



Creating the thin blue line: Social network evolution within a police academy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Whenever major schisms between police and communities come to public attention, there are always passionate calls for an increased emphasis on – and improvement of – police training. This rhetoric is so common that police leaders joke that there is no societal problem so big that it can't be fixed by better police training. Still, professional socialization in law enforcement remains an important topic with a great deal of resources being devoted to developing initiatives and augmenting existing curricula. This training comes in many forms including learning the nuts and bolts of many legal processes and acquiring the practical skills for law enforcement. However, beyond this, there is a socialization process with multiple facets including the development of solidarity and trust among a cohort of recruits. We attempt to understand the basic mechanisms of network creation in police academies as the foundation of the socialization processes within them. By focusing on these network mechanisms underlying the establishment of the 'Thin Blue Line', we offer an understanding of the underlying social processes foundational for the transmission of police culture. In short, we think the recruit network structure functions as a vehicle for cultural transmission within police academies.

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Introduction

Within police culture, officers are expected to display common sense, exercise good judgment, take charge in crises, possess courage, as well as being formally competent in, and adherent to, the controlled use of violence and group loyalty (Lundman, 1980; Paes-Machado and Albuquerque, 2002; White, 2006). While police academies are primarily designed to teach recruits the basic mechanics of policing (i.e., knowledge of the law, departmental policy and practical skills), changes in perspective, personality, and identity over the course of police socialization have been well documented (Van Maanen, 1975; Fielding, 1984; Christie et al., 1996; Shernock, 1998; Haarr, 2005). Other, more profound, changes occur also within police academies and, subsequently, while on the job. However, the training environment has been recognized as dehumanizing and paranoia inducing (Harris, 1973; Albuquerque and Paes-Machado, 2004; Conti, 2009).

High-stress paramilitary training is the most common academy structure in the US, one revolving around a series of degradations and obedience tests (Chappell, 2008; Fielding, 1984; Little, 1990; McCreedy, 1980; McNamara, 1999; Paes-Machado and Albuquerque, 2002). This model has been described as a punitive initiation into the occupational subculture (Harris, 1973; Van Maanen, 1972) during which instructors enthusiastically embrace sacrifice, humiliation, and pain as pedagogical tools for building character (Berg, 1990; Conti and Nolan, 2005). The interaction order within police academy training requires periodic degradation ceremonies that are juxtaposed with the potential for elevation to police status.

During their training, recruits become increasingly authoritarian, conventional, moralistic, domineering, rigid and hostile towards the public (Stradling et al., 1993; Catlin and Maupin, 2004). Furthermore, progressive goals, such as eliminating racial divisions between officers have been less than successful within the training process (Conti and Doreian, 2014). Most of academy training is focused on formal policies and procedures to protect the civic bureaucracy from liability when officers fail to live up to these standards (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce, 2009). This raises the obvious question: How is the cultural transformation of recruits possible when so much training is spent on a mind-numbing curriculum?

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The transformation of a recruit identity into a police identity is evident in the operation of a police academy. “The police socialization process is structured so as to dismantle the personality and self-concept of a recruit and rebuild it along lines that are occupationally acceptable (Yarmey, 1990: 42).” This process entails an excision of the civilian identity in conjunction with the transmission of a demeanor, bearing, and competence befitting an idealized police officer (Fielding, 1984; Shernock, 1998). The socialization also generates an intense sense of loyalty to the occupational group along with an animosity toward civilians and administrators (Kappeler et al., 1998; Sherman, 1980). Further, training officers weave in a hidden curriculum by defining what constitutes ‘common sense’ within policing, highlighting its value, and explaining how to apply it (McNulty, 1994). An idealized sense of police character is transmitted through emphasizing obedience to authority in paramilitary dress, demeanor, and deportment, bolstered by war stories or parables told by instructors, veteran officers, and peers (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Ford, 2003; Langworthy and Travis, 1999). While being socialized, recruits experience shifts in self-concept, attitude, and moral relativism paralleling the perspectives of active officers (Catlin and Maupin, 2004; Christie et al., 1996; Stradling et al., 1993). Further, this hidden curriculum promotes values contrary to the formal training and the recruits’ initial idealism, motivation, and commitment (Chappell et al., 2005; Fielding, 1984; White, 2006). The disjuncture between recruit idealism and actual training experience is significant for academy resignations (Haarr, 2005).

This element of the training closely parallels the structure of medical training where faculty and staff dramatically affect the development of student perspectives through the institution’s authoritarian structure. Every incoming recruit class enters the sort of heavily constrained social environment documented in *Boys in White* (Becker et al., 1963). Consider the following:

The environment of the first year is so structured that freshmen [medical students] are virtually isolated from everyone but their own classmates and faculty. All freshmen follow a uniform schedule and curriculum. Each student does the same thing at the same time and in the same place, except when lab sections are in different rooms. The class is together in the medical school building, except during lunch hour, from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon. Students attend few university functions; they have virtually no student government or other extracurricular activities. Since lectures are of indefinite length (there is no system of bells to keep faculty in line) and labs begin immediately afterward, students have little chance to see anyone but classmates during the day. They seldom see medical students from other classes. . . . Evenings and many hours of the weekend are filled with preparation for daily work. With the exception of brief vacations, the schedule continues without pause (Becker et al., 1963: 88–89).

This ‘forcing house’ model seems very similar to the operation of police academies. In both examples, power is used to “control the student’s activities very tightly and cause the students to act in whatever fashion they [the faculty] want” (Becker et al., 1963: 48). This deters the students from constructing independent perspectives and compels them to adopt the ideas imposed on them by the faculty. As with medical students, police recruits are largely isolated from their families during the day and those in the higher levels of their occupation.

We focus here on how a recruit class is structured and restructured because these shifts are essential for creating a group conforming to the image and identity of police officers. Given that there is a high degree of socialization taking place during the course of academy training, we ask: “How is this change

achieved?” Answering this question entails looking at the *system of social relations established in the course of the academy*. Our focus here is on the *process* of transformation, rather than the product of trained police officers. In turn, this implies using substantive knowledge regarding the formation of social relations. Since prior research demonstrates the effectiveness of police training in shaping identities, our goal is to explore the mechanisms by which this socialization is accomplished.

Substantive foundations and empirical characteristics

Environments and elements of behavior

We employ Feld’s (1981) focus theory approach to help explain the interrelationship between the recruit networks and the other aspects of the academy social structure. Feld argues “in order to explain patterns in social networks, we need not look at causes of friendship but should concentrate our attention on those aspects of the extra network social structure that systematically produce patterns in a network” (Feld, 1981: 1016).¹ This is an important foundation for our investigation and since Feld’s theory is rooted in the work of Homans, we recognize the recruit group survives within this environment through a set of adaptations that constitute its external system—formed through the interrelations between sentiment, activity, and interaction (Homans, 1950: 91). Sentiment is the group’s collective motivation (the desire to become police officers) while activity is the steps taken towards this collective goal (i.e., training). Interaction refers to the formally established work groups and channels of communication that exist within the academy (especially the chain of command and the role of the recruit while training). The paired relationships between sentiment, activity and interaction constitute an external system for a cohort of recruits as it constrains their behavior.

Recruits willingly submitted themselves to a regimented existence within a police academy to become police officers and the external system is a part of their adaptation to that environment. At the start of training, admitted recruits came together in a milieu which, in Feld’s terms, constitutes a set of foci. Having competed fiercely to enter the training, they then share a common goal of graduating. A critical design feature of police academies is that activities once purely individualistic and competitive are redefined for—and by—the recruits as cooperative. While individuals may either succeed or fail within this environment based upon individual performance, an ethos of teamwork is instilled in the recruits by the training staff.

A recruit cohort is placed in a difficult position where they are compelled to unite against a common enemy (i.e. the training staff). There are two reasons for this structure. First, recruits must be conditioned to maintain their composure under stressful circumstances with the public perceived as hostile. Second, it lays the groundwork for creating loyalty among officers. Through constant surveillance within the academy and the assaults by the training staff, a recruit cohort evolves into a highly cohesive group (Van Maanen, 1975; Conti and Doreian, 2010). In addition to establishing a united front against the staff, tightly knit peer groups can play a utilitarian role in assessing the value of the official curriculum (McCreedy, 1980; Crank, 1998; Ford, 2003). Faced by an extensive curriculum, recruits require similar guidance in prioritizing instructional materials as was observed among medical students (Becker et al., 1963: 112).

¹ Feld’s sharp distinction between ignoring causes and focusing on aspects of extra network social structure seems too extreme. The latter can form part of the reasons for the formation of social ties, as Feld later suggests.

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