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# On the Relevance of Police Organisational Culture Approaches to the Prison Context

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## Introduction

**Research into the occupational culture of prison officers has provided some important and enriching accounts of prisons, of the lives of those who live and work in them and the kinds of work that take place within them. Such accounts tend to use police occupational culture as a reference point, if not as a template for such observations. In many respects, this is understandable and a perhaps obvious choice given that prison officers and police officers both work within the criminal justice system. Similarly, the wealth of literature focussing on police occupational culture provides a foundation for understanding and exploring different occupational groups which function within the criminal justice arena.**

This paper, however, will explore some of the broader differences between the two occupations. The purpose of this is to assess the limits to the usefulness of police occupational culture as a means of understanding the cultural world of prison officers. This is not to understate the similarities between the two occupations and the ways in which these might contribute to similar or shared culturally driven experiences, perceptions and behaviours. What this paper will do, however, is to provide a brief overview of some of the areas of difference which might lead to different cultural reference points.

## Public Expectation and the Conditional Morality of Policing

One of the fundamental differences between prison and police work, at a cultural level, is the extent to which the latter interact with, for want of a better word, the 'public'. The inevitably public-facing and public service orientation of police work, as we move from the language of 'forces' to 'services', means that police officers are inevitably and ever-increasingly subject to a level of public scrutiny denied to prison officers and their work. Traditional accounts of police

culture have shown how police officers bring a 'sacred veil' over their work to shield their work and its practices from the public and that this plays a significant role in the occupational culture. Prison work, by its very nature, has a less publicly-oriented role and generally takes place behind prison walls. In terms of public expectation, prisons as a social institution enjoy emphatic public support. Policing, on the other hand, is regarded in a much more ambiguous way by the public. The sheer breadth of their role, not least in terms of the often uneasy combination of law enforcement and public service roles, means that the police undertake a range of tasks that have the propensity to bring them into conflict with the public. These include a number of potentially 'unpopular' roles which include the enforcement of motoring offences<sup>2</sup> which has traditionally been viewed as one of the key factors accounting for the decline in the middle class's relationship with the police. Similarly, public order policing has at times, as history attests, succeeded in polarizing relations between the police and sections of the working classes.

And whilst identifying direct causality when charting the impact of particular factors on occupational culture is always fraught with imprecision, it might be possible to advance some potential impacts on occupational culture. Scrutiny and external pressure have long been viewed as drivers of what has been termed the 'police working personality'.<sup>3</sup> For example, as far back as the 1960s it has been noted that police perceptions of anti-police sentiment, evidenced through external pressures, led to increases in the social solidarity of the occupation.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, this social solidarity can be evidenced by the 'siege mentality' noted by Reiner<sup>5</sup> that is caused by defensiveness and suspicion. I would argue therefore that many of the characteristics of police occupational culture are a result of such external pressures. Prison officer organisational culture is, arguably, essentially different as a result of the features of the occupation. There is broad public support for the social institution of prisons with many members of the public favouring an increase in the use

1. Manning, P.K. (1977), *Police Work: The Social Organization of Policing*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.
2. Emsley, C. (1996), *The English Police: A Political and Social History* (2nd Edition), London: Longman.
3. Skolnick, J.H. (1994), *Justice Without Trial: Law Enforcement in Democratic Society* (3rd Edition), London: Wiley.
4. Whitaker, B. (1964), *The Police*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
5. Reiner, R. (1992), *The Politics of the Police* (2nd Edition), London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

of this form of punishment.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the prison is viewed by so many as a legitimate institution correspondingly imbues the work of the prison officer with a similar sense of legitimacy. Policing involves a broader set of functions which bring them into contact with the public during incidents often characterised by stress or conflict. Prison officers' work largely is removed from the complicating context of public interaction and has a core clientele of those to whom the criminal justice system has successfully applied the label of 'criminal'. For this reason, one would expect the occupational culture of prison officers to be less defensive than those of police officers as their work is largely invisible (to the public), is considered legitimate and focusses on the management of individuals who have been given custodial sentences as a consequence of their behaviour. This last point is especially important. So much of our interest in police culture is driven by many of the moral ambiguities that arise in this particular institution. These are inherent to the breadth of the police role rather than being necessarily symptomatic of any particular problem in the moral orientation of officers. This is supported by Harris' assertion that policing is essentially 'dirty work'. In a telling passage he notes:

'The low prestige of police work stems partly from the 'dirty' facet of policing: enforcing laws that support interest groups, but becoming scapegoats when things go wrong. That is, the respectables hire the police to do their dirty work for them... Although they are aware of the need for law and order, they refuse to take responsibility for their personal involvement: they do not train their children to respect the police; they keep information from the police; and they do not participate in police-community relations programs... If this is the respectables' perspective of the police, one may well ask what the public really means when it demands law and order'.<sup>7</sup>

This passage is important in that it draws our attention to some of the contradictions of policework

and the ambivalence with which such work is perceived and responded to by the public. It can therefore be argued that, culturally, the police operate within and between sets of tensions that do not exist in other occupational milieus. Not least, whilst law and order, conceptually, is often rendered in absolutist terms, real policework is couched in discretion, compromise and negotiation. Likewise, whilst the public expect some body or agency to undertake such 'dirty work' there is a reluctance to co-operate with, or take part in, those publicly driven processes that facilitate effective state police work.

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### Contextualising Discretion in Prison and Police Work

A fundamental aspect of police occupational culture is discretion and is described by Klockars<sup>8</sup> in the following terms, 'A police officer or police agency may be said to exercise discretion whenever effective limits on his, her or its power leave the officer or agency free to make choices among possible courses of action or inaction'. That this phenomenon has long been viewed as a core facilitator of behaviours associated with police culture is emphasised by much of the literature of this area and is important for a number of reasons. First, the issue of police discretion (and its use and impacts) provides a key distinguishing feature between

some of the more orthodox historical texts on police and those of a more critical sociological orientation. Second, police discretion is crucial to our understanding of the application of police powers through existing legal frameworks, from the Vagrancy Act of 1824 to the infamous 'sus' laws of the 1970s. The 'mandatory discretion'<sup>9</sup> that is integral to police work has been viewed by some scholars, such as Davis<sup>10</sup> and LaFave<sup>11</sup> as undermining judicial discretion. Thirdly, police discretion has become, if not synonymous with issues such as police racism and corruption, then at least as a key facilitating factor.

6. Roberts, J. (2008), Paper presented at the Commission on English Prisons Today's 'Public Opinion and the Media Seminar' 8 February 2008, Royal Institute of British Architects.
7. Harris, R.N. (1978), 'The Police Academy and the Professional Self-Image' in P.K. Manning and J. Van Maanen (eds) 'Policing: A View from the Street', Santa Monica, Ca. : Goodyear.
8. Klockars, C. (1985), *The Idea of Police*, Beverley Hills, Ca. : Sage. P.93.
9. Brogden, M. (1982), *The Police: Autonomy and Consent*, London: Academic Press.
10. Davis, K.C. (1975), *Police Discretion*, St Paul, Mn. : West.
11. LaFave, W. (1962), *The Police and Nonenforcement of the Law — Part II*, *Wisconsin Law Review*, 2: 179-239.

Similarly, academics have increasingly begun to explore the dimensions of discretion associated with prison officers. Liebling<sup>12</sup> provides a helpful account of the ways in which prison officers, like police officers, utilise occupational discretion as a means of translating policy and procedure into practice within a broad array of situations. Her work details a number of important and relevant themes. She notes, for instance, that discretion is widely used within the prison estate. Second, she makes the important point that discretion can be used to under-enforce regulations and effect 'positive' outcomes for prisoners. Third, she shows how prison officers' work allows for discretion to be exercised in very particular ways such as, for example, the distribution of privileges to prisoners.

It might be tempting to suggest that the three above points could be taken as prima facie evidence that the discretion used by prison officers parallels that used by police officers. At one level, of course, it would be valid to make such an assertion given that for both occupations discretion is widespread, can be used to effect widely-differing outcomes and is shaped by the opportunities provided by that particular role. However, the work of Chan<sup>13</sup> may allow us to unthread and identify some of the difficulties associated with understanding the relationship between occupational cultures and the contexts which they occur in. Chan draws upon Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' where the former refers to cultural knowledge and the latter to the structural conditions of police work. It can be argued accordingly that the nature and form of occupational cultures are intrinsically shaped by the occupational context. Whilst arguing against linear and a-cultural depictions of culture, not least in the way in which culture is shaped by occupational environments, underlying Chan's work is a sense of cultural fluidity where both the 'field' and numerous external factors can have cultural impacts within organisations. This suggests that different cultural reference points will emerge as responses to the different external factors that impact upon particular organisations. This, in itself, reminds us of the dangers of assuming degrees of cultural homogeneity between different occupational groups.

Whilst both police officers and prison officers occupy roles that are founded on broadly similar ideas

of control, it is patently the case that roles are essentially different. The outward facing elements of the police role ensure that the occupation is essentially viewed as a service role whereas, according to Liebling the prison role can, in many respects, be considered a care role. This fundamental difference in role leads to different forms of cultural responses. The work of Manning, amongst others, shows how the relationship with the public, and the scrutiny of the police organisation associated with this, leads to a drawing of a veil over police work. Because of this, I would argue that the cultural responses that evolve around these organisations are fundamentally different.

Thus, it can be argued that fundamental differences exist between the occupational worlds of police officers and prison officers and that these can be explained in terms of the different roles that are encapsulated by these two jobs. At the same time, the social context of policing, as an occupation, is tightly woven into the consciousness of the wider public to an extent that prison work is not. The following section will show this by exploring some of the non-organisational factors that impact on workplace culture.

It can be argued accordingly that the nature and form of occupational cultures are intrinsically shaped by the occupational context.

### **Symbolism, Crime and Politicisation**

The symbolic value of the police has drawn much commentary over the years, not least with respect to the concept of the Golden Age of Policing. The Golden Age of Policing remains to many the default and idealised depiction of policing and, somewhat unfortunately, draws much of its symbolic value, not so much from the actions of the police, but from its totemic positioning of police work as central to the optimism of the post-World War II social landscape. Whilst some might dismiss the notion of Golden Ages as part of the political rhetoric famously associated with the Macmillan era, many criminologists have sought to situate the symbolism of the Dixon of Dock Green era of policing within this post war landscape. And whilst the same criminologists have seemingly failed to locate any Golden Age of Prison Work, it should be noted that the canonisation of the police was, by the 1970s, a dim memory as, over a relatively short period of time, public faith in the police diminished. This, arguably, is important in explaining the different cultural dimensions of prison and police work. For those

12. Liebling, A. (2000), 'Prison Officers, Policing and the Use of Discretion', *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol 4(3): 333-357.

13. Chan, J. (1997), *Changing Police Culture: Policing In A Multicultural Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

working in the prison system, there is not quite the same level of symbolic baggage as there is surrounding the policework.

To properly assess the impact or importance of this, it is crucial to appreciate how Golden Ages and Dixon of Dock Green iconography have allowed the police to become one of the most politicised public services and to understand how this has served to create a particularly unique culture. Those working in the prison service (or indeed in education or healthcare) have certainly not been immune to the politicisation of their political arena and I shall return to address some of those areas where prison work and policework have been similarly impacted by the politicisation of their work later in this paper.

The extent of police politicisation is evident through the oft-cited example of foot patrol. Whilst routinely applauded and welcomed by the public, the work of academics such as Clarke and Hough<sup>14</sup> suggest that it is a generally ineffective means of achieving crime reduction. What this shows us is interesting. We have a core public service from which we demand increasing evidence of effectiveness. At the same time, we deplore those methods of crime reduction that are actually effective, if they do not coincide with our collectively held sense of what 'policing' should be. This gulf between public expectation and the often hidden 'realities' of police work is redolent of the symbolism that imbues our understanding of policework. Unfortunately, for the policing profession, this collision of expectation and reality rarely works well for the police as political players are drawn more to engaging with public expectation than the realities of delivering effective policing.

I will argue that the widespread politicisation of policing has been enabled by three closely-related issues a) the emotive nature of crime, vulnerability and state responses to it, (b) the ambiguity of police work and, c) what Densten<sup>15</sup> refers to as the 'paradox of accountability'.

In terms of the first, it should be noted that crime and, particularly, the policing of crime were

uncontentious areas prior to the 1970s. The inherent trust of the majority of the population (and the political classes) in the institution of policing ensured that for most of its formal history the police had not, as is the case nowadays, found their work to be subject to the vagaries of political will. However, as Morgan and Newburn<sup>16</sup> show, Margaret Thatcher's first administration came to power largely on a law and order mandate that proved popular with voters who for the first time were harbouring concerns (legitimate or illegitimate) around their vulnerability to crime.<sup>17</sup> Whilst it is debatable as to whether or not crime statistics were reliable enough to prove a valid barometer of one's chances of becoming a crime victim, these were seized upon to provide evidence for a problem for which the

Thatcher administration had a ready solution — a substantial increase in police numbers. When this increase in police numbers led, not to decreases in recorded crime numbers, but an increase the scene was set for the contemporary situation where policework is shaped by often cynical political interpretations of public sentiment. The second point, regarding the ambiguity of police work, is related to the first point. The sheer breadth of police roles means that it is often difficult to communicate straight forwardly to the public what policing is, what the challenges are and what our legitimate expectations of it should be.

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When social problems or social policy issues are complex the process of their politicisation is often facilitated, a process evidenced, for example, in David Prior's work on the Anti-Social Behaviour agenda.<sup>18</sup> This is especially true in the case of the police where the combination of policy focus and the lack of a coherent or unambiguous knowledge base (in itself, a result of policing's capricious remit and sheer breadth of role) has meant that coherent dialogue around policing is often lost against the 'white noise' of the political background. Finally, intricately tied up with this is the notion of the 'paradox of accountability'. Densten uses this phrase to denote one of the peculiarities of police work whereby officers are held accountable for the actions that they engage in whilst fulfilling their

14. Clarke, R.V.G and Hough, M. (1984), *Crime and Police Effectiveness*. Home Office Research Study No 79, London: HMSO.

15. Densten, I.L. (1999), 'Senior Australian Law Enforcement Leadership Under Examination', *Policing: An International Journal Of Police Strategies and Management*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 45-57.

16. Morgan, R. and Newburn, T. (1997), *The Future of Policing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

17. Garland, D. (2001), *The Culture of Control*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

18. Prior, D. (2009), 'The 'Problem' of Anti-Social Behaviour and the Policy Knowledge Base: Analysing the Power/Knowledge Relationship', *Critical Social Policy*, 29 (1), 5-23.

professional roles, yet there is no explicitly defined measure of what is an acceptable or unacceptable outcome. This is, in large part, due to the situational specificity of what police officers do. The breadth of the police role, with its inherent discretion, means that police officers are empowered (and obliged) to take action whilst fulfilling a vast number of potential roles (including crime-fighting, public order and protection of property and life). Officers are held accountable for their actions despite guidance and protocols failing to articulate the breadth of situations they might face. Ironically, this 'paradox of accountability' is faced, predominantly, by the most inexperienced officers.

So, to recap, the politicisation of crime and its emergence as a 'social fact' has led to it taking an altogether more embedded role in the consciousness of the public. As this leads to increased fear of crime, the legitimacy of police actions is scrutinised on a regular basis making politically motivated interventions a regular occurrence and in politicising policing and policework. At the same time, the ambiguity of policework means that the public fail to respond to the police in a uniform manner. 'Policing by consent' retains political currency yet in pragmatic terms remains largely unachievable given the increasingly fragmented nature of public opinion. And whilst the public themselves are divided in their opinions of what good policing looks like, so too it appears are police organisations. As Densten's work shows, there appears to be little guidance to officers regarding what a 'preferred outcome' looks like. It is barely surprising that cynicism plays an important part in the cultural world of the police officer. It is for these reasons that I believe we can conceive of the political factors, and those of public expectation, acting upon prison and police officers as substantively different.

### **Conclusion: Rationalising Occupational Culture Between Prison and Police Officers**

It is probably fair to suggest that within both the police and prison sectors, occupational culture is impacted by occupational role, external influences and,

increasingly, the 'business' models adopted in each case by these institutions. I have made a case to suggest that core roles and external influences (such as, for example, politicisation and public expectation) vary greatly between prison and police officers and that this will necessarily impact on the type of cultural reference points that become embedded in these particular occupations. This is not to say that cultural reference points will necessarily be substantively different between the roles in every case but that they will get played out differently in particular occupational contexts and that this will, in turn, be reflected in occupational cultures. For example, discretion is undoubtedly a key cultural driver in both occupational

spheres. However, discretion will be utilised in different ways between the two occupations, with different groups of people and with different outcomes. Central in this respect, I believe, is that discretion within the police world is focussed on interactions with the public and, perhaps to a lesser extent, other players in the criminal justice system. To prison officers discretion is played out within a potentially smaller and less mobile 'population' and this will necessarily impact on what discretion means to prison officers.

What this brief paper has so far failed to address is those areas where there are similarities in occupational outlook between the prison officer and police officer roles. Increasingly, it appears to be the case that a significant driver of both organisational cultures is the increasing adoption of business models that reflect private as opposed to public sector values. Beattie and Cockcroft<sup>19</sup> illustrate how the discretion common to the roles of prison officer and police officer is being eroded by the advent of New Public Management (NPM) techniques and that these developments have met cultural resistance amongst those who see the 'professionalism' of their role being reduced. This, in turn, draws us to the 'professionalization' agenda. In terms of the ways in which this is being played out within a policing context, there is evidence to suggest that what we are witnessing is the increasing application of the rhetoric of 'professionalization' to describe a process whereby control is being enforced upon police officers from

Increasingly, it appears to be the case that a significant driver of both organisational cultures is the increasing adoption of business models that reflect private as opposed to public sector values.

19. Beattie, I. & Cockcroft, T. (2006), 'Square Pegs and Round Holes: Performance Measurement in the Police and Prison Services', *Prison Service Journal*, 168.

above (see Cockcroft).<sup>20</sup> The work of Fournier<sup>21</sup> and Evetts<sup>22</sup> is especially helpful in showing how 'professionalization' is increasingly being used as a means of encouraging practitioners to succumb to new forms of 'disciplinary logic' to ensure adequate occupational regulation. These processes can, and do, lead to unintended consequences of resistance which operate at a cultural level. An example of this can be seen in the work of Monique Marks<sup>23</sup> who demonstrates how such developments, in the police world, have led to a strict demarcation between managerial and practitioner cultures with the latter seeking, in response, to define itself in terms of,

'autonomy, discretion and legitimacy'. Given the cultural response of police practitioners to the imposition of private sector rationalities on an occupational world steeped in symbolism and tradition, it will be very interesting to see what form the cultural response of prison officers is to similar external drivers. This leaves us with perhaps a final irony in that it may merely be the re-shaping of public services through NPM that is providing the drivers for perceived cultural convergence between prison and police officers, rather than any shared experience of operating within the criminal justice arena.

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20. Cockcroft, T. (2015), 'Golden Ages, Red Herrings and Post-Keynesian Policing: Understanding the Role of Police Culture in the Police Professionalism Debate', *Nordisk Politiforskning*, 2 (2), pp. 182-195.

21. Fournier, V. (1999), 'The Appeal to 'Professionalism' as a Disciplinary Mechanism', *The Sociological Review*, 47 (2), 280-307.

22. Evetts, J. (2013), 'Professionalism: Value and Ideology', *Current Sociology*, 61 (5-6), 778-796.

23. Marks, M. (2007), 'Police Unions and their Influence: Subculture or Counterculture', in M. O'Neill, M. Marks and A. Singh (eds.), *Police Occupational Culture: New Debates and Directions*, New York: Elsevier. P.237.