‘YOUR report made a difference’ said the barrister, telling me that a woman officer had accepted an out-of-court settlement after a 15-year legal battle to acknowledge her harassment within the police. I had been given the interesting brief to provide an account of research that was available at the time of this officer’s experiences. What might her force have reasonably been expected to know about sexual harassment? Her victory gave me great satisfaction and reinforced my commitment to studying gender in policing.

As a jobbing researcher after completing my PhD, I got fed up with the uncertainties and insecurities of short-term employment in university on a succession of so-called soft-money contracts. I left to work for the police as a research manager during the late 1980s. I was drawn to policing in part because of its mystique. Seeing behind the chequered tape marking off crime scenes and going beyond where the camera stops has a certain seductive appeal.

My specific interest in gender in policing was as a result of several factors. I had been intrigued by pioneer women such as the suffragettes, and women ‘firsts’ such as Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the vanguard female doctor. When I joined the police service as a civilian employee, women made up about 10 per cent of the complement of officers nationally. The highest-ranking woman officer within my force was an inspector. There were no women chief constables, although since then seven have been appointed. When I attended meetings of the constabulary’s senior management (chief inspector upwards), I found myself the only woman in an assembly of about 60 men. ‘Good morning gentlemen and Jennifer’, the chief constable’s welcoming salutation, was meant kindly but nonetheless felt patronising.

The actual trigger was an induction tour. The surprise with which I was greeted as a potential line manager to male police officers, together with the presence of Pirelli calendars and explicit sexualised comments, gave me an early policing research topic. The police service appeared to be a somewhat hostile environment for women. I thought research might answer the question why there were so few women in the police, why they were not at the top of the organisation and how they cope with their lot.

The fact that I myself would be pioneering was also an attraction. A brief scan of the research literature showed up little in the way of psychological research that shed any light on the issue of gender relations within the police. Not explicitly at the outset, but certainly later, once research findings achieved some measure of publicity, I resolved to adopt an advocacy role. The research did become a conduit through which women’s voices, muted within their own forces, could be heard describing their discriminatory and harassing experiences.

My first foray into an examination of the gender dimension in policing was through a study of occupational stress (Brown & Campbell, 1990). This revealed the rather startling finding that, for women, the stressor most likely to predict suffering symptoms of distress was the bias and prejudice meted out to them by fellow officers. I wanted to explore further. The Home Office agreed to fund a study, but when the research caught the attention of a chief constable whose force had recently lost a race discrimination case, he attempted to thwart it. This created for me a determination that not only would the research go ahead but that it would be beyond reproach.

We found wide-ranging sexual harassment amongst women police officers (Anderson et al., 1993). This research emerged at the same time as a thematic inspection of equal opportunities in the police service. Together they formed a
critical mass of evidence that was presented at a key seminar at the Police Staff College and resulted in a series of policy initiatives and stimulated development of good practice.

This study had been largely quantitative, but in the free-text final comments section of the questionnaire, women officers added insightful, humorous, touching and sometimes shocking accounts of their experiences. As an undergraduate I had been fired by the reconstructing social psychology school exemplified by Nigel Armistead, Rom Harré and John Shotter. My PhD had developed an accounts methodology (Brown & Sime, 1981), so I had always been interested in narratives and ways to analyse them. And, let’s be candid, I like to hear stories. Policewomen, rather like policemen, have a fund of war stories that they like to tell. Frances Heidensohn and I devised a joint project that involved collecting both qualitative and quantitative data and melding sociological and psychological approaches to our subject. This enabled us to contextualise women’s experiences historically, a neglected dimension of analysis by psychologists. We also met a range of phenomenal women from many different police jurisdictions and listened to vivid firsthand accounts of their experiences. I have felt it a huge privilege to hear of their (mis)adventures in this alien land of policing, dominated as it is by straight, white males. I hope we did their stories justice in the book Frances and I wrote (Brown & Heidensohn, 2000).

As keywords, ‘policing’, ‘sexual harassment’, and ‘sex discrimination’ are certainly not the buttons to press to attract prestigious research funding. Nor are they topics likely to find publication in journals that command a high RAE tariff. So my preferred research field was not self-consciously chosen as a reputation-building enterprise; nor was an interest in gender in policing going to award me cult celebrity status within the febrile atmosphere of media fixation on offender profiling aspects of forensic psychology. I was drawn to it by a combination of preference and circumstance, and have loved every minute of it.

Professor Jennifer Brown is in the Department of Psychology, University of Surrey. E-mail: Jennifer.Brown@surrey.ac.uk.

References