

Chapter 3

A Policeman's Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an ethnological examination of a police officer, the police culture, and the type of individual that makes up the “good cop.” Through the lens of over 30 years’ experience as a police officer in both small suburban and large city police departments, the author hopes to provide some insight into his experience. This chapter will most likely not affect anything institutional but may change the individual’s view of police officers in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2014 with the media frenzy surrounding an Officer involved shooting in Ferguson Missouri, media fabrications, political condemnation, radical agendas, aggrandizement of both the frequency and severity of real and imagined Police misconduct, combined with intense scrutiny, and attacks on personal and professional character have led to an increasingly negative narrative and distasteful view of the American Police Officer. In this strange new era that can be described as increasingly hostile and unforgiving to those men and women in American Law Enforcement, I began asking myself about the very nature of police work and the shared systems of beliefs and personal attributes that make up the majority of our Law Enforcement Officers. What makes a good Police Officer? Why would any sane person join this profession?

This paper is an ethnological examination of a Police Officer, the Police culture, and the type of individual that makes up the “Good Cop.” Through the lens of over 30 years’ experience as a Police Officer in both small suburban and large city Police Departments I hope to provide some insight into my experience. This paper will most likely not affect anything institutional but may change the individual’s view of Police Officers in the future.

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METHODOLOGY

This is an ethnographic study of a Police Officer—me. Drawing upon over 30 years of experience in both suburban and big city policing, and as a Police supervisor for 21 years, I examine and re-examine the life and experiences that brought me to and allowed me to survive this profession. People are curious about Police Officers, and much of the available sources of information about law enforcement is gained through hearsay, limited interaction, often skewed media representation, and Hollywood. For this paper, I relied upon a recounting of my life, what and who prepared me for public service, and how it all related to my experiences as an Officer. In my attempt to answer the question, “What makes a Good Police Officer,” I have reviewed many sources of literature that have helped me understand the complexities of motivation, new theories of leadership and ethics. Although enlightening, they fall short of providing a picture of the average and most commonly found Police Officer.

Limitations

As with any study, this paper has limitations. As an ethnographic study, this paper suffers from this more so, and I acknowledge those limitations. Perhaps the most significant limitation is the author who must rely on memories and experiences as primary source materials. Some memories come freely and naturally imperfectly. Other memories, purposely buried deep for my sanity or associated with negative incidents, were difficult and painful to recount. I understand that this study is colored by my personal experience, which is not every Officer's experience. I acknowledge that I am a Police Officer and I am incredibly fond of them! As such, I am biased regarding my opinion of Police Officers and Police Departments. I wished to interview a diverse group of Police Officers from a doctoral program to discover their experiences, views, and ideas of what a good Police Officer should look like but was unfamiliar with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements. Unfortunately, there was insufficient time to submit, obtain approval, and take the required tests from the IRB that they require to conduct those interviews and surveys. It would have been nice to have more time to explore this topic and to have had interaction with the CPD Doctoral students; I believe they would have been illuminating. While studies on specific incidents or use of force determiners are numerous, there is a lack of current primary data about the Police Officer as a complete human being.

Literature Review

I have reviewed many sources of literature that have helped me understand the complexities of motivation, new theories in leadership, and ethics. Although enlightening, they fall short of providing a picture of the average and most commonly found Police Officer. Studies into the “Police Personality” have been limited, and modern studies are almost nonexistent. In Robert Balch's 1972 study, he wrote on the traits that make up the Police Officer and posited that like any stereotype, the Police may have fallen victim to crippling stereotyping that society accepts as truth. He references the fact that then, as in now, there is very little empirical evidence to quantify the question. Of the personality studies available, each used different techniques and scales, and there is little agreement between studies. (Balch, 1972) In 2005, Twersky-Glasner revisited the “Police Personality” question citing studies as far back as 1937 (Twersky-Glasner, 2005), but most having been completed in the 1970s. While I'm unable to say whether or not those studies apply today, the lack of modern research creates a gap; people, motivations, and accepted

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