

# Sample case study on police subculture:

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



## **Following the American Psychological Association's Guidelines**

Few things can be as frightening to a civil and innocent society as a corrupt police task force. There are many examples from around the world, and throughout history, of police forces and military forces behaving with an “us against them” mentality. While sometimes it is the law enforcement against the criminals, this way of thinking often gets misconstrued; the officers begin to think it is “us,” the officers, against “them,” everybody else. Much like in the case study concerning Officer Barton, he found that officers were secretive, and had an official subculture that had its own taboos. It also had its own rules to follow. While sometimes a sense of fellowship can be positive, when used in a violent or secretive manner, it can sometimes manifest into something pathological. Since, in many cases, subcultures in police work are unavoidable, police administration must take positive steps to ensure that subcultures do not take hold, or at least present a positive environment for officers to thrive.

When Officer Barton joined his first force, he was well educated, trilingual, and dedicated to helping keep citizens safe. He wanted to bring justice to the people. Unfortunately, he walked into a situation with an already established subculture. According to Barbara Oakley's “Pathological Altruism,” in secretive groups like the one Barton was exposed to, there may be a justification already in place for the misdeeds of the groups participants . This method is often used as a coping mechanism. Being a police officer is more difficult than originally anticipated by many recruits, and they seek the bonds of their fellow officers to help them through. John P. Crank's, “

Understanding Police Culture,” stresses that because police have a certain amount of power over their actions and the actions of others, they are at liberty to create a subculture not founded on hobbies or fads, but on cover-ups . It is not right, but on occasion, it happens. The subculture is very exclusive and when it involves cover-ups, it is necessary that everybody be a part of it. Therefore, taboos and ostracizing are enacted to force other members to join; nobody wants to be the odd man out. Utilizing group dynamics, this is most likely what happened in Barton’s situation.

It is important for any groups, especially groups that will be under high amounts of stress to have group cohesiveness. It allows them to share their burdens and feel connected. There is a sense of team spirit that keeps members of the group connected; nobody wants to leave the group because each member feels essential to the other members and their thriving. It is a very positive cluster of relationships . However, this positive group cohesion can begin to turn pathological. Group conformity may begin to take over. Primarily what this means is all it will take is one or two police officers to conduct an illegal search or forge paperwork before other members of the group start believing it is okay, as well. The group constructs justifications for why they are conducting themselves this way in order to reconcile their inner desires with their actions, and soon the behavior is entirely pathological. In many cases concerning law enforcement, the subculture begins to take the first steps toward becoming a pathological process due to conformity constraints. The “ Us against them” behavior is established almost immediately; as soon as the group cohesion becomes something unjustifiable, those willing to do it anyway will group those against it with “

them.” Not wanting to be ostracized, typically everybody folds into the pathological framework .

One of the primary questions concerning police officers is whether subcultures in police work are inevitable or not. They are, in fact, inevitable, according to “ Understanding Police Culture .” Individuals in a unique group like that of law enforcement are on what is seen as a team. A team needs a union or bond between them. They need to be able to relate to one another. There are characteristics and quirks about working law enforcement that nobody with a different job will ever understand. There are also deep, painful hardships that police officers must face and learn to cope with. Average citizens will never understand what it is like to bond with a fellow officer, trust him with your life, and watch him be shot to death in the street, for example. This incident is only something fellow officers would understand. The subculture creates itself because police officers eventually need a team-like structure, and a bond with their fellow officers, they can turn to when nobody else understands them. While it is true that subcultures in police work are inevitable, it does not mean they have to be negative or breed more crime.

Law enforcement related subcultures have gotten a bad reputation for breeding more crime instead of supporting police officers. Police administration can do many things to not only clean up this image, but also help the subculture itself. Firstly, the “ us against them” notion must be erased from the minds of officers. “ Them” is too broad; “ Law enforcement against criminals,” would be better, but more accurately the creed should be something simple and straight to the point. “ Always defend justice,” sounds

cheesy, but it does not put the police officer at odds with the world. Instead, it puts them in the stance of a hero, defending the weak and victimized against criminals. Secondly, if any officers are ostracized for standing up for victims, it should be investigated. History shows when this happens, the subculture is usually punishing an individual for trying to do what is right. In sum, subcultures can sometimes get out of hand. The life of a police officer warrants a place for subculture, but only if it is safe, and does not turn into pathological warfare, as it did in the case study. Officers want to bond, and feel welcome on their " team." Sometimes they will do anything to stay there. Since police subcultures are often inevitable, erasing the " us against them" mentality and investigating altruistic or pathological behavior within the subculture may help build a healthier environment for officers to relate to one another. These methods will also simultaneously help hold up the justice system better, while ridding the system of dirty cops.

## **References**

Crank, J. P. (2010). *Understanding Police Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Oakley, B. (2012). *Pathological Altruism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.