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Police culture, discourse, and the construction of Canadian police officers' identity

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ABSTRACT

Canadian police officers work within a deeply rooted and unique police culture that remains anchored to traditional occupational norms and values often resistant to change. Yet, policing is under pressure from elected officials and the public to meet changing social realities and public expectations. Inevitably, officers experience an identity crisis when they feel the strong and persistent pull of their tradition-bound culture while their services attempt to be more inclusive and progressive. Utilizing critical discourse analysis (CDA) and specifically Fairclough's dialectical-relations approach, this study explores how identity is constructed and reinforced through discourse within and by police culture to create the idea of what it means to be a cop. Using data from an analysis of semi-structured interviews with 30 currently serving police officers in four Canadian police services, it considers how the language of policing (verbal, written, visual) is used to construct police identity. The data show that through the use of police-specific discourse prior to, during, and after recruitment, police culture retains an all-powerful hold on officers' identity construction before and during recruitment and throughout their careers. It also represents a barrier to more equitable and inclusive police organizations. Finally, this study explores areas such as training, recruitment, and warrior/guardian debate where change should be considered.

Key Words Policing; police culture; identity; discourse; power; warriors/guardians.

INTRODUCTION

Canadian police officers have extraordinary powers to maintain public order and enforce laws and their professional lives are influenced by the nature of police work. Moreover, officers are indoctrinated by and into the policing culture even before they are hired. Thus, the work and culture of policing act to construct officers' identities at work and as individuals. This is done through an emphasis on a strict police organizational hierarchy, paramilitary teaching structures, physical training, in-service training, specialized training (Chappel & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Karp & Stenmark, 2011; Kutnjak-Ivković & Kang, 2012; White, 2006), and the constant enforcement of occupational norms (Conti, 2010; Demirkol, 2020).

This study critically analyzes police discursive practices and their impact on police officers' self-identity, specifically the following:

- How and why are discourses constructed and reinforced within police culture to create the idea of what it means to be a police officer?
- What are the opportunities to change the normative discourses of the police culture so that the profession becomes more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and safe for its members?

Policing Today

Police leaders face unique significant challenges when it comes to meeting public expectations today. Specifically, they are expected to effectively deliver law enforcement services in a world where criminal activities are ever changing and complex while also attempting to justify the significant public investments required to run highly complex and labour-intensive police organizations (Sanders et al., 2015; Sanders & Langan, 2019; Stenning, 2021).

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Moreover, police officers are on the frontlines when it comes to dealing not just with traditional crime issues, but also the impact on public safety of social issues such as mental health and addictions, homelessness, public demonstrations, calls for reform, and even abolishing of police organizations while also responding to calls to "get tough with crime" by some political leaders (Diphoorn et al., 2021; Jacobs et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2021; White et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2021).

The Scope of the Issue

There is no one universally accepted concept of "self" when it comes to identity (Leary & Tangney, 2012). De Fina (2006) describes identity as being about what kind of person someone is, including which geographic, ethnic, and social communities they "belong to," where a person stands in relation to deeply personal ethical and moral questions, and where their loyalties lie (p. 263). For police officers, their professional identity often becomes inseparable from their personal identity (Ahern, 1972).

The construction and promotion of an officer's identity is done through both formal, vertical learning (e.g., new recruit training and on-going training for officers) and informal, horizontal learning within the police workplace culture (e.g., peer-to-peer and supervisor-to-subordinate interactions and discourses) (Charman, 2017).

Police officers' skills gained in higher education may be lost as they are "enculturated" into a deeply rooted, paramilitary organizational culture (Vickers, 2000, p. 508). This enculturation draws on cultural beliefs, rules, and values that have long been characterized as hypermasculine and reinforced by, "complex ensembles of values, attitudes, symbols, rites, recipes, and practices" that are unique to the law enforcement profession to form a specific police identity and inform officers' occupational performances (Reiner, 2010, p. 116).

Police officers informally develop their sense of what it means to be a cop through (1) "socialization," where officers are initiated into a police "brotherhood" as part of their training, socialize with one another, and tend to exclude non-police from their interaction, and (2) "solidarity," where officers develop a sense of "brotherhood," the "blue line," and "[having] one another's back" (Skolnick, 1994, pp. 48, 52), interpret conduct, retain loyalties, express opinions, and use authority largely from police organizational structures (Skolnick, 2008).

Adherence to cultural norms can perpetuate negative practices by police officers, including the misuse of authority, sexual harassment, discrimination against other police members, or excessive use of force (Brough et al., 2016). It can also encourage police officers to place loyalty before integrity, often condoning corruption and tolerating unethical behaviour (Chan, 2007). On the other hand, police culture can be seen as a coping mechanism for occupational stress and promoting mutual protection and safety for police members (Biggs et al., 2014; Chan, 2007; Couto, 2014).

Police Culture

Police services in Western societies are structured based on hierarchy and rank and are expected to deliver crime control, public order maintenance, and assistance to the public. Power relationships within the police organization and in relation to policing as an instrument of state power play an important role in the daily working lives of police officers and influence their experiences as police professionals (Hassell et al., 2011; Nelson, 1996; Watson, 2008). Police organizations, structures, policies, training, etc., communicate (through workplace language used in police work, policies, procedures, etc.) the policing values and norms officers are expected to reflect in their work. In fact, these police norms begin to be indoctrinated prior to the hiring of police officers through recruitment practices and socialization of potential recruits through higher education programs. For example, Cox and Kirby (2018) found that English Police Foundation degree students quickly assimilated a police identity, which affected their attitudes and behaviour and led to a strengthening of ties within their own student group, at the expense of wider student socialization.

These norms and values regulate the conduct and identity of police officers, which have traditionally reflected the heterosexual and hypermasculine character of policing in the Western world (Archbold et al., 2010; Loftus, 2008; Somvadee & Morash, 2008). The power role of police officers as law enforcers and police culture inevitably raise questions about the role of policing in society and the nature of contemporary policing (Adegbile, 2017; Vital, 2018).

Police culture continues to play a role in resisting meaningful and substantial change within the profession, particularly in an age where highly publicized incidents of police brutality and discrimination in Canada and elsewhere raise public and political concerns about police conduct and accountability (Diphoorn et al., 2021; Roach, 2022; Sklansky, 2022). These incidents bring into question the public's trust in police organizations and the legitimacy of policing as a public institution.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized Fairclough's (2005) dialectical-relations approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) to consider the role of discourse, knowledge, and power in constructing the social world, social identities, and influences within policing (Jabłońska, 2012; Nonhoff, 2017). For further details on the methodologies, see Supplementary Material.

RESULTS

The research asked participants for their insights in two distinct areas:

1. Identity-building before starting a policing career and
2. Thinking about being a police officer.

Part I: Identity-Building Before Starting a Policing Career

Participants were asked questions aimed at determining their preexisting sense of identity prior to entering policing. An analysis of responses revealed three distinct concepts:

1. Policing as a calling/public service: officers see their role as "positive," "altruistic," and often "idealized" (*contemporary view of police officer as a guardian/positive preconception of police officers*).
2. Policing as "the job": officers see their role as "the job" (*neutral view of police officer*).

3. Policing as traditional policing: officers see their role as "enforcement" (*us vs. them; view of police officer as a law enforcer/warrior*).

Participants who recalled their perception of policing and police officers before they entered the profession in a positive or altruistic light used such terms as "guardians," "protector," "servant," "altruism," "ethical," and "professional" to describe officers. For them, officers were powerful yet benevolent figures who worked to keep people safe: "My perception of police was that we could fix problems; you could call us and we're gonna come and everything's going to be great" (Participant 2).

The data showed that those who had a positive view of policing and police officers did not see it as a "soft-on-crime" approach to policing. Rather, they suggested that officers who engage in approaches based on community engagement were "ethical" and "professional" in their work (in contrast to traditional "get-tough-on-crime" approaches). Such participants did not indicate that they supported fundamentally challenging the power dynamics of police work or structures, but rather approaches to it (e.g., collaboration with the community). This suggests that there remains a continued strong hold of traditional, institutional police structures and culture on officers and their work.

Policing as the "Job"/Traditional Policing

Participants who saw police officers in a less altruistic manner generally used terms such as "law enforcer" or policing as simply "the job." These participants stressed the importance of "law enforcement" and "crime fighting":

> Before I became a police officer, I thought it was a lot more like law enforcement and a lot more kind of like investigating things, arresting 'bad guys', you know, like to put it in a cartoonish way. You know, traffic tickets, things like that, just kind of maintaining the status quo, making sure everyone's generally abiding by the law. (Participant 8)

Some participants indicated a neutral view of policing as "the job," one that paid well, offered variety of work, good benefits, etc. Those who held this view indicated a preference for traditional law enforcement approaches to policing rather than more collaborative, community-focused approaches. This may perpetuate acceptance of the hierarchal power structures in policing and encourage resistance to change.

Influence of Family/Friends/Officers

Many participants indicated that they came into the profession having been strongly influenced by close, personal contacts (family and/or friends). The manner in which individuals are socialized to think about policing by family/friends or external influencers can make a significant difference in terms of how future officers build their professional identities and attitudes, their sense of their professional identity, as well as how they use their power to impact individuals they deal with:

> I grew up in a police family, my dad was a police officer. And I was a daddy's girl. So, it made a lot of sense to (go into policing). I'd never wanted to do anything else or be anything else… since I was about four or five years old, I've always wanted to follow in my father's footsteps. And so, I've always known what I was going to do. (Participant 12)

Similarly, friends or police officers who either wanted them to enter the profession or were themselves officers influenced participants' views. Participants thus indicated that personal relationships prior to recruitment socialized them into seeing themselves in the role of a police officer. They often reinforced a latent desire to "become a cop" from childhood or early adulthood and that the choice to become a police officer was primarily a personal one for achieving personal goals (joining the family business, achieving monetary goals, wanting to realize childhood goals, etc.).

Part II: Thinking About Being a Police Officer

Participants were asked about training and its relationship to police identity, and their responses align broadly with three main themes:

1. Learning about "the job"
2. Positive and/or negative aspects of the training
3. The pride and professionalism conveyed about being a police officer as well as the socialization that occurs into the police culture during training.

The Job

Participants all described having to learn about the "realities" of police work, commonly referred to as "the job." During this early phase of an officer's career, the emphasis is on distancing the recruit from their previous life and into the policing "family." Themes such as the dangers of police work and "surviving the job" emerged as common ones:

> The biggest one I remember from the academy was one of my instructors like day two or three, said, "So, it's always like you go there, the report sometimes it comes in really big, like, 'Oh my God! Shots fired!'", blood everywhere, and you show up. And none of that is true. Or, on the flip side, where it's a very minor call, and you go inside, you're like, "Holy smokes! This is a crime scene". So, that always stood out for me. (Participant 22)

This indicates that for police officers, "the job" becomes a critical part of their sense of self. Not only are they socialized into seeing themselves as part of a policing "family" that excludes anyone who is not a sworn police officer, but the job itself becomes a challenge by its dangerous nature, where they must prove their mettle by "surviving" the very thing that gives their professional selves meaning and purpose. In such a scenario, being a cop becomes all-consuming in terms of identity and purpose.

The Training

Police training emphasizes strict discipline, following orders, and a stress-based style of instruction (Police Executive Research Forum, 2022). Power relations in policing and other paramilitary organizations are hierarchical, with an emphasis on not questioning instructors or coach officers and superiors in the field. This led some participants (as recruits) to complain about "information overload" designed to keep them

stressed as a means of discipline and instructors treating recruits as "children."

Participants indicated that recruit training continues to reinforce traditional, hierarchical organizational norms: adherence to discipline, following rules, and submission to authority, no matter how altruistic the training's intentions are in promoting things like diversity and inclusion. In-service training continued to adhere to traditional concepts of hierarchy and submission to authority.

Moreover, police training remains embedded in power relationships that demand following the rules laid out for officers from the start of their career through subsequent training and promotional opportunities, leaving little room for questioning of how "the job" is carried out.

Professionalism/socialization

During the early training phase of their policing careers, participants reported having a strong sense of the pride in the uniform and the profession purposefully instilled into their consciousness by supervisors, mentors, and peers. This indicates that police organizations employ an intentional process of socialization to which officers are subjected to when they join (Chan, 2007; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Fry & Berkes, 1983; Hoel & Dillern, 2022):

> … you do meet like-minded people that are good people and you become friends with even in that short period of time. And you have that commonality. And because the emphasis is on the fact that you are in a very small group of people that are sometimes targeted by other groups of people. (Participant 10)

This socialization instills a set of values that is strongly centred around the dangers of the "job" and the need to have each other's backs. The strong paramilitary discipline engrained in policing is designed to promote a distinct professional culture, where rules are followed, superiors are unquestioned, and there is unwavering loyalty to other officers. It also reinforces the sense of a "brotherhood" and suspicion of anyone outside the profession. The uniform and the fraternity of policing provide members with a sense of power. This power is crucial to the "survival" of officers who must deal with the stresses of the job (both in doing dangerous police work and the stresses the job places on their personal relationships).

Participants also indicated that the passing down of policing values relied on instructors/mentors being utilized in the transfer of knowledge. In particular, participants cited the significant impact of strong mentors (instructors, coach officers) and their stories about "the job" and/or scenario-based training in conveying traditional and conservative law enforcement values and ethics.

This knowledge transfer was important to participants in enculturating them into the "job" and being a "professional." Importantly, no participants questioned the actual training (including training materials/programs) and the values upon which that training is based – its emphasis on doing the "job," the lack of questioning of coach officers and other officers who hand down the knowledge, the adherence to rules and hierarchy at the core of policing power structures, etc. In fact, participants regardless of rank or experience generally that they saw merit in training and education for the modern police professional. This echoes studies that have found a connection between post-secondary education and an officer's ability to enhance their interpersonal, critical decision-making, and other important skills (Blair, 2024, Strudwick, 2021).

Participants clearly valued training which emphasized traditional crime-fighting skills. However, today's police officers are increasingly modern learners used to being participants in their learning. Experienced officers and police recruits will question training methods that are seen as lacking creativity or not utilizing modern training methods as seen, for example, in post-secondary training environments (Police Executive Research Forum, 2022). Traditional training methods that emphasize top-down knowledge transfer and focus on crime control and "by-the-book" policing are increasingly seen as causing frustration for new recruits and officers who are used to debating social issues and engaging in social media, which encourages the sharing of personal opinions unfiltered by authorities or organization.

This study also found a growing openness to training that goes beyond the "specialty training" (with its emphasis on traditional crime fighting), which nonetheless remains the main path to career advancement and power within hierarchical police organizations. Instead, participants were receptive to training on such as contemporary legal and social issues such as Charter rights, diversity, mental health, leadership/management, human trafficking, etc.

Similarly, the growing debate about whether officers today should be guardians or warriors is causing a divide among police officers themselves. While many participants generally supported traditional policing structures, hierarchy, and crime-fighting mission, they were equally passionate about both traditional policing and community policing/service alternatives.

Some officers were adamant that no amount of training or policy changes would change their fundamental crime-fighting outlook, stating that, "…those courses are supposed to change my sense of identity as a police officer, and they're not doing…you don't get those social elements from these online courses that they're jamming down our throats" (Participant 26). Others hailed such things as "fair and impartial policing training" as critical to community service:

> People aren't going to just respond because we show up in uniform; people aren't going to do what we say just because we're in this shirt. We have to treat people with a degree of expected dignity and respect in order to get them to interact with us. (Participant 15)

Such diametrically opposed views indicate the police culture is not a monolithic, static, and negative entity that contemporary research continues to assume, but rather distinct police "cultures." Yet, this study showed that officers maintain a strong adherence to the traditional norms and values of the profession. This presents challenges for police services attempting to move away from the traditional, hypermasculine roots of law enforcement (Reiner, 2010) toward a greater emphasis on diversity in the ranks (demographic personal backgrounds, etc.). Inevitably, police officers must navigate their place in a culture that remains unreflective of the social diversity in Canada (Couto, 2014, 2018; Loftus, 2010; Panter, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Change within policing requires both formal structural changes involving recruitment, training, policies, procedures, promotional and discipline processes, and accountability as well as changes to public policies that govern policing. It will inevitably require a reassessment in services' recruitment practices, identity-building through training, education, policies, workplace supports, etc. and raises the question of how officers' self-identification should be constructed prior to, during, and after they are recruited in order to better reflect whichever mindset is desired for law enforcement personnel.

First, policing training curricula and methods need to evolve to meet contemporary policing challenges (particularly around equity and diversity issues, police legitimacy, trust, and confidence issue, and officer wellness). The public generally expect police officers to increase their education in order to effectively serve their communities (Antrobus et al., 2018). The various kinds of training available to police officers – mandatory skills training (e.g., use of force), police speciality training (e.g., homicide investigations, traffic enforcement, public order, etc.), and training on issues beyond traditional law enforcement (e.g., diversity training, community collaboration, mental health and wellness, etc.) – set the groundwork for identity-building. While participants in this study generally indicated that police training continues to reinforce traditional power relations in policing that emphasize the supremacy in the role of instructors, coach officers, and supervisors in the field, there was a felt need to balance traditional mandatory and specialty training with training on contemporary, community-based issues.

Secondly, officers need to be empowered to do community-building work and be rewarded for that work. The continued adherence to traditional approaches to career advancement through specialty training and unquestioning submission to superior officers needs to be augmented with problem-solving strategies such as positive deviance (focusing on the positive influencers in policing who succeed in non-traditional ways) and appreciative inquiry (where the emphasis is on opportunities, strengths, positive achievements, etc. as solutions to problems) (Barath, 2022).

Thirdly, it needs to be recognized that recruitment acts as a prime opportunity in the construction of police officers' identity. The recruitment process is usually the start of the process of officer socialization. Recruitment challenges are particularly acute when it comes to efforts to diversifying police organizations that have not reflected their communities in terms of having officers from non-White racial groups, individuals who identify as females, members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, etc. (Perrott, 2021; Rigaux, 2018; Rigaux & Barton-Cunningham, 2021). This is a prime area of focus for constructing the identity of future officers.

Finally, what a police officer today is expected to be in terms of their professional and personal identities needs to be clearly articulated. The narrative of what a police officer is expected to be, one that permeates every level of their organizations, is vital. This will require honestly confronting concepts like group solidarity, which positions officers to see themselves as a closed group rather than citizens empowered by their fellow citizens to protect the interests of the community's general welfare.

Opportunities for Further Research and Discussion

Ideally, research involving identification building and cultural attitudes would involve longitudinal research, which would follow a group of participants to assess changing attitudes, values, beliefs, etc., and evaluate influences on the individuals. Because of the constraints of this research project, the research should be considered as a snapshot in time of the research participants. However, this study does provide possible opportunities to discuss the state of police culture in Canada today, both in terms of its impact on police officers' personal and professional identity development and on the structure of police organizations, instruction and training of law enforcement professionals, the development of police policies and procedures, and the possible collaboration among police stakeholders for positive change.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplemental material linked to the online version of the paper at https://www.journalcswb.ca/index.php/cswb/article/view/412/supp_material.

- Detailed Methodology and Methods.

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