

POLICE CULTURE

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ADAPTING TO THE STRAINS OF THE JOB

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Introduction

Having taught thousands of students, and interacted with policing scholars and practitioners from all parts of the United States, a highly identifiable topic of discussion is police culture. Broad-based terms such as *thin blue line*, *brotherhood*, and *blue code of silence* are used to characterize the collective bond that police officers share. At the same time, while many are comfortable talking about police culture, a large degree of vagueness and confusion comes with this concept. Similar to the notion of love, if you survey a hundred people asking them to explain police culture, you are liable to get a hundred different responses. These responses would undoubtedly include a variety of definitions, causes and consequences, and levels of aggregation. It is probably not a coincidence that researchers who have tackled the “culture beast” often write a single book, article, or chapter and then venture off to another area of inquiry. As such, one primary aim of this book is to provide a working definition of police culture while organizing the disparate conceptualizations that currently exist.

From a research standpoint, a large portion of what we “know” about police culture is based on single-agency ethnographic studies conducted over a half century ago. These works focused on qualitatively detailing commonalities (at the expense of potential differences) among police officers. Debates over the existence of a single police culture versus various cultural adaptations were born primarily out of patrol officer typology studies. Such works collectively spanned several police departments, often mixing qualitative and quantitative methods to empirically refute the idea of a single police culture in illustrating different policing styles. In large part, the impetus for these inquiries was based on the search for the “professional” style, following a time when the Supreme Court was placing limits on the crime fighting mandates espoused by the reform era of policing. Additional works have highlighted cultural segmentation among officers based on factors such as the differing type

of police organizations and rank designations. More recent inquiries have been geared toward the development of quantitatively based classification schemes, which in many ways resemble typology studies. A key distinction is that these works rely less on rich descriptive detail and focus more on the statistical modeling and advanced analytical techniques employed. Like typology approaches before them, these studies were also a result of changes that occurred in policing (i.e., police officer demographics and post-professionalization organizational philosophies).

Despite additions that highlight segmentation, the prevailing view of the police is that they are bound by a single culture (which is described in a variety of ways) regardless of where and for whom they work. This often results in scholars taking sides between the popular characterization of the police as a single “brotherhood” and those who believe that the collectiveness has been overstated. In the end, the knowledge base has suffered, since researchers have been caught up purely in the “homogeneity versus heterogeneity” debate. Logically, there are probably dimensions of culture that officers share, but there are also cultural features that exhibit variation among officers, especially in an ever-changing police world. From an empirical standpoint, we have yet to fully explore such dynamics. As such, a second primary aim of this book is to empirically revisit some of the foundational elements of police culture. In doing so, we assess officers’ cultural views across seven police agencies of varying size, structure, and geographic locales, within a post-community policing work environment.

Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive review of police culture, which should allow readers to walk away with a clear understanding of the various conceptualizations of police culture and how research from each perspective has been conducted. The second chapter offers a historical look at American policing in terms of ideological approaches, operational strategies, and police culture. As part of this discussion, we examine how recent changes in policing (e.g., evidence-based policing) mirror past approaches, and what we can learn from this history with respect to police culture. Chapter 3 outlines the environmental features of our seven study sites. We begin by discussing the external environments in relation to how the cities were situated (e.g., population, crime, arrests, etc.), and then provide an organizational sketch of each police department by detailing how the agencies were organized and structured, as well as the policies and supervisory procedures that were in operation—all of which have implications for understanding police culture.

Chapter 4 describes the survey research process and highlights important lessons from the field. We focus on elements such as coordinating the survey of groups of patrol officers, the importance of gaining cooperation from upper

level and middle management, presenting the study goals and objectives in person, obtaining consent from research participants, and dealing with confidentiality and anonymity concerns. In the fifth chapter, we assess patrol officer perceptions of their internal (i.e., the police department) and external (i.e., the street) work environments. In particular, we look closely at the ways in which police officers deal with the various strains of the job in either similar or disparate ways, as well as the extent to which officers embody the cumulative values of the occupational culture perspective. In the final chapter we summarize key findings from the study, discuss the implications of this work, and speculate on the future of police culture research.

Suggested Reading Tips

This book is intended for audiences of various interests and knowledge levels. We surmise that Chapter 1 will appeal to most readers as it lays the foundation for understanding police culture from both a conceptual and research-based perspective. Beyond the initial chapter, readers may wish to be more discriminating based on their interests and existing knowledge of policing and culture. For undergraduates or students new to the policing literature, we would strongly suggest Chapter 2 as it offers a fairly succinct summary of the primary policing eras over the past several hundred years, with an eye toward the role of culture. More advanced students, researchers, scholars, and practitioners may already have a good grip on these historical components and decide to skim this chapter and concentrate on other chapters of interest. Chapter 3 offers perhaps the most comprehensive description of study sites found within the policing literature. In doing so, we go into significant detail on each of the seven organizations. Those interested in organizations from any number of angles, including but also well beyond culture, should find this chapter worthwhile, while those with a more casual interest in the topic need not get caught up in some of the minutia. One can certainly browse this chapter and not be lost in the later chapters.

While Chapter 3 may be ideal for readers who focus on organizations, Chapter 4 should be especially helpful for those with an interest in survey research. Beyond detailing the survey methodology for the present study, we offer many tips and insights for researchers interested in this methodological approach to social science research. Ph.D. students in particular may get quite a bit out of this chapter. Chapter 5 serves as the empirical glue that holds the book together. While not overly complicated in terms of sophisticated statistical analyses (i.e., descriptive in nature), we examine each culture element across the

seven study agencies. In essence, Chapter 5 tells us what we uncovered in the study regarding facets of occupational culture police officers widely share and parts they do not. Finally, Chapter 6 offers a summary assessment of key findings, shedding light on contemporary police culture as well as the future of this area of inquiry. In this sense, we believe that readers of all levels of interest and knowledge will find this chapter worth reading.

In closing, readers should feel quite comfortable picking and choosing those chapters that appeal most to them, and concentrating less on those that do not. In this sense, the book is not written in a strictly linear fashion *per se*. We believe advanced readers can hone in on Chapters 1, 5, and 6 and still walk away with quite a bit. Undergraduates or students new to the topic may want to spend more time on the early chapters to get a feel for culture as a whole, and how it fits into the realm of policing over time, before tackling the later chapters. Yet policing generalists may have little interest in culture, but may still get quite a lot out of Chapter 3 (i.e., organizations) or Chapter 4 (i.e., survey research methodology) separate and apart from the remaining chapters. Of course we are also cognizant that some readers may not wish to delve into the level of detail such a book brings, and thus are simply interested in going directly to the concluding chapter to uncover the “big picture.” If so, we say have at it, although as with any author, we would always prefer one reading more over less!