

Socialisation of student officers

Published on 4 December 2022 Written by Police Constable Amy Pickering, Leicestershire Police

Long read: Police culture – exploring the socialisation of student officers

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Introduction

I started my career with Leicestershire Police as a special constable in 2018, while studying for my Criminology BSc degree at the University of Leicester. I then went on to do an MSc and finished my studies in 2021 with a distinction. After that, having resigned as a special sergeant and before starting my initial training as a full-time police constable, I worked as a local support team officer at the front desk of a local police station.

My frontline experience offered a unique perspective and enhanced my understanding about the realities of policing. I found myself seeking approval from those around me and as a result, adapted my own behaviour. Throughout my time working for the police, I found myself observing how officers viewed the social world and became interested in their decision-making.

I chose to look at the socialisation of police officers, as police forces are going through a period of change – specifically, increasing levels of recruitment and a relatively new-in-service workforce. This offers many challenges, but I wondered what impact it would have on policing culture and the socialisation of officers.

In response to the declining experience on the front line, the police force I carried out this research with recently reformed their mentoring scheme. This resulted in officers being mentored by more than one person, who were also relatively young-in-service themselves.

The organisational culture of an institution – such as the police – reflects shared values and assumptions, so it is important to understand how these are formed. This research is concerned with police constables, who are the lowest rank and arguably act with the highest discretion.

Literature review

Occupational culture is not isolated to policing – it is simply the shared values, norms and behaviours of an organisation. Occupational culture binds people together and is used as a method to overcome challenges. Culture has a strong identity and is passed down from generation to generation as a result of storytelling. Robert Reiner's (2010) work has accounted for seven core characteristics of police occupational culture. These are:

- mission-action-cynicism-pessimism
- suspicion
- isolation or solidarity
- conservatism
- machismo
- pragmatism
- racial prejudice

Often, policing culture is presented as conservative and supports the notion that officers are 'crime fighters'. As a result, policing culture arguably fails to highlight the breadth of the role (Punch, 1979; McLaughlin, 2007).

Significant moments in policing history have called for reform in relation to police occupational culture, as it is often presented as the root problem of issues. However, police occupational culture also denotes some positive mechanisms – for example, how it helps officers respond to stressful situations that are unique to their role (Van Maanen, 1973; Paoline, 2003). In his study of police canteen subculture, Waddington (1999) noted that the police canteen acts as a 'repair shop' for officers. Willis and Mastrofski (2018) argued that newer officers were taught about police work when 'war stories' were passed on by experienced officers, a notion referred to as 'craft' knowledge.

Exploring the link between initial training and new recruits' socialisation is fundamental in understanding the future of police occupational culture. Early research into organisational socialisation of police officers by Van Maanen's (1973) study, 'Observation of a policeman', highlighted the importance of the socialisation process for new recruits. Van Maanen concluded that initial socialisation was the main influence for later behaviour. Van Maanen also highlighted that applicants make a pre-entry choice while applying to the police – even at this early stage, they begin to subscribe to the values of police occupational culture.

A key notion of police occupational culture is craft, which is developed by officers over time. It is viewed as knowledge that cannot be taught and is gained by exposure to stories that are passed down from officer to officer. A pivotal stage in a police officer's development is widely understood to be their mentor (tutor), as they teach student officers how to act in a present moment (Charman, 2017). During the socialisation process, officers' external influences may diminish. Exposure to policing culture makes it difficult for them to be influenced by other external influences and they experience cognitive burn, whereby they solely view the world through the lens of police occupational culture (O'Neill and others, 2007).

Methodology

This research was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 10 student officers with under two years' service, under the supervision of the University of Leicester's Criminology Department from May to September 2021. Participants' initial training was affected by COVID-19 in different ways, due to the restrictions in place. Participants had differing levels of social distancing and online learning, which may have had an impact on the findings.

Snowball sampling was used and yielded participants from a range of different backgrounds. Three had past experience as a special constable, while one was previously a police community support officer (PCSO) and another was previously a call taker. Eight participants were male and two were female. Eight participants were White, while two were from ethnic minority backgrounds. The age range of participants was 20 to 43 years old. The officers covered a range of different police stations and length of service within their two-year probation period. Due to the ethical constraints, the police force and participants remained anonymous, allowing them to speak without fear of repercussions.

The project sought to explore how the socialisation process and police occupational culture affected newly recruited police officers' decision-making on the front line. The interviews explored how newly recruited officers view their socialisation process and identified their biggest influence. The results were examined using police occupational culture theory and analysed using thematic analysis to produce codes and themes. These were broken down into practical recommendations about how to improve the socialisation of officers and their decision-making.

Findings

The research identified formal learning, the front line and craft knowledge as the main influences of officer's decision-making. These were broken down into smaller themes.

Participants felt that during initial training, a strong emphasis was placed on force policy and legalisation. While they understood the importance of this, they struggled to envisage how it would be applied on the front line. They felt that initial training was largely taught in isolation to reality – they described it as PowerPoint-heavy, which gave limited context.

Those who had prior experience within policing – the special constables, police community support officer and call taker – felt this prior knowledge was invaluable, as it allowed them to apply their classroom training to reality more easily. It helped them to contextualise learning. Participants expressed empathy for those who did not have previous policing experience.

Participants valued the combination of mentoring alongside formal training. They explained that their mentor was the most influential factor in their decision-making. One participant described police training as a 'jigsaw' and said that the mentor allowed them to piece it all together.

L&D [Learning and Development] gives you the jigsaw pieces and then your tutor sort of teaches you how they align up.

Participant 7/H

This study was conducted during a time of change, as the structure of the mentoring programme had undergone reform. Officers had mixed feelings about this, but explained that having more than one mentor exposed them to different ways of responding to similar incidents.

However, this lack of continuity meant that they received contradictory feedback. In this initial phase on the front line, student officers stated that their sergeant was one of the main influences on their decision-making. All participants found their sergeant approachable, as they believed that they understood the pressures of the front line.

Officers' accumulation of craft knowledge over time was developed by reviewing incidents and debriefing with their shift. Participants expressed that they felt the value and place of debriefing could have been emphasised more in initial training. This could have been achieved by showing them body-worn video (BWV) of previous incidents to help them contextualise their learning.

...show footage because you learn, I couldn't care less about the OST [officer safety training]. OST trainers have all these amazing stories of when they've held people's rib cages open whilst they're doing first aid, like massage their heart and first aid. Brilliant. Show videos of officers being assaulted, show videos of them [...] Show us footage. Show us things. Give us these scary stories and that's how you learn from it. Show us officers doing the wrong thing. Show us officers doing the right thing.

Participant 6/E

These findings were consistent across participants, despite them being from a range of entry routes and demographics.

Conclusion

This research found that officers felt a sense of mission on joining and were surprised at how paperwork-led policing work is. This research therefore supports that, although police occupational culture may be resistant to change, new recruits have the potential to influence it.

However, the results suggest that recruits' influence on policing culture may be limited by their experience of initial training and their mentors, both of which were identified as tending to reinforce the values of police occupational culture.

While this research was limited to interviews with only ten officers, it is supported by previous studies that suggest that newly recruited officers identified the strongest influence on them to be their mentor or tutor constable. Participants outlined that exposure to incidents and development of

craft knowledge helped them to become confident with decision-making.

Recommendations

The study produced the following recommendations to improve officer socialisation. These are divided into short-term, medium-term and long-term.

Short-term

- BWV of real incidents should be used more in initial training to help officers contextualise their learning.
- The structure of the training needs to be less focused on subject matter, and should reflect the context and ways that officers will be expected to work on the front line.

This recommendation is the most practical suggestion from the research and is relatively low-cost to implement. This study highlighted that exposure to incidents made officers feel more confident in their decision-making. More use of BWV would allow trainers to standardise the material that student officers are exposed to and develop their craft.

Reiner (2010) identified the telling of war stories as a key component that has the potential to perpetuate negative stereotypes and police occupational culture. BWV can be used in training to help overcome this risk, giving a more contextual view to support training and a positive culture.

Although officers could become hesitant of using their BWV out of fear of being highlighted as poor practice in initial training, consent from those in the videos would be essential to support development of skills and craft.

Medium-term

- Further study is needed around the role of the sergeants and their influence on student officers. This study highlighted the pressure on sergeants, due to the declining amount of experience of their shift.

This study supports the need for experienced practitioners to address the problem that the informal role of a 'senior PC' has become less available as a resource for new officers. A senior PC should have at least two years' experience to ease the pressure on shift sergeants. To retain experienced officers in this role, it would need to become professionalised and provide an opportunity for lateral career development.

Long-term

- On a local and national level, forces should focus on initial training as a mechanism to influence some of the more negative aspects of police culture and promote the positive ones.
- Recruitment processes needs to consider the ways in which police roles are advertised, to ensure that new officers have a realistic perception of policing.

This research confirmed that initial training and the initial probation period (two years) were instrumental in developing student officers craft knowledge. However, this knowledge is often informal and does not address negative issues related to police occupational culture. This research suggested that the training curriculum should encompass and develop craft knowledge in order to support change.

A criticism of the recruitment process that this research highlighted is that student officers felt surprised by the realities of their role, such as the unsociable hours, level of demand, number of procedures and the range of skills they were required to have (for example, mental health, traffic knowledge).

Participants who had prior policing experience explained that they knew what they 'were getting themselves into' and would not have been able to cope without this prior exposure to policing.

This current research therefore highlighted the importance of being exposed to craft knowledge, as it supports transition into the role. This supports Waddington's (1999) notion that craft knowledge is a positive function of police occupational culture.

- This article was peer reviewed by Inspector Upile Mtitimila, Cheshire Constabulary

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