From Vice Cop to Sociology Prof.: A Long Journey to a Familiar Place

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I was home visiting family and friends during summer break and I was somewhat oblivious to the stares from my siblings because of—as I later found out—my rather shabby appearance. My hair had grown longer and I had not shaved for a few days, which was truly out of character for me. You see, I had spent the majority of my "professional" life well-groomed and either wearing a uniform or a suit. I had served four years in the U.S. Navy and then nearly twenty years in law enforcement, the past five years with the FBI.

It was my mom who first said out loud what I later learned everyone else was thinking. "You look like you are back in the vice squad," she said, referring to the period of about five years in the 1980s when I was working in an undercover special investigations unit. Another family member echoed the same observation when he entered the house about an hour later. As my first year as a sociology professor was winding down, I, too, had begun to notice strong similarities in the way I was feeling (and looking) reminiscent of my days in the vice squad. For more than a decade, I had worked hard and made many sacrifices to prepare for this "second" career. I thought of my transition as a journey. I was on the road to a new and different place which seemed to be millions of miles away. Yet, now, instead of feeling that I had *arrived* at a new place, I felt more like I had *returned* a familiar one.

The Vice Squad

For six years, beginning in late 1983 when the "war on drugs" was approaching its peak, I was a vice cop in an mid-sized east coast city. The unit to which I was assigned was officially called "Drugs, Organized Crime, and Vice," but was known throughout the department simply as the vice squad. Like most people in law enforcement at that time, I wholeheartedly believed that we were engaged in a war of good against evil. The drug dealers, prostitutes, and

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pimps were the enemy of the people, and we—the police—were out to apprehend them. The vice squad, as I saw it, was the front line in this war.

My investigations took me deep into the world of drug dealers, small-time organized crime networks, gamblers, and prostitutes. Using a variety of methods, we conducted "research" on deviant individuals and groups with the aim of arresting them and putting them in jail. The vice squad was very busy in those years. The unit conducted approximately 350 investigations annually, most of which resulted in the arrest of multiple individuals involved in crimes of a conspiratorial nature.

Undercover drug investigations were in vogue at that time. "Miami Vice" was the hot show on television and everyone from politicians and pundits to local bakers and barbers were talking about the War on Drugs. The resources that were available to us—and to most law enforcement agencies at that time— were incredible. We drove expensive undercover cars, most of which had been seized from drug dealers or couriers. We had unlimited funds to pay officers to work overtime and to pay informants handsomely for their work. We also had plenty of money (mostly from federal enforcement agencies like the DEA, ATF, and FBI) to make expensive undercover drug buys from the bigger dealers and to purchase expensive electronic surveillance equipment. During this time, I passionately pursued my work. I loved the challenges presented by the nature of the investigations, and I loved delving into new and different criminal networks.

The investigations were sometimes long and tedious, but they were always extremely interesting. I learned a lot about the people and the subcultures that were considered deviant by "the mainstream." I learned how clandestine networks formed and sustained themselves, how the participants communicated and operated to avoid detection, how they recruited and paid employees, and much more. For example, one summer a young waitress was found dead at the trendy West Side nightclub where she worked. When an autopsy revealed she had died from a cocaine overdose, the vice squad initiated an investigation to try to determine where she had obtained the drug. Employing court-authorized telephone wiretaps, we uncovered a multinational cocaine conspiracy and were able to trace the flow of cocaine from its source in Columbia to this specific restaurant in the United States, and then to individual drug users, including the deceased waitress. The U.S. connection was an Israeli national who was living legally in the United States. One of the drug "users" was a high-ranking military officer who lost his commission (and pension) as a result of his eventual arrest. This smuggling and distribution arrangement had gone on for years and involved a complex web of people who had established their own routines, norms, code of ethics, and patterns of communications that facilitated the transportation and distribution of cocaine. The investigation resulted in the arrest of more than thirty people in the United States, many of whom were professionals such as teachers, bankers, and business owners who were simply using cocaine themselves or were supplying it to a close network of friends and associates.

Likewise, in another investigation using telephone wiretaps, we uncovered a drug smuggling operation at a maximum security state prison. The investigation began when allegations were made that prisoners had been recruiting and "hiring" prison guards as drug couriers. The illicit organization that developed to carry out this operation was very sophisticated. The inmates developed

creative ways to earn money—mostly from telephone confidence schemes and the sale of the drugs—communicate with each other, enforce rules and norms, recruit and pay prison guards, and more. This investigation also ended in the arrest and conviction of numerous individuals, some who were inmates already serving life sentences, while others were prison guards who had no prior record of criminal behavior.

The nature of the work was such that we got to know many intimate details about the individuals and groups we investigated. By listening in on private telephone calls—sometimes for months at a time—and infiltrating these networks in an undercover capacity, we came to know the fine details of the entire criminal conspiracy. We also got to know the conspirators on a personal level, including the identities of their friends and family members, their sense of humor, aspirations, motivations, and more. Over a period of time, I came to see the participants in these conspiracies as quite normal and, in many cases, quite likeable. I knew more about them than simply the nature of their crimes or the complexity of their conspiracies. I knew them as *human beings*. When one drug dealer learned that I was an undercover cop after months of daily contact, he looked me in the eyes and said, "Man, I would have fought like a brother for you." This was very unsettling because I knew that he was sincere. I could trust him, but I could not, in turn, be trustworthy. Goffman (1959) claimed that we all share a moral responsibility to be who we say we are and to treat others in a way that is consistent with who they claim to be. I had long justified the violation of this moral responsibility as a necessary evil in the "war against drugs," and it was an accepted (and valued) part of daily life in the vice squad. "Getting over" on the "bad guys" was how it was viewed and discussed. Those who were good at this deception where recognized as "good cops" by their peers.

I truly loved the excitement and the challenge of the special investigations, but the lying, deception, and the end result—the arrest and prosecution—left me unsettled. I simply could not see any positive outcomes in the drug war. Individuals, families, and communities were being ruined not so much by the drugs, but as a result of the actions of the criminal justice system. My fellow officers and I had had to compromise many long-held moral and ethical principles to become successful in fighting this drug war. The belief was pervasive that the end justified the means. It was, therefore, somewhat ironic to think of the cops as the "good guys." Many good people were sent to jail for long periods of time for violating drug laws. I saw both the police and the citizens as losers in this war on drugs. Gary Marx (1981, 1988) describes this phenomenon as one of the great ironies of social control: In their efforts to control deviant behavior, the police can (and do) actually make things worse at times. It was the dissonance between my love for the investigation, my dislike of the inevitable result (the arrest and prosecution), and the sometimes unethical means of achieving that result that caused me to transfer out of the unit.

Graduate School

In 1989, I decided to go to graduate school. I had been reading the literature in criminology and criminal justice about the changes in policing philosophies

and wanted to know more. The new model, "community policing," seemed like a more productive and humane way to approach crime control. But, at the time, it was still a relatively new idea that was scoffed at by most senior police officers. There were many local colleges and universities in the geographic area where I lived that offered graduate programs in criminology and criminal justice, which is what I studied as an undergraduate. But I was looking for something different. I wanted to know more about the processes of organizational and societal change. I had the good fortune to find such a program at Temple University. The program, Psychoeducational Processes, provided an integrated curriculum drawing from the core disciplines of sociology, psychology, and education. The courses focused on the social and psychological processes that affect human cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors. I was also introduced, at the time, to the idea that groups, organizations, and societies could be studied as whole, integrated systems. During this time, I was reading Cooley and Mead in sociology; Lewin in psychology; and Dewey and Freire in education. As I saw it, all of them focused, in their own way, on the unseen, imperceptible social forces that influenced the subjective reality of people and held them tightly in place. I recognized that by identifying and challenging these social forces, and by collectively attempting to understand reality as objectively as possible, significant changes could occur. I came to understand society more in terms of its processes than simply its structure. I gained an appreciation for the power of language and dialogue both to define and confine a person to a particular subjective reality. I could also see in them the power to educate and liberate.

Community Policing

These insights had a tremendous impact on me both professionally and personally. By the early 1990s, I had been promoted to lieutenant and was now supervising a community policing unit. The strategies we employed included what had become mainstream in community policing circles, e.g., neighborhood problem solving, walking and bike patrols, anti-drug marches and vigils, mini-police stations in the communities, and a "mobile" mini-station (a Winabago) that traveled from one high-crime area to the next. These strategies, although somewhat effective were clearly not enough. I had come to believe that what was preventing neighborhoods from becoming safer and stronger was the shared *false* assumption that the police alone could keep a neighborhood safe. This assumption was one of those invisible forces that exerted itself onto the collective psyche of communities. Where the community wanted desperately to be protected by the police from crime and criminals, the police unwittingly responded in a way that led the community to believe it could be done. The police and the government were viewed as the "experts" and would pass on their knowledge and professional service in a way that maintained their superior position and kept the citizens dependent on them and, therefore, in their place. I interpreted this situation as exemplifying what Freire viewed as the "banking style" of government intervention. He wrote:

We simply cannot go to the laborers—urban or peasant—in the banking style and give them "knowledge" or to impose upon them the model of the "good man" contained in a program

whose content we have ourselves organized. Many political...plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as objects of their actions) the [people] to whom their program was ostensibly directed. ...leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them the message of "salvation," but in order to come to know through dialogue with them both their *objective situation* and their *awareness* of that situation... (Freire 1993, 75-76).

Freire believed that government action should be a form of education that should liberate people from their oppression. The education should not be delivered in the "banking" style, i.e., as if the government were depositing some special knowledge into the heads of the poor, helpless people. Instead, he promoted the establishment of a dialogue *with the people* with the aim of helping them come to understand the true "objective" nature of their situation. Freire saw this as a necessary step if they (the community) were to mobilize and transform their situation. I was influenced by Freire and believed strongly that the most productive action the police could take would be to spend time in neighborhoods engaging in an honest dialogue with community members about the true nature of the situation. This dialogue must contain the truthful message that the police are not able to "enforce" the problem away. Unfortunately, as I saw it being practiced around the country, community policing was simply a more humane way of practicing the same old mode of policing. It was clearly not the paradigm shift that was being described in the literature, nor was it a move toward a more peaceful approach to crime as envisioned by Quinney (1991) and others.

During this time I tried to incorporate neighborhood-based dialogue and system-wide planning and action into the mix. I believed that through these methods whole communities might begin to shift away from a collective psychological dependence on the police to keep them safe, and toward a more mature state of interdependence in which the community members and other stakeholders work with each other to prevent, detect, and appropriately deal with crime and disorder. The overwhelming and seemingly hopeless situations that existed in some of the more run-down, crime-ridden neighborhoods prevented their members from seeing (and believing) that they had the power to change the conditions in which they lived. Margaret Rioch (1975) described this group-level phenomenon metaphorically.

It is as if the members have been staring out of a small barred window, straining every nerve and muscle to stretch and see out as far as possible, trying to see the light according to the outside authority, shaking violently at the bars which may bend but do not break. Behind them at the other end of the room is an open door. They have only to turn around to walk out of their prison. But before they can let go their cramped hold on the bars and be willing to turn away from the precious bit of light which they perceive through the small window, they have to comprehend clearly that they really are—and have been from the beginning—free. They have to comprehend that the power and authority which they had ascribed to the staff (or government/police) belong not to anyone outside themselves but to them... (175)

I had come to believe that it really did not matter which techniques the police used in the battle against drugs and crime, whether it was the traditional law enforcement model or the community policing approach or some combination of the two. Ultimately, it was up to the community to "let go of the bars"

and turn around and see that they really are free to effect the sort of lasting change that will only come if they do it themselves—with the assistance of the police and other public and private resources. Community policing, as I saw it being practiced, was merely a version of Rioch's "light through the window" that kept the community dependent, fixated, and, therefore, imprisoned.

On a personal level, my graduate school experience was an awakening for me. The course work had helped shape my thinking about community safety in general and about the future of policing in particular. By the time I completed my Ph.D. in 1997, I believed that I would not have the freedom to pursue these ideas inside of law enforcement and, therefore, planned to move to an academic setting. But this idea would be put on hold for a while as I had accepted a position in the FBI and had just moved my family to West Virginia. After four years with the agency, I decided to get back on the academic track and applied for a faculty position at several universities. I eventually accepted a tenure-track position at West Virginia University as a criminologist in a department of sociology and anthropology.

Today, I consider myself a criminologist with a predominantly sociological perspective. Years ago, I believed that putting "bad" people away in jail would be a viable solution to social problems. Primarily from writings of John Dewey and C. Wright Mills, I have learned to think about social problems in a different way. Dewey compares "thinking" about social problems to a traveler who comes to a fork in the road. This situation both creates a state of perplexity and demands a solution. In response to this situation, the traveler metaphorically climbs a tree to get a better view of the situation and to gather additional facts in order to choose the right path. At this theoretical crossroad, I imagine that C. Wright Mills would climb the *sociological* tree for it gives the most accurate and expansive view. And I tend to agree. I feel at home in a sociology department as the discipline provides a grounding for my teaching and research. And, as leading sociologists like Robert Sampson at the University of Chicago suggest that "social processes should be at the heart of sociological inquiry" (Sampson 2001, 714), my own perspective and future research become more relevant.

So, on reflection, how was I feeling at the end of my first full year as a sociology professor? In many ways I feel now as I did in my first few years in the vice squad. I am excited by all the opportunities to learn about social problems and social networks in hopes of making positive changes. In the vice squad there were so many potential cases to pick from. Likewise, as an assistant professor of sociology I have an unending supply of "targets" for research. The selection of research topics is very much like the selection of investigative targets; they are dependent on the same sorts of variables, i.e., the availability of reliable informants, resources, time, and the expected probability of some success. Teaching undergraduates has also been a wonderful experience. My perspective of, and commitment to, education as a liberating method toward peaceful social change comes from both my academic training at Temple and from my experiences as a police officer working with communities. My approach to classroom teaching is securely grounded in this perspective, and I continue to see the value of this approach in the progress and enthusiasm of my students—which is personally very rewarding.

I had always envisioned the transition from the police department to academia as a long, tedious, evolutionary process. I began this process believing that I would do something completely different in my new career. However, I am continually surprised to find so many similarities between these two seemingly dissimilar professions. What I have come to realize is that being a cop and being a sociologist are very much alike. Today, sociology simply offers me a better way of achieving the same goal. As I mentioned at the outset of this article, I feel like I have traveled a great distance only to arrive at a very familiar place.

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