

What is meant by the ‘occupational culture of policing’ (Fielding 1994) and does it matter?

The ‘occupational culture of policing’ relates to the understanding of how police relate to the social world and their function within it. Police have the task of transferring the written law to that of practical police work and it is this process that creates many of the characteristics of the ‘police culture.’ The boundary between written and practical police work leads to the subject of police discretion and how far it can stretch from the written law. Those to blame for this discretion can either be seen as those that write the law, whose principles leave the police only as robots, or the police who manipulate the law to their understanding and interpretation. However problematic legal rules can be they play an important role in police culture. Police culture is subject to the environment however certain traits are seen throughout the police force especially in ‘industrial capitalist societies with a liberal-democratic political ethos’¹

The police culture is a reaction to both danger and authority, two central concepts to the police force. The danger aspect is different to other occupations where the person has foreknowledge of the danger ahead such as a fighter but a police officer is often unaware of what to expect. When a police officer is called to a scene the situation may be outlined but the element of danger is still present, especially when situations turn unexpectedly. The police are a representation of the law in action therefore seen as authority. This combined with the police’s use of force causes a reaction by those opposed to it seen as danger by the police. Pressure from the government to produce results can create a method of policing based on quantity rather than quality. As the police’s job becomes harder the temptation to extend their discretion becomes more tempting. This point is made by Skolnick who uses statistics taken from the clear-up rates for guidance. A combination of these factors leads the police into this culture as they become seen as ‘street corner politicians.’²

The characteristics of the police culture have been identified as mission, action, cynicism and pessimism. The idea of policing as a mission is that it is not so much a job but a way of life. Policing is about using your wits and intelligence to continue to protect the victims, it becomes part of your morality to protect. The feeling of being set a task and having the capacity to challenge not only others but yourself leads people into seeing it as a way of life because it is so engrossing. The action is not only a thrill to them but also a necessity to society therefore their status and responsibility is required. The idea of a mission can lead the police into a pessimistic cynicism with an us against them attitude. They have maintained the correct principles and that it is society that has failed and it is there ‘mission’ to resolve the problem. These characteristics interrelate with one another and with this theme of a mission and pressure for results we have a police force which embraces this cop culture. This can cause an over expectation of the police by society whereas in reality the police culture is weakening due to pressures from outside i.e. the rise of CID and the need for equal opportunity.

¹ ‘The politics of the police. Brighton, Harvester, 1985, p.109 Reiner, R

² Muir 1977

Suspicion is a trait that police take into their everyday life due to the risk of danger being an integral part of their work. The suspicion that the police carry is seen through stereotyping of potential offenders. Stereotyping has been largely accepted as a necessity for police work and the interest in it is focused upon its effectiveness not upon its continuation. Suspicion is something encouraged by the police force and Skolnick cites it as a 'healthy police attitude.'³

Isolation and solidarity are attributes of the police culture which come as a result of the authoritarian persona which the public sees. With continuous suspicion and the idea of a mission the police can become segregated from society as they appear to be impersonal. Solidarity is witnessed with police working together and backing one another up when dealing with both the public and senior members of the police force. There is often an underlying division however between police working on the street and those in the office, which can be shielded by this apparent solidarity. The reason for this being that their role in the police force differs; those in administration being responsible for the structure and persona that the police wish to present and street police putting the law into action.

The attitude within the police culture towards society is of us and them mentality, but when dealing with the public they have to be aware of the social distinctions between people. However these distinctions are not based upon the social status but upon the likelihood to cause the police problems. The distinctions are highlighted by Simon Holdaway; 'good-class villains, police property, rubbish, challengers, disarmers, do-gooders and politicians.' Good-class villains seen as criminals who understand and are experienced at committing crime who are unlikely to challenge or be challenged by an ordinary police officer, they are seen as hard to catch but worth the reward. Police property are socially rejected groups who are left to the police to deal with. Groups whose income, attitudes and problems are largely left to the police to handle. The problem however is categorising them for example with ethnic minorities or middle class deviants as boundaries become blurred. Rubbish are individuals who may come from the police property group but use the police to solve worthless problems that they have created i.e. domestic violence. Challengers are people such as lawyers or doctors who have access to the police culture and can challenge the system by which the police work. Disarmers are socially defenceless people who have the ability to challenge the police with the support of society through sympathy i.e. elderly or women. Do-gooders are people who monitor police action such as Liberty who in the view of the police only cause problems. Politicians are viewed as unwilling to relate to the police with principles and views that are idealistic. These groups range throughout the social hierarchy and because of this the importance of solidarity for the police becomes apparent.

The attitudes adopted by the police as seen are of great importance to their culture therefore it is important to identify their political stance. The police have predominantly been seen as conservative due to the fact that the police force is based around the principle of selection and the opposition faced by the political left. The importance of the political stance becomes a factor when the police use their traits of suspicion and stereotyping. However the contradiction is that a large majority of police officers come from working class backgrounds and have a union based attitude when concerned with pay. One of the aspects of the police conservatism is racial prejudice which is seen

³ 'The politics of the police. Brighton, Harvester, 1985, p.115 Reiner, R

through harsh and apprehensive behaviour towards blacks. However as seen in the PSI study 'racialist language and racial prejudice were prominent and pervasive...in their work we found that their relations with black and brown people were often relaxed or friendly.' From research carried out by Colman and Gorman it is apparent that police do have hostile attitudes towards ethnic minorities as seen in their answers to open ended questions. Racial prejudice in the police force is influenced heavily by societies' attitudes and also the social position in which these ethnic minorities are in. Low income and bad neighbourhoods statistically mean that they are more likely to offend, therefore more likely to come into contact with the police.

The police force also carry a history of machismo with sexism and an indulgence in alcohol being problems within the police culture. Sexism is seen with women finding it hard to rise through the ranks and the police having a contemptuous view on issues such as homosexuality and jokes at the expense of female colleagues. Finally the police culture is seen as pragmatic in that they refute theoretical approaches and are lead simply by fact.

The importance of the police culture becomes apparent when society calls upon authority which can only in practice be administered by the police. Their job of putting the law into action is fraught with difficulties and the need for discretion is a necessity. However elements of the police culture that are a result of their discretion such as racial prejudice and sexism show how power can be manipulated. With the idea of a mission and their work becoming more than just a job allows their own attitudes to seep into their work. Society feels the consequences, as seen in the Stephen Lawrence case, but if we remove the police's discretion then the police will fail to function effectively. The solution seems to be to focus on recruitment and the methods used, however trying to change the police's ethos cannot be done from the outside only from those inside.