angiolini, 2024). In line with this evidence, this study's findings suggested that the alleged discrepancy between public expectations for specialism and officers' capacity might make it even more difficult to repair public trust in the legitimacy of police abilities to prevent and prosecute sex offences.

Internal and external factors challenging this process were also identified as significant challenges to this process. Many of the officers interviewed, especially when directly involved in investigating sex offences, expressed frustration with out-of-policing agencies, including the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the court system, citing evidential standards that heavily rely on proof of consent and are often misaligned with the complex and non-linear nature of sex offence investigations. Such constraints have been shown to often undermine victim confidence and police legitimacy, reflecting broader critiques of how sexual violence should be investigated and prosecuted (Stanko, 2022; Westmarland, 2015). As previously highlighted, internally, specialist roles in this area are described as under-resourced, emotionally taxing, and subject to heightened scrutiny, contributing to low uptake and retention, particularly in relation to recent policing scandals and public criticism (Brown, 2022; Police Federation, 2023). Overall, while the participants recognised the importance of procedural fairness and contribution of specialism in improving victim engagement and high-quality investigations, they also highlighted how these efforts are often constrained or undermined by decisions and priorities situated outside of policing, within broader organisational criminal justice realities. The under-utilisation of specialism, paired with the persistence of cross-system challenges that remain unaddressed, appear to be a significant cause of frustration for the officers interviewed. The finding underscores, and is linked to, the relational and institutional nature of legitimacy (Tyler & Jackson, 2014), where the credibility of police work is shaped not only by officers' conduct, but by the systemic environment in which investigations are embedded, which might or might not prioritise officers' capacity to specialise.

Lastly, the fifth category brought together organisational misalignments and goal discrepancies for specialist

development that appear to be further undermining the delivery of procedurally fairer responses to sex offences, weakening officers' capacity to uphold legitimacy. While all participants interviewed reiterated a clear commitment to improving victim outcomes, the systemic undervaluing of specialism (Barbin et al., 2025), the limited investment in staff wellbeing (Beckley et al., 2025), and top-down reform driven by external measures of success rather than internal needs (Phythian et al., 2021), can erode morale, compromises staff retention, and long-term effectiveness within and beyond legitimacy. As participants also made clear that reforms focused exclusively on outcomes and/or conviction rates risk overlooking the conditions that could enable them to perform their duties effectively. In line with this, the findings suggest that any attempt to enhance legitimacy in policing sex offences should also be matched by attention to officer needs and challenges to meaningfully integrate specialist training, career development, and workload management into the operational culture of policing, as this might subsequently lead to better PJ and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In contrast to conventional reform processes or enquiries that marginalise staff perspectives, this study actively involved police officers in shaping the future of the specialism they would like to see, facilitating a co-constructed understanding of how this could be used to improve procedural justice and legitimacy. By centring officers' voices, the research demonstrated that sustained legitimacy can not only arise from public-facing interactions, but also from empowering those within policing to act for the change they would like to see.

Overall, the study made a unique contribution to legitimacy literature by drawing a connection between the internal dynamics of specialism, such as role clarity, organisational support, and investments in specialist capacity, and the external outcomes of procedural justice and legitimacy. By testing these new connections using a constructivist grounded theory paradigm (Barbin et al., 2024; 2025), this research moved beyond established accounts of legitimacy that centre almost exclusively on public perceptions of fairness (Rimkutė & Mazepus, 2025), to demonstrate how the organisational conditions that shape specialism also underpin the capacity of officers to deliver procedurally just responses. More specifically, the findings suggest that officers view specialism and organisational support as resources which may enable them to deliver interactions with victims that are more closely aligned with PJ's principles. The study also highlighted the need to integrate legitimacy research with scholarship on occupational cultures, professional development, and specialist practice in policing, offering an important step towards reframing legitimacy not only as the inevitable outcome of police–public interaction, but also as an organisational product that could be used to identify how

policing invests in, sustains, and values its specialist workforce within and beyond sexual violence.

Limitations and Future Research

While rigorous ethical, reflexive, and analytical practices were implemented, the study used secondary data that had been previously transcribed and initially coded. While in CGT methodology, this is not inherently a limitation, the influence of the authors' knowledge on the topic should be recognised. The original coding framework may have foregrounded the existing categories relating to specialism, not allowing additional potentially linked categories to be co-constructed with the participants around legitimisation. To mitigate the potential for bias, existing codes were treated as provisional rather than fixed, and the transcripts were revisited to ensure theoretical sensitivity was maintained. Future research could focus on the collection of primary data targeting legitimacy from a policy perspective, expanding the focus from sex offending to other crime types, and exploring further how officers' perception of a lack of organisational justice inputs on the self-perception of legitimacy and procedural justice. It was also highlighted that officers' voices are just one of the audiences that contribute to legitimate and procedurally just police work. In line with this, there is scope to expand this investigation to include the perspectives of the public, media, and other CJS agents on the relationship between specialism as a tool to improve legitimacy and procedural justice in policing for, and beyond, sex offence investigations.

Conclusion

This study interrogated the relationship between specialism, legitimacy, and PJ through 26 accounts collected from current, former, and retired police officers in England and Wales. Interviews offered novel insights into police officers' narratives of the perceived benefits and potential of enhancing specialist investigative and communication skills or training for sex offences to improve legitimacy and victims' confidence that their case is being treated in a way that is fair and procedurally just. Participants underscored the value of specialism in reinforcing public trust and credibility. By voicing a link between competence development and procedural fairness and efficacy, the findings suggest that investing in specialism could strengthen procedural justice and legitimacy practices, promote victim-centred investigations, and increase officers' confidence in their roles. Taken together, the study findings suggest that enhancing police specialism is not just a matter of professional development, training, or operational capacity, but rather a key mechanism for strengthening legitimacy and procedurally fair processes

when responding to sexual violence. By addressing structural biases, supporting specialist skills, and embedding consistent practices, police forces can ensure that victims experience fairness, respect, and voice, while officers are equipped to act with confidence and integrity. In this way, organisational investment in specialism can become both a practical and theoretical lever for improving policing outcomes and public support beyond solely sexual violence, in a climate already affected by policing scandals, broken trust, and institutional malpractice.

Author Contributions The first author, AB, was responsible for the study's design, primary data collection, and secondary data analysis, as well as for drafting the manuscript, interpreting the findings, and reviewing the submission. The co-authors, MM, KD, and MH, provided essential support and guidance to shape, amend, and refine the manuscript's content to its final form. All authors contributed to the study's conceptualisation and approved each submission and review conducted.

Data Availability Interview data is not publicly available due to confidentiality and privacy restrictions approved at the ethics request stage.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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