

Policing the Platonic Cave: Ethics and Efficacy in Police Training

Norman Conti & James J. Nolan III

This article seeks to understand the form, content and broader implications of police academy ethics training. We begin by detailing the mechanisms borrowed from (near) total/greedy institutions that are key elements in the academy training structure. These are noted in an ethnographic account that points out the importance of obedience to authority, and the resultant shame and honour, which function as the core of police socialization. We conclude by explicating the theoretical foundation of the police function and then move on to question how ethics training supports, or resists, this structure. Findings suggest that, even at its best, ethics training is likely to serve in restraining the professional vision of incoming police officers. Despite what can only be assumed to be the best of intentions, a traditional model of police as law enforcers is (re)generated within a recruit cohort while more progressive notions of the police role (i.e., working toward neighbourhood efficacy) are ignored. With this, truly ethical behaviour is structurally inhibited by theatrical efforts at maintaining the collective fiction of the police mandate.

Keywords: Police training; Ethics; Collective efficacy; Situational policing; Ethnography; Socialization

We're not trying to *change* you. We're trying to get you to think *differently*.

—The Deputy Chief

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Introduction

Prior research finds that over the course of training, police recruits are subjected to an intense degree of resocialization. This is a key element in the transition from mainstream culture to the police world. The changes in perspective, personality and identity that occur over the course of an academy class have been well documented (McNamara, 1967; Van Maanen, 1973; Burgin, 1975; Hopper, 1977; McCreedy, 1980; Bahn, 1984; Bennett, 1984; Fielding, 1992; Maghan, 1988; McNulty, 1994; Tenerowicz, 1992; Radelet, 1986). That research is important in demonstrating the power of the training in shaping the selves of the individuals subjected to it. It does not, however, examine the specific mechanisms by which this socialization is accomplished. This project involves looking closely at how ethics training within a police academy is structured in order to aid in the production of a large group that conforms to the traditional image and identity of police officers.

The research presented here is an ethnographic account of an ethics course early in the training of a cohort of police recruits—the point at which recruits are first being processed into the organization and indoctrinated into its occupational perspective. This experience is largely modeled after basic military training, which is an example of the total institution (Goffman, 1961). A total institution is a place where a large number of “like situated” individuals are cut off from society and lead a “formally administered” life (i.e., the social situation of prisoners and mental patients). This environment is both the workplace and residence of the individuals confined to it. Individuals are subjected to a “batch existence” for an extended period of time in order to achieve some formally prescribed goal. The most important common element of total institutions is that they serve as forcing houses for identity transformation.

While a number of people have pointed to the affect of academy training on the identities of those subjected to it (Harris (1973) described it as dehumanizing¹), it was McNamara (1999) who first categorized it in the totalistic vein. Though McNamara’s claim is very provocative and has played a major role in the current analysis, it is at best a loose fitting of Goffman’s model. It is true that police recruits find themselves within the same circumstances for an extended period of time in order to achieve a formally prescribed goal (i.e., training and transformation into police officers). Additionally, the entire cohort of seventy individuals studied here was appointed to the police department on the same day and share the title “recruit”. However, they are not fully removed from society in a way that would qualify them as true inmates. The clearest example of this is that the police recruits observed in this project and in most municipal departments do not sleep within the academy.² This nonresidentiality makes the application of the concept of “total institution” problematic. Still, McNamara opens the door for a consideration of the key elements from Goffman’s concept that are at work in police training that is attempted in this project.

In actuality, police training falls somewhere between Goffman's totalistic model and Coser's (1974) "greedy institution" (i.e., the social situation of Jesuits and domestic servants). Rather than literally incarcerating the individual, the greedy institution seeks the unmitigated commitment from him or her while s/he continues to navigate the wider social environment. Despite the fact that these individuals may be frequently interacting with outsiders, the institution demands a type of absolute and exclusive allegiance that serves to isolate individuals from the rest of society. Moreover, the greedy institution desires to minimize, if not eliminate, the demands of conflicting roles and statuses (i.e., family and community). This model fits the social circumstances of a police officer better than that of a mental hospital or prison. This mental, rather than physical, incarceration leads to the categorization of the training as a (near) total/greedy institution.

The Platonic Cave

Since our data on police socialization comes from an introductory ethics course at a police academy, a few general comments about ethics are important in setting the stage for how this analysis contributes to the larger discourse on policing. First, it is important to consider what is meant by the term "ethics". Popularly construed, it is often understood simply as making a moral choice between right and wrong behaviour. Viewed in this way, a training course on police ethics should be expected to highlight the typical moral dilemmas faced by police officers in their everyday work. Additionally, it might provide descriptions of the "right" behaviour for officers in each particular circumstance that is likely to arise. However, as Plato explains in the dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus, a narrow conception such as this quickly leads to problems:

Socrates to Cephalus: "But what about this thing you mentioned, *doing right*? Shall we say it is, without qualification, truthfulness and giving back anything one has borrowed from someone? Or might the performance of precisely these actions sometimes be right, but sometimes wrong? This is the kind of thing I mean. I'm sure everyone would agree that if you'd borrowed weapons from a friend who was perfectly sane, but he went insane and asked for the weapons back, you shouldn't given them back, and if you give them back you wouldn't be doing right, and neither would someone who was ready to tell the whole truth to someone like that." (Plato, (1993: 8) emphasis added by author)

Plato's point in this dialogue is that focusing on moral choices in absolute terms will quickly result in "self-contradictory knots". Similar problems can easily be seen in situations that arise in policing. For example, truthfulness in the performance of police duties is generally considered "doing right"; however, undercover police officers lie about their identities while trying to infiltrate an illegal drug distribution networks. In this context, perhaps truthfulness would limit the officer's ability to uncover criminal activities and enforce certain laws. In this example it is clear that the evaluation of the moral principal of truthfulness must be made within a particular

context. This is not so clear, however, in less transparent examples, such as when the police must decide what “doing right” means in their more routine interactions with citizens who are dealing with problems of neighbourhood crime and disorder.

Like Plato, many philosophers avoid these traps by broadening the concept of ethics to include a larger context from which to evaluate their moral decisions. The context at which they aim is known as the “*summum bonum*”—life’s greatest good. In other words, they set out to define a desired *end state*, often referred to as “*the good life*” or a “life worth living”. Once *the good life* is defined, a *moral* action is one that leads to its realization, while the immoral action deters it. From this point of view, “ethics” is defined as “the study of right conduct and the good life”. Carried further, ethics is the *theory* of right conduct and the good life and *morals* is the practice of these things (Sahakian & Sahakian, 1966: 31). Applying this broader notion of ethics to the institution of policing involves two components. The first is identifying the greatest good (or the ultimate end) at which policing aims, and the second is taking the right action (in relation to achieving this greatest good).

In Book VII of *Republic*, Plato uses the Allegory of the Cave to describe a condition that can inhibit our ability to know our world and, therefore, to determine effectively goodness and right action in it. Plato begins the story by asking us to imagine people living in an underground cave. In this scenario, the people have been there for as long as they can remember and are physically bound in such a way that they can only look straight ahead. Behind these prisoners a fire burns which creates shadows of their captors, and the artifacts they carry, on the wall in front of them. As their captors talk, the prisoners learn to attribute their sounds to the shadows they see in front of them. The shadows become the only reality these prisoners recognize. Since they have always been in this condition, these prisoners are completely ignorant of the fact that they are imprisoned and that the shadows only partial representations of reality.

As the story continues, one of the prisoners is suddenly set free and forcibly led outside of the cave. On the way out, he sees the fire and the objects that cast the shadows for the first time, but he is too dazzled to comprehend them. He is told that all of the images he has come to know have no substance and what he is seeing now for the first time is reality. Once outside, he is unable see until his eyes adjust. As time passes, he begins to see things more as they actually are. He learns to see the heavenly bodies and eventually deduces that the sun is the source of the seasons and everything that he and the other prisoners had, only partially, seen.

The enlightened prisoner reflects on what used to pass for knowledge in the cave and the activities and skills to which the prisoners attributed prestige and credit. These are no longer meaningful to him. Plato asks us to imagine that after the passage of some time, this prisoner returns to his same spot in the cave. He is no longer able to see things as he had and, therefore, makes a fool of himself in completing in his former tasks. Seeing this, the other prisoners are outraged and say they would to kill anyone who tried to force them “up there”. The point of the story is that we can all be slaves to a system that distorts our reality; under these circumstances, we are basically

living an illusion we accept as the truth. In this article, we seek to describe and explain the process by which police recruits are lead to a perspective that parallels what is presented in the Allegory of the Cave.

Methods

The context of this ethnography is a recruit class at the Rockport³ Police Academy. The data was collected over the course of the training session through participant observation with the cohort and staff. This academy class consisted of seventy recruits and lasted for twenty-one weeks from late 1999 through early 2000. The academy generally met five days a week between the hours of eight in the morning and five in the evening. At the completion of this time period and after passing a state examination, successful recruits became certified police officers. At this point, the rookie officers were made probationary members of the Rockport Police Department.

This particular analysis focuses on two in-class situations where a specific recruit subgroup⁴ was being taught ethics by one of the deputy chiefs of the department who, up until a few months prior, had been the officer in charge of the training unit. Since this was entirely a classroom environment, detailed observations could be unobtrusively recorded. This did not seem unusual because all of the recruits were taking notes related to the curriculum. Here the ethnographer was just one person, among eighteen others, writing in a notebook. In addition to observing as much of the formal training as possible, the researcher went to great lengths to spend time outside of class with the recruits where they were frequently discussing the training. Finally, a series of informal interviews with staff and recruits were conducted before, during and after the course of training.

The data was analyzed from grounded theory (Chamaraz, 1983; Glasner & Strauss, 1967) perspective where field notes were coded for emerging processes and themes. Analytic memos were essential in understanding the function of the ethics training. When the significance of the traditional law enforcer model began to emerge, the field notes were once more reviewed in order to determine how this was being negotiated. Eventually, it became clear that this traditional template was a key mechanism in the development of a professional vision within the group.

Ethics and Ethnography

The Recruit's Situation: Structural Elements in Police Training

There are four central features to the total institution and these can be found, to varying degrees and in modified forms, within the police academy. The first is that all aspects of the inhabitant's life take place in one specific setting under the general authority of a centralized administrative body. Within a total institution, all the boundaries that separate the segments of daily existence are erased. In this moment, the individual's life takes on a vastly greater homogeneity. Within the academy in

question, recruits came and went from the training site in standardized shifts. Thus, there were still substantial physical boundaries between their various spheres of existence. However, the freedom entailed in this movement was lessened by the nature of their endeavour. While they could leave police headquarters at proscribed times, it was still possible for them to, on some level, be perpetually “in the academy”. This was accomplished through the vast quantities of outside work required of recruits. Physical conditioning, notebooks, review sessions, remedial training and studying were (the minimal) outside preparations required. These activities were likely to tie up a substantial portion of the recruits’ “outside” time and, while not qualifying as incarceration, they do seem to suggest a high level of role engulfment (Adler & Adler, 1991). Under these circumstances, it becomes difficult for the recruit to manage, or even maintain, the other spheres of his or her life. So, while the environment is not fully totalistic in its structure, it is likely to be so within the minds of the recruits experiencing it.

Moreover, the most important aspect of this feature is that the individual’s entire life is subject to “a single authority”. Since the recruit is a provisional member of the police department it is that governmental authority to which she or he is subjected. What is more, recruits are likely to be living in the city in which the police department is located. Upon graduation, residence is mandatory. Under these circumstances, the recruit is subject to police authority in a manner unlike anyone else in the community. Here, the recruit is subject to the same laws as the average citizen as well as all of the rules and regulations of the police department.

In a clear instance of this the phrase “two beers and a tree” was perpetually recited, first by the training officers and then later by the recruits themselves, throughout the course of training. This was a constant reminder that drunk driving citations resulted in dismissal from the academy. This makes for an unusual situation because, while any employer might frown upon behaviours such as drunk driving or domestic violence, they do not necessarily discover when their employees are engaging in them. This is certainly not the case with police departments. In this situation, every arrest leads to an occupational sanction. Knowing that recruits are subject to departmental standards in addition to the rule of law, and it is the city police who actively enforce each, it can be argued that they are constantly under the authority of a centralized administration. Here surveillance is installed in a highly unusual manner and, though not fully panoptic, the institutional gaze is extended well beyond the confines of the facility.

Additionally, there was a new moral imperative placed upon the recruits. They were immediately upon admission, and perpetually thereafter, made aware of a double standard in police conduct. They were informed at the outset that: “Police officers cannot live like normal people.” This results from being held to a higher standard of behaviour. Stemming from this, the recruit begins to feel the constant gaze of civilians. Many police officers wear flannel shirts, or their functional equivalent, over their uniforms on their way to and from work. This is done in order to camouflage their status. Here it is the public’s gaze rather than the institutional

constraint from which they are seeking refuge.⁵ This disguise permits them to hide from an ever-present public waiting to judge them as well as the criminal element that is seeking to hurt them. Whether justified or not, this is a level of paranoia indicative of institutionalized individuals.

The second feature of the total institution is “batch living”. This entails the individual being constantly kept with a group of others who are all in the same social position. All of these people are required to do the same things at the same times. The idea of being tethered to a single group for the entirety of a stay in a total institution is an extreme manner of confinement and control. Although, the absence of living quarters within the academy seriously weakens this argument, recruits still spend a minimum of nine hours a day with a group of seventy other people who are all enacting the exact same rituals of uniformity at the same time, under stringent control and inspection. The important aspect of institutional activities being group-oriented is the potential for conformity via inescapable comparison. The central location of recruit training is the academy’s large classroom. The model is very formal with recruits listening to extended lectures or completing assignments all in unison. The structure does not leave the recruit much opportunity for individual variation. While sixty-nine other recruits are all diligently labouring away at the most recent “make-work” (Goffman, 1959) project, it is difficult to be the lone individual completing tasks at his or her own discretion. Inside the formal structure, where the recruit is confined to a single room observing the various paramilitary protocols that are applied, everyone is doing the same exact thing at the exact same time. This limits the potential for individual deviance, or even variance, as well as deeply ingraining an ethos related to unison of action.

Along with this there is the idea of everything that the individuals are doing is in furtherance of organizational goals. This seems likely to be the case among police recruits because even when they are not actually in the academy portion of their day they are likely to be doing outside work related to their training. Moreover, within police culture there is the common observation that police officers spend much of their leisure time with other police officers (Harris, 1973). For many of the recruits, the intense difficulty of their training leads them to try to squeeze as much enjoyment out of their off-time as possible. The result of this is a high frequency of group outings. As with a true total institution, there is little more valuable than time on the outside. At this moment, recruits are beyond the confines of the academy but still within its milieu. As a result of their almost constant confinement, the recruits attempted to make the most of what free time they had. A big part of this was groups of recruits going out together and spending time at the local bars. Since this is the case, the concept of batch living is very loosely applicable.

The third characteristic relates to the tight scheduling of all the aspects of the individual’s day where one activity leads directly into the next. All activities are planned and imposed by a higher authority within the organization. In this situation, the day, and all time in general, is made to conform to a predetermined structure. In an optimally efficient total institution there is nothing that falls out of the scheduled

regime. While the nonresidentiality of the academy limits the degree to which this element can operate, aspects of it are evident in the training. The recruit experiences months comprised of a series of tightly scheduled lectures, assignments and practice. Additionally, the bulk of academy curriculum is state-mandated with the inclusion of only a few departmental electives. This is a program implemented from utilitarian directives where knowledge and skill are built in a step-by-step fashion with one leading into the next.

The fourth characteristic, which is related to the third, is that there is a single rational plan to achieve the institutional goals from which all of the enforced activities, as well as their timing, have been derived. The idea is that individuals are put through a course of “treatment” and will, in the end, become the institution’s ideal product. This is antithetical to the natural life course where someone is shaped by the fairly organic progress of his or her existence. Instead of becoming who one is more or less freely, there is a concerted effort to mold the individual into becoming exactly what is required for the organization by the total institution. This is achieved often through a course of training where every hour of every day is constructed as a sequential step in the desired progression. This aspect is fully realized in police academies. The organization has a number of months to enact a transformation in a group of civilians that, more or less, turns them into police officers. In order to accomplish this goal in the allotted time period, various mechanisms are utilized. These include everything from minor regulations to the requirements for state certification. All of these structures are consciously designed to contribute to the shaping of a police figure. While they may not truly learn what it means to be police officers and how the job is really done until their field training, the academy effectively conditions them to accept that knowledge. Or, as an instructor put it: “In here, they’re teaching you what you need to survive out on the street long enough for your FTO [field training officer] to teach you how to be a cop.”

Police Ethics: The Warrior Heart

On the fourth day of the second week of the training, the 2B sub-group was scheduled for *Ethics* with the Deputy Chief in charge of Field Operations. The Deputy Chief began his presentation with a very complex joke about Jesus and Saint Peter playing golf. This helped to set the class at ease. The recruits had all been a little nervous as a result of finding themselves in the academy’s smallest classroom with the former commander of the Training Unit. The fact that the room could barely contain the eighteen recruits, comprising the subgroup, was a significant factor in setting the tone for the class. This was an acutely different atmosphere than the seventy-plus seat main classroom where the recruits were receiving the majority of their training up to this point. In this setting there was much less opportunity for anonymity. This, coupled with the reality that the instructor was now one of the highest-ranking individuals within the department, put the recruits under a substantial amount of stress.

This anxiety was made apparent with the practice of coming to attention when someone of the Deputy Chief's status entered the room. Upon detection of a command staff level officer entering a room, the recruits were required to immediately yell out "Attention on Deck!", rise from their seats and stand at attention until the commander put them "at rest". Whenever recruits had an advanced warning that a commander may be coming to the academy there was an intense anxiety centred on maintaining all of the proper protocols while in the presence of such a high ranking official. The stress in these interactions was likely to have been a product of their condition as mixed contacts where the absolute highest-ranking members of the department interacting with the absolute lowest (quasi)members. The Deputy Chief was known to be "a real good guy"; however, he was also known for having a vicious temper when confronted with recruits that neglected academy standards.⁶

There was a lingering story from the last academy class that struck fear in the hearts of all the current recruits. Several months earlier, during the course of the previous academy class, a group of recruits started spending some of their off duty time in a local "cop bar". As a joke, several of the veteran officers that frequented the establishment informed the recruits that there was a high-ranking departmental commander in the bar. They told the recruits that buying the officer drinks would ensure them a good district assignment upon graduation from the academy. Of course the "commander" was actually just a patrolman, who was not even in on the joke, and the recruits were buying him round after round of drinks in a pointless attempt at self-ingratiation. This apparently went on for some time before any of the higher-ranking members of the department found out about it.

Word of this eventually got back to the then Lieutenant and he immediately stormed out of his office and down to the classroom. On the way he informed his Sergeant, the second in command, that her "babies" where in serious trouble.⁷ He invited her to come along as a witness to his wrath, but she declined because she simply could not bear to watch the ensuing admonition. She did, however, send two other training officers into the classroom, along with the Lieutenant: "You know, just to make sure that nobody got killed." Details about exactly what happened when the Lieutenant entered the room vary slightly while emphasizing intense yelling. One thing that resonated in the minds of the recruits who were currently in front of him was that the Lieutenant flipped over a table behind which several recruits were standing at attention. The exact number of rotations that the table made before finally hitting the ground is still, to this day, undetermined. However, it was certainly enough to guarantee that the incident would instantly become a legendary moment in academy lore.⁸

While the recruits were naturally attracted to the Deputy Chief's charismatic persona, they were all slightly intimidated by his reputation and rank, as well as his six foot six stature. His class began with a statement of the course philosophies. These were the standard tropes of conventional teaching that promoted an informal and relaxed classroom environment. He was also trying to push the recruits to be

open-minded and ask questions. In all of this he was encouraging the recruits to enjoy this training. The Deputy Chief explained that an ethics class was not part of the state-mandated curriculum. He stated that because this class was something of a departmental elective and while not being a mandatory segment of the state curriculum, it was still a vital part of their training. He illustrated this by saying "There will be no test, other than the rest of your lives!"

This was an important claim for the Deputy Chief to make. From the beginning of their training, the recruits were intensely test-oriented students motivated by the staff's emphasis on knowing the required material as well as their own anxiety about the state examination and its role in their employment. In any class, all the recruits really cared about was meeting their SPOs (student performance objectives) and being prepared for both the state as well as the inhouse examinations. In the juxtaposition of this academic strategy with the reality of police work the Deputy Chief was making a compelling point. This class was not about "playing the game" and getting state certification, it was developed to help the recruits prepare for police work; it was "for real". This illustrated a striking distinction between the formal training and the informal learning that took place during the course of the academy.

The Deputy Chief made the point that police work is a hard job. He explained that cops have to be social workers, medics, lawyers, priests and gladiators. From his perspective, police officers needed to have "warrior hearts". He was talking about an internal drive to protect people that manifested itself in a need to go out and actively take part in the pursuit of justice. It was explained that this was an innate quality that could not spring from academy training. He felt it must be within the soul of the individual and needed to be in place prior to entering the academy. He commended the recruits because their mere presence in the academy was itself an initial demonstration of this type of heroic potential. Just ten minutes into the class it was obvious to the recruits that it would be an excellent experience and a memorable moment in the course of the twenty-one week academy training.

The Deputy Chief went on to talk about a corruption scandal from a year earlier where five Rockport Police Officers, along with many prison guards, were indicted for providing security to local drug dealers. The officers were being paid by the drug dealers to protect their major drug shipments as they came into the area. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had been called in to investigate this and everyone involved was eventually arrested. On the day of their arrest, each of the corrupt officers was individually called into the academy's main classroom for a "routine weapons inspection". Of course this was just a ruse to separate the officers from their pistols.⁹ As soon as they turned over their guns FBI agents came in and arrested them. Many of the command officers who had been present for this event and were also instructors in the academy made it a point to comment on how difficult it was to witness this.

The Deputy Chief took an especially personal interest in this police tragedy because three of the five corrupt officers had been trained in the academy while he was in command. It was clear that he felt partially responsible for the "bad cops" he had

trained as a result of having “missed something”. It was not clear if this something that was missed was an element of the individual’s character or if it was a neglected aspect of training that could have kept the officers on the straight path. In any event, it was clear that these officers’ crimes weighed on his conscience. This high degree of internal accountability was an illustration of the intense morality entailed in his constitution.

Weeks later this issue was raised once more. Again it was a high-ranking member of the department, a Captain, who brought it up. He explained that:

Nine out of ten drug dealers are informants for someone. So, if you take money off of one of them they have someone they can tell about it. Alphabet guys love to take down cops. You heard about those five officers that were arrested by the FBI. They brought them into this very room under some other auspices and told them they were having a weapons check. As soon as they turned over their guns the FBI came in, slapped the cuffs on them and took them over to the elevators. In twenty-three years of police work that was the worst I ever felt.

It looks too good and too easy. I’ve seen a lot of coppers get wrapped up in it. You get out of here, after making eight-fifty an hour all this time, and that big wad of money in a drug boy’s pocket is going to look awfully good to you.

I’m just telling you don’t do it because prison is not a good place for a police officer.

These informants will turn on you in a second. They’ll sell out their mothers if it will get them off, so they got no problem screwing you over.

This was a very different tact than the Deputy Chief had taken. Instead of taking the high road and restating the morality that “we are the good guys”, the Captain chose to focus on the notion that the police are constantly under scrutiny and being spied upon by other law enforcement agencies. It was not an argument based upon ethics, but rather deterrence theory.

The Deputy Chief warned the recruits that they could not take it for granted that people know right from wrong. He exemplified this point by asking the recruits why there were specific rules within the General Police Orders (GPO) about police not drinking, watching television or playing cards while on duty. It was his contention that these were commonsense matters and anybody would know not to do them while on duty. The answer to this question was that all of these rules had been made because, historically, some people were in fact doing these unreasonable things while working. He was noting that all of the rules in the GPO Book were the result of police having done what is now outlawed. A previous instructor had made a similar point in telling the class that many of the GPOs were the product of lawsuits against the police department.

The Deputy Chief explained his motivation for taking part in this training through an expression of personal concern for the recruits. He was teaching this class in an attempt to ensure the survival of the recruits. He was interested in seeing each of the recruits survive his or her career as a police officer on physical, mental and legal levels. This, along with having fun while doing the work, was considered to be the

central element of a successful career. From his perspective, training in matters of personal ethics was one means for helping to ensure these ends.

Early on the Deputy Chief demonstrated that, despite his rank, he was still a cop at heart and could be trusted. He accomplished this by sharing a horrific story with the recruits. The story was sixteen years old and took place while he was still “riding a zone car” (i.e., on patrol). The nature of what he and his partner had witnessed while on an assignment was so grotesque that it would have been unbelievable had he not conveyed it with such feeling and sincerity. Part of the narrative was how, as a result of being a police officer, there are moments when individuals step into “the twilight zone”. In his story he and his partner had an idea in mind for handling the situation that would have been a gross abuse of power. They looked at each other when confronted with the scene and, without saying a word, each knew what the other was thinking. The thoughts running through their minds related to actions that would be blatantly illegal, though certainly understandable and not unacceptable from a human perspective. The point was that they resisted their urges, without even discussing them, and dealt with the situation through the appropriate course of police action.

Telling this story had two effects in the situation. First, related to course content, it was an example of the type of fortitude that the recruits would need to do the job of police work honorably. By telling them of a personal situation that was unimaginably bad, the recruits could start to get an idea of the type of misery they would be confronting in their new careers. With this they could begin to prepare themselves for what they were about to be doing. Second, was the factor of trust. The Deputy Chief explained that this story was not to leave the room.¹⁰ To that day he had never even told his wife about what he saw and how it affected him. He qualified this by recognizing that police officers should not shut themselves off from their families. He believed that cops should talk about their day with their spouses and avoid excluding them from that part of their lives. He further acknowledged that sharing the difficulties of police work with a spouse is a healthy coping strategy. However, in this contradictory instance, he saw nothing to be gained by describing the atrocity that he had witnessed to his wife. He told the recruits that as a result of the nature of the scene, he left a part of himself there that he could never get back. His point was that there would be things about police work that are guaranteed to have a negative impact on the recruits. However, there were strategies that could be employed (i.e., ethical behaviour) that could help to minimize the damage done. The Deputy Chief openly stated that: “I left a piece of myself at that crime scene. In twenty-five years on this job you’re going to lose, at least, a small part of yourselves. But, you don’t have to lose everything.” With this he was sharing a secret, as well as the personal anguish that accompanied it, with the class. This trust was based solely on their status as new (quasi)members of the department. This was the type of trust emblematic of relationships between police officers.

The Deputy Chief pushed this issue even further in a discussion of “The Blue Wall of Silence”. In considering the practice of police breaking the law he told the recruits:

“I will lay down my life right now for any one of you. I don’t even really know you people but I would not let you go into a dangerous situation alone. I’ll lay down my life for you but I won’t go to jail for you, not for anyone.” Here again, was another example of the Deputy Chief instilling a sense of group solidarity while at the same time pursuing the course goals. In this acknowledgment of how far he, a serious role model, was willing to go for a fellow officer, he was also demonstrating what he would not do. This was a clear demonstration of correct police standards.

This point was also made formally in the standardized guide that accompanied the course. On a page that also included the standards and principles of ethical policing there was the following excerpt:

The code of silence and the “us versus them” mentality were present wherever we found corruption. These characteristics of police culture largely explain how groups of corrupt officers, sometimes comprising almost an entire squad can openly engage in corruption for long periods of time with impunity. Any successful system for corruption control must redirect police culture against protecting and perpetuating police corruption. It must create a culture that demands integrity and works to ensure it. (Mollen Commission, 27 December 1993)

While this statement exemplified the social problem of police corruption and the facilitating silence, it did not have nearly the impact of the Deputy Chief’s informal discussion. This was primarily the result of the Deputy Chief’s status as an insider and someone who should be listened to, versus the commission’s position as outsiders and “experts”. In the course of the recruits’ training, the only people that they ever looked upon as experts were “real cops” with a lot of experience. From this perspective, civilians were inherently less important because they did not know what it was like to do police work. Furthermore, the Deputy Chief personalized the situation for the recruits rather than couching in terms of a public issue. The recruits maintained a very in-group centred perspective when it came to police work and social problems. Avoiding this big picture tactic was always a more effective strategy for instruction.

The Deputy Chief illustrated the importance of a healthy balance of police culture in conjunction with active participation in the outside world (i.e., an attempt to reduce the level of institutionalization). He explained that there is something special, and desirable, about the camaraderie shared between officers. However, he noted that this has the potential to be all consuming and detrimental to the officer’s other relationships (i.e., role engulfment). He was pushing the recruits to hold on to some of the civilian parts of their identities. This is evident in the following statement: “There’s going to be pressure on you to get socialized into the big blue club. We got the biggest gang in town, but what’s most important is how your kids will look at you.”

At one point during his ethics class the Deputy Chief asked the recruits why they were there. He let them posit whatever answers they wanted but in the end he cut to the chase and told them that they were here because they were required to be. He

went onto state that: “You’re basically prisoners. If you try to leave I’ll shoot you in the back and I’ll be justified.” The Deputy Chief explained that the police academy was a Visigoth system of training. The recruits were informed that in Visigoth society, leadership was determined by trial and whoever could suffer the most punishment was elevated to the status of the leader. From his perspective, that was exactly how the police academy functioned. The recruits were subjected to various hardships while expected to perform to difficult standards and whoever successfully made it to the end of this training would be elevated to the status of police officer. He took some time to acknowledge all of the difficulties such as low pay, hard work, intense studying and physical training that the recruits would be facing over the course of their training. This was a moment of recognition of the negative aspects of academy training while at the same time encouraging the recruits to persevere through them.

The final topic covered in that day’s portion of the ethics course was the “trickbag”. This metaphor literally referred to an individual being handed what was supposedly a gift inside a bag. When the individual opens the bag and looks inside, it is rigged to blow up in his or her face. The recruits were warned that police officers had to be vigilant about “getting caught in a trick bag” because there were always people looking to set them up or lead them astray. The Deputy Chief reiterated this point with the idea that if anyone came up to them with an offer that “sounded too good to be true” they should not take it. Any part-time security job where officers were paid five hundred dollars an hour was, in the Deputy Chief’s opinion, not worth taking. After this the recruits were given a reading assignment to be completed for the second half of the ethics class and dismissed for the day.

Ethics Part II: Lax Discipline

During the third week of the Academy, the 2B sub-group had a second session of ethical training with the Deputy Chief. Prior to the start of class, the recruits were sitting in the room engaging in casual conversation. The chatter continued as the Deputy Chief entered the room. Within seconds the Deputy Chief sarcastically exclaimed: “Well, I guess I don’t rate your coming to attention!” The recruits were immediately snapped out of their conversations by the realization that they were now in very serious trouble. In only a few seconds they had unintentionally violated one of the academy’s most important standards of conduct. Moreover, they had done so to the offense of the Deputy Chief. He began to admonish them and explain that people had told him that the class was becoming lax in their discipline. He informed the recruits that he had defended them to their detractors, and now they had proven him wrong in his very presence. He stood up and left the room stating that this was “totally unacceptable”.

When the recruits were left alone they sat shocked. They were trying to figure out what had happened and how they got into this situation. Moments later, one of the training officers entered the room and began to scream at the recruits: “What the fuck is wrong with you people! When a fucking Chief walks into the room and not only do

you fail to come to attention but you sit there and continue to talk!” The training officer was furious and assigned the subgroup twenty-five demerits the equivalent of two hundred and fifty push ups or other calisthenics. One female recruit tried to explain the infraction by noting that it was because they were all talking that no one noticed the Deputy Chief enter the room. Another female recruit suggested that they should have someone watching the door in these situations. The staff member was not impressed by their explanations and told the recruits that: “Their [the department’s command staff’s] white shirts are not like your white shirts.” This was a juxtaposition of the recruit’s store bought (i.e., civilian) short-sleeved white dress shirts with the white uniform tops worn by commanding officers. She was further illustrating the fact that the recruits were the absolute lowest members of the department and they needed to realize that and act accordingly. It was her contention that this situation was the result of a lack of discipline and the inability to pay attention.

This event really changed the atmosphere in the classroom. It had seemed that the recruits failure to come to attention was more a product of the informal manner in which the Deputy Chief’s class was conducted than anything else. The room was so small that it was difficult to believe that not one of the eighteen recruits would have seen the Deputy Chief enter. The recruits may have become so comfortable around the Deputy Chief that, for a moment, they failed to respond to his position within the police hierarchy. Resulting from the tone of the Deputy Chief’s last class there was a slip in the paramilitary order of the academy, which led to a breakdown in the inter-group control and self-socialization.

Later, the Deputy Chief returned to the room and class began. He started by asking the recruits about the article he had assigned for them to read. Quickly it became obvious that many of the recruits had neglected to complete the required reading. Again the Deputy Chief began to berate the class. He informed them that teaching this course in the academy added four hours to each of his workdays over a two-week period. He told the class that this was time he could be spending with his family instead of being upstairs in his office doing paperwork. The Deputy Chief also noted that he had told them three times that they were supposed to read the article. From this he went on to explain his motivation for teaching this class. “I don’t give a goddamn if any of you even like me! My reward will come when I’m eighty and you people are retiring and I can say you were all good cops. I’m trying to give you what you need to do a good job and have fun without getting in trouble.” Upon making this point he went on to discuss the article. The recruits who had actually completed the reading took an active role in the discussion.

Once the article had been thoroughly considered, the class was broken up into small groups. The groups were assigned different scenarios to consider and determine the ethical behaviour appropriate for each. After all the groups had completed and discussed their scenarios, the Deputy Chief made a few final points. He was concerned with demonstrating the distinction between honesty and loyalty: “You don’t go to jail for anybody. The Blue Wall of Silence only goes so far. Cops talk a lot

of shit, but when push comes to shove and you have a chance to avoid going to jail. . . . Come on?" The Deputy Chief told the recruits that they needed to pick a role model and find someone they can go to when something bad happens. He told the recruits that police need to take care of each other, but the days of cover-ups were over. This was a lesson police had learned the hard way and he did not want to see any of the recruits ruin their lives over this job.

Emerging Themes: Authority and Obedience

The narrative above maintains a very clear trajectory of obedience to authority and the honour that results. Under close observation, we note that the situation begins with the recruit's anxiety in regard to encountering the Deputy Chief. Having navigated the (near) totalistic/greedy structure for almost two weeks, the recruits understood, gravely, the differences in their (provisional) status within the organization and that of the Deputy Chief. The recruits were painfully aware of the potential for offending this commanding officer and all of the consequences that such a misstep would yield.

Early on, the Deputy Chief set them at ease with jokes and the presentation of a comfortable classroom environment. From this more relaxed position, he showed solidarity in claiming a concern in their long-term well being. Moreover, he honoured them for their presence within the academy (i.e., "the warrior heart"). Next, he told a morality tale of police corruption and the resultant shame that transcended the guilty offices. This involved a discussion of his own personal guilt in having failed to catch the defect in character during training that led to the corruption. From this beginning, the Deputy Chief went on to discuss a variety of moral dilemmas that present themselves to police officers. These situations were framed as vital tests in which officers could demonstrate honour and further elevate themselves and their profession or bring shame on all. He illustrated this with his own war story in a moment that demonstrated both honour and solidarity. This section of the ethics course would end with a reiteration of the importance of correct choices in moral dilemmas by way of a discussion of the "trickbags" ever present in policing.

In the first component of the course, the Deputy Chief noted, and mocked, the recruit's degraded position with a threat to shoot any who attempted to escape. This was then coupled with the "Visigoth" analogy in order to make it clear that, within the academy, as well as throughout both the department and the occupation, honour is a property resultant of obedience. This point was expressed at the beginning of the second class in a way that would make it clear to all of the recruits. The moment where the recruits failed to come to attention for the Deputy Chief was an example of the kind of blatant disobedience that brought shame upon all of them, including the Deputy Chief. In this breach of proper decorum, the lowest members of the departmental hierarchy failed to correctly subordinate themselves to a command officer who was only one rank below the Chief of Police. Despite three weeks under the regime, they were lacking the very discipline that was the core of the profession.

For this they were harshly degraded by the staff. For the recruit, it is only through strict obedience that she or he can achieve the honour of police status. Here, the recruits were disobedient and had to be, temporarily and symbolically, lowered in status to something like an undisciplined civilian. Once the significance of proper deference was forcefully restated in this event, the class could move back to a discussion of preventing corruption.

Discussion

Our analysis exemplifies one of the processes by which an institutional dialectic of shame and honour is internalized by police recruits. A significant consequence of this is an initial degradation, a later elevation and an eventual alienation for the police officer. Sherman (1999), in a discussion of how officers learn ethics, argues that rookies develop a perspective that focuses on loyalty within the police group and animosity towards most of the public and police administrators. This dichotomy is then coupled with a sense that when friends and family disagree with their perspective it is only because of the outsider's naiveté. This observation is supported by both Skolnick (1994) and Kappeler et al. (1998). Kappeler goes on to discuss the siege mentality that is emphasized in the "us/them" police worldview. All of this animosity and alienation seems to put the police officer in a prisoner's situation. The objective of this analysis has been to demonstrate how that psychological incarceration is achieved.

Within the presentation of ethics training there is a clear interaction order (Goffman, 1983) of obedience to authority and the elevation—or degradation—that may result. This type of structure has also been observed by others. Bordua and Reiss (1966) describe the organizational culture of policing as a "holy order" with an intense focus on subordination, chain of command, accountability and limited provisions for inter-rank communication. They argue that the organizational commitment to subordination and service is so great that, in accordance with the model of a greedy institution, it takes precedence over "extra-occupational ones to family and community" (Bordua & Reiss, 1966: 68). Their emphasis on the role of subordination fits well with Rokeach et al.'s (1971) discussion of the emphasis on self-control and obedience, as well as Skolnick's (1994) comments on the function of authority that is common to the profession. It is understood that the result of obedience is the eventual achievement of honour (Bordua & Reiss, 1966: 71). Here it is the same chain of command that originally subordinates the officer/recruit that will later elevate him or her. Sykes and Clark (1975) build on this notion in recognition of an asymmetric status norm that governs police-civilian encounters. They observe that the quality of these interactions generally results from the civilian's recognition, or failure to acknowledge, the officer's elevated status. In these contacts, the officer's internalized command structure is either confirmed or challenged by the civilian's demeanor. Proper deference on the part of the civilian demonstrates the potential for honour while disrespect is shameful to both parties.

Conclusion

In the Platonic dialogue presented earlier, Socrates explicates the difficulties one might have when describing the concept “doing right” without first defining an end state of the “good life”. The good life, as it applies to police ethics, means policing in a way that provides the greatest benefit to the community and officers. Here, ethical decisions can only be made in acknowledgment of this goal; moral action is that which leads to its realization, while immoral action deters it.

As simple as it sounds, defining the “good life” is no easy task. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave provides a way to understand this situation. Since the prisoners in this story are completely unaware that they are imprisoned, their realities are located in the shadows on the walls of the cave. They are so blinded by their own view of the world that they reject the news from the enlightened slave who has returned to help them see and understand their condition. In fact, they are so thoroughly steadfast in their viewpoints that they would “grab hold of anyone who tried to set them free . . . and kill him” (p. 243). While this analogy has application well beyond the world of policing, the police are very likely to be unwitting slaves of a system (i.e., their profession) that prevents them from seeing clearly the good life.

One could easily infer from the ethics training at the Rockport Police Academy that the good life (i.e., the model of good policing) is most closely aligned with the traditional “law enforcement” model (Kelling & Moore, 1988). From this perspective, the police see themselves as a mostly closed society of professionally trained “warriors” whose aim is to protect the “good” citizens from the “bad”. In furthering this warrior life, moral choices are made based on power and authority. Obedience to authority is essential to obtaining the good life as defined in this way. In addition, the exemplar of the good leader from this perspective is the *benevolent dictator*, who is all-knowing because he “has been there”, and who cares so much about his “babies” that he will share his secrets as long as they continue to show deference to him. This model is extended throughout the profession with lower ranking officers encouraged to be dependent on, and obedient to, superiors.

One would assume that ethics training would be different from that presented by the Rockport Police Department *if* the good life were defined as the more democratic and participatory models of community policing (Trojanowitz & Bucqueroux, 1990; Skogan, 1990) and situational policing (Nolan et al., 2004). For example, the community policing model requires lower ranking, frontline officers to have the authority to make decisions, commit resources and work with the community to solve local public safety problems. In a similar way, the situational policing model posits that when local community problems are consistently solved by the police, the local neighbourhoods remain dependent on them and, therefore, less likely to organize to solve their own problems. In other words, the traditional model of law enforcement (i.e., the Rockport Police Department’s version of the good life) actually works against the development of neighbourhood-level collective efficacy, which has recently been identified as a significant predictor of crime and disorder (Sampson &

Raudenbush, 1999). Clearly, ethical issues in furtherance of the good life as defined by the community policing or situational policing perspectives would be different from the issues addressed by the Rockport Police Department.

Development and implementation of ethics training at the police academy by senior police officers in a department like Rockport can serve to perpetuate the *good life* as it *has been*, without taking into account more enlightened insights such as the ones described above (e.g., the value of community policing and the importance of neighbourhood-level collective efficacy). From this point of view, the police academy resembles Plato's cave and the depictions of "real" police work are like the shadows cast on the wall. All participants in this process have become unwitting slaves, unable to see the (near) total/greedy mechanisms of police socialization that are curtailing collective efficacy in a twofold process. First, police officers socialized from this extreme emphasis on obedience to authority are unlikely to comprise a group that is itself collectively efficacious. Furthermore, as agents of social control they carry this efficacy-breaking model with them out into the communities in which they are most active. This has a contagion effect and neighbourhoods are undoubtedly compromised. So, while it is possible in the city of Rockport to produce police officers who can make very superficial choices between right and wrong behaviour, the cultivation of a "truly" ethical police force is improbable within the system as it currently stands.

Notes

- [1] Harris's specific term was "depersonalization".
- [2] It is worth noting that better funded law enforcement organizations such as the State Police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) maintain training facilities that include barracks where cadets reside during their training.
- [3] Rockport is a pseudonym for an American city with a population of 500,000 people and a police force of 2,000 officers.
- [4] The class of seventy recruits was divided into four subgroups in order to facilitate small group training in specific areas such as self-defence, weapons or first aid. These types of classes were in contrast to large, largely boring, lectures presented on "General Police Orders" (GPOs).
- [5] Marx (1988: 21) notes that one of the key functions of the police uniform is "a moral separation of the police from criminals and a visual separation from the police and everyone else". Here the uniform is designed to compel the citizenry to come to the aid of an officer when needed and compel the officer to actively pursue order rather than his or her own vices. This is achieved via the public scrutiny that the uniform inherently attracts.
- [6] The Deputy Chief, when he was the Lieutenant in charge of the academy, had once dismissed a recruit from training on the day of graduation for refusing to present her identification card to the institutional guard at the entrance to Police Headquarters. She had felt that her full police uniform was all of the identification that she needed. The commander disagreed and saw this as a disobedience that disqualified her for service.
- [7] This fits neatly with Goffman's description of the avuncular role that the staff takes in relation to inmates.
- [8] The Deputy Chief insists that he "never flipped over any table". He claims that part of the story is a total embellishment and it does seem a bit far-fetched. Still, whether it actually

happened or not, it was real in the minds of the recruits and added to their understanding of the Deputy Chief as well as police culture in general.

- [9] A recruit who had worked for the Rockport Metropolitan Housing Authority Police explained that when he and many of his fellow officers were all laid off at the same time this same ploy was used on them prior to being informed of their dismissal.
- [10] For this reason, all of the specifics have been excluded, despite the fact that the officers involved acted with great honour. The story's inclusion would only serve as an example of a high moment in police conduct and an illustration of the extreme difficulties entailed in police careers.

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