

Sociology essays - occupational culture police



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Occupational Culture Police

Title question: What do you know about the occupational culture(s) of the police? Why is it important?

Introduction

As Reiner states, “ the idea of ‘ police occupational culture’ or ‘ cop culture’ has been a source of academic interest and debate since research into policing began in earnest in the 1960s”. The following consideration of the title question concerning the meaning and importance of the police occupational culture is advanced through identification and the development of a number of themes which are inter-related:

- a definition of the phrase *occupational culture* (both as a free standing term of art as well as its relationship to the concept of *organizational culture*)
- how a distinct occupational culture and various sub-cultures are fostered generally in police services;
- the further fundamental relationship between police occupational cultures and the public interest in effective law enforcement

At this point I would like to state that the issues discussed below are not tied exclusively to the occupational culture of UK policing, although the majority of the references utilised throughout and noted in Bibliography are derived from these sources. The observations advanced here are stated as broadly applicable to all jurisdictions in the Anglo-American legal tradition, where police services are a societal institution regulated through and accountable to civilian authority. Similarly, the discussion of the issues raised here

<https://assignbuster.com/sociology-essays-occupational-culture-police/>

presumes a familiarity with current issues concerning culture associated with policing.

- Definitions

'Culture' is a term that is itself amenable to a number of definitions. In its widest formulation, culture may be defined as '...the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge which constitute the shared basis of action'. Moreover, it encompasses 'taken-for-granted' emotionally charged beliefs guiding behaviour, and cultural forms, which are the overt expressions of those beliefs. As a concept, culture connotes both precepts and boundaries that are broadly held by its entire membership. Therefore, adherence to a police culture is an 'all or nothing' proposition.

Police occupational culture is comprised of several constituent parts and each is essential to an understanding of the whole. The first such component is that of the 'cop culture' mentality. This point highlights the fact that the occupational culture of police is directly connected to the actions and ethics of street or other front line serving officers.

Yet, it is contended that the occupational culture of policing is not disconnected or detached from the organizational culture; this is the framework within which policing is mandated and conducted in all societies. Worth mentioning is the fact that commentators such as McIvor regard the two cultures as distinct; the conclusions advanced in the course of the present analysis are in part the product of a view that organizational and occupational cultures are considerably inter-related.

The occupational cultures of police as exclusively reflective of the ' front line' mentality of police officers is too limited an approach. If organisational police culture may be defined as the actual front line behaviour that will be condoned by management, the relationship between police hierarchy and the police themselves is that of formal / informal, where conduct acceptable to the organisation is not *permitted* so much as it is *condoned* .

Reiner noted that to gain a deeper understanding of how police operations are conducted, one must understand the policing culture (the values, norms, perspectives, and craft rules that inform their conduct). In addition, Reiner observed that police services possess one unique property, namely that within the services the level of officer discretion *increases* as one moves down the hierarchy, with the greatest discretion existing on the front line.

This understanding leads inevitably to the related characterization of police culture as the product of various codes, some mandated (i. e. by legislation or organisational practice) and others driven informally by the culture. Of critical importance to understanding the resilience of occupational cultures in policing is an appreciation that police cultures do not necessarily bear a significant relationship to public expectations concerning effective law enforcement. Police cultures exist organically, with the culture sustained as much by its structure as by any external influences.

- How police occupational cultures thrive

It is contended that at the heart of police occupational cultures is the conflict of ' us versus them' that is played out on a multitude of levels within modern society. Notwithstanding the popularity of government initiatives broadly

labeled as 'community policing', the police have long adopted a world view that identifies a number of potential opponents to cultural practices and conduct that encourage the 'us versus them' mentality, such as the general public (both as 'on the street' adversaries and in the manifestation of negative opinions about policing), organized criminal elements, the police hierarchy (union versus management) and other police officers within a service with contrary notions of policing.

Inevitably, these various points of conflict produce a number of cultural outcomes for the police that may be distilled to a single product - police solidarity. In each of the four general areas noted here, loyalty to one's fellow officers is the adhesive that maintains the strength of the occupational culture. Police solidarity is what Skolnick feels contributes to the idea of a culture created by officers, which demands they cover each other on the streets and perhaps even during an internal investigation. As a police officer stated: *"We're a tight-knit community. We've got to stand by each other because we are getting it from all angles. We get it from outside, the general public, we get it from solicitors, from QC's, we get it from our own bosses"*.

It is a simple conclusion to be drawn from the police officers world view of 'us versus them' that police officers will unavoidably experience a sense of isolation from the public they have sworn to serve. When the additional element of cynicism concerning the police role within the justice system as a marginalized one (in the sense of accused persons being acquitted as a result of the function of the law to defeat legitimate police action), feelings of solidarity within the service are accentuated.

Police solidarity as a reciprocal outcome of the organisational and social environments where the police function was effectively summarized by Goldsmith as an equation:

“ In an environment perceived as hostile and unpredictable the police culture offers its members reassurance that the other officers will pull their weight in police work, that they will defend, back up and assist their colleagues when confronted with external threats and that they will maintain secrecy in the face of external investigations. In return for loyalty and solidarity members of the police culture enjoy considerable individual autonomy to get on with the job.”

The cultural foundation of solidarity leads to the following progression when considering the outcomes, both positive and negative in terms of the public interest in effective policing: solidarity; esprit de corps; the ‘ thin blue line’, a mentality that the police are the only effective means to preserve public order; the ‘ code of silence’, where loyalty to a fellow officer has a greater value than the public interest in the investigation of police practices or suspected misconduct; active steps taken to defeat any investigation of suspected police misconduct.

The ‘ us versus them’ characterization of police attitudes at the root of occupational culture can also be considered from the vantage point of the insider / outsider framework. This method of cultural assessment also permits the police ‘ outsider’ to be defined in a variety of ways, each of which reinforces the primacy given to the principle of solidarity among officers within policing cultures. Depending upon the circumstances of the

relationship being examined, an 'outsider' to a police culture may be defined by race, gender, masculinity (distinct from gender; the machismo traditionally associated with effective policing) and preferred social activities (e. g. police related events).

It is submitted that any one or more of these circumstances may operate as an obstacle to the 'outsider' achieving solidarity within the subject culture. One prominent concern noted by both academic and public commentators is the bullying and intimidation of non conformers within police ranks as a product of occupational solidarity.

A prominent example is the 2003 UK government report 'Diversity Matters'. The Report advocated changes to the organisational and occupational cultures of modern UK policing through an encouragement of police services to accept and appreciate officers from different backgrounds, skills, attitudes and experiences.

The views expressed in the report were tempered by a recognition of the need for a "...working environment free from any unfair practice, bullying, prejudice and discrimination, in order to underpin [officer]... retention and to enable them to develop to their full potential." Barracking, teasing and ridicule are accepted as cultural norms that flow naturally from occupational solidarity.

Solidarity is therefore the ultimate two edged police cultural sword. It is a stimulus to police action, officer safety and a general sense of confidence within the occupational culture; it is a barrier to the transparent governance of police, as the element of secrecy in how the police govern themselves

encourages a sense of autonomy from the very public to which the police swear their allegiance.

Police subcultures are also an outcome of difference between serving officers, where the difference is not driven out of the service by exclusion, but where the difference creates a cultural microcosm within the police itself. Examples abound where the officers are required to work in close quarters, such as undercover operatives, where the officers are in continual contact with a lifestyle that is counter to that of accepted society.

The archetypal 'rogue cop', who either violates the law to achieve either ultimately positive law enforcement objective, or alternatively who engages in criminal activity while in police service, is such a figure. As was noted in the course of the Lawrence inquiry report, *"...the culture of the police and some procedures in the criminal justice system actually make it totally improbable that all police officers will behave as the system lays down that they should."*

As an aside, if the depictions of police culture in modern UK television drama were a barometre, one might conclude that the public broadly accepts police misconduct so long as the end achieved is in the public interest. From the robust detective Frost to the more intellectual investigative approaches depicted in productions such 'Inspector Morse' and 'Prime Suspect', where the occupational culture demands that an organisational rule be ignored or actively disobeyed to achieve justice (often justice as the protagonist defines it), such conduct is desirable.

It is in this context that a further occupational culture must be mentioned. Not only does policing encourage the development of distinct cultures from within, there are equally distinct cultures that are devoted to observing and characterising police behaviour. As was observed by Sklansky with regard to the American policing occupational cultures,

“...for over half a century, police reform in the United States has been guided by a broadly shared set of assumptions about the nature of the police subculture and its central importance in shaping the behavior of the police. Those assumptions—that police officers think alike; that they are paranoid, insular, and intolerant; that they intransigently oppose change; that they must be rigidly controlled from the outside, or at least from the top—they themselves constitute a schema [mental constructs that sort and organize human experience]”.

Sklansky's assertion adds another dimension to the consideration of occupational culture. Not only is there a need to define the nature and extent of the culture, there must also be a concerted effort to assess the perspective of the observer or commentator.

- Occupational cultures and the public interest in effective law enforcement

The most obvious negative outcome with respect to police conduct when examined from an occupational cultural perspective is the public perception that the police either (a) cannot investigate themselves in an objective fashion where wrongdoing is suspected (b) the result of such internal investigations are inherently flawed and not credible.

The law enforcement landscape is littered with such issues. The numerous reports and White Papers commissioned by the UK government to address this issue have not eliminated public concerns. A prominent 2007 Canadian example of the clash between the evident irresistible force of public concern over an in-custody police shooting of a civilian, and the equally immovable object of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) internal investigation practices is a notable example.

The deceased had been arrested on a minor charge; while in custody and handcuffed he was shot in the head by the arresting officer. In the ensuing 15 month period between the event and the release of the internal RCMP investigative report, the subject officer was permitted a number of weeks to consult with his legal counsel prior to his making of any formal statement to investigators; the subject officer was supplied the questions to be posed in written form in advance.

There has been a significant public outcry in Canada to reform internal RCMP practices in this respect; the perception has been noted that even where a civilian person was killed in very troubling circumstances, the police will not turn in one of their own.

It is submitted that notwithstanding characterisations of modern policing as an agent for change, where community policing enhances public relations within the community and removes the implicit barriers between police and public, certain cultural elements can never be resolved. Police operations have an immediacy that demands action. For this reason policing must be a

pragmatic enterprise, where the occupational culture facilitates the pursuit of pragmatic results over adherence to rules either legal or organisational.

Bibliography

Chan, J, (1996) ' Changing Police Culture', *British Journal of Criminology*, Winter 1996.

Fielding, N. G. (1988). *Joining forces: police training, socialization, and occupational competence* , London: Routledge.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies (2000) *Policing London - Winning Consent*

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies (2003) *Diversity Matters*

Leishman, F., Loveday, B. and Savage, S. (1996) ' *Core Issues in Policing* ' , London: Longmans.

MacPherson, William (1999) *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* At: [www. archive. official-documents. co. uk/document/cm42/4262/4262. htm](http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm) (Accessed December 22, 2007)

McIvor, K. (2004) ' *The culture of the police service* ', in *Bullying 999*, At: [www. bullying999. co. uk. jan5. htm](http://www.bullying999.co.uk/jan5.htm) (Accessed December 21, 2007)

Oxford English Dictionary, (3rd), 2003

Padfield, N. (1995) *Text and Materials on the Criminal Justice Process*, London: Butterworths, p. 34.

Reiner, R., (1992) *The Politics of the Police, 2nd Edition*, Sussex, St Martins Press

Reiner, R., and Leigh, L. (1994) 'Police Power,' in McCrudden and Chambers, pp. 69-108.

Reiner, R., (1994) ' *Policing the Police* ' in Maguire, M., Morgan, R., & Reiner, R., (eds) (1994) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 705-772.

Reiner, R., (2000) *The Politics of the Police, 3rd Edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Rigakos, G. (2002). *The new Para police: risk markets and commodified social control*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police / Public Complaints ' *Ian Bush B. C Shooting Death* ' http://www.cpc-cpp.gc.ca/DefaultSite/Whatsnew/index_e.aspx?ArticleID=1230 (Accessed December 22, 2007)

Sklansky, David Alan (2007) ' Seeing Blue: Police reform, occupational culture, and cognitive burn-in' In: *Police Occupational Culture: New Debates and Directions* (Megan O'Neill and Monique Marks eds., Elsevier Science Jan. 2007)