



Choosing courage: Builders or abandoners?

Michael J. DeValve*, Rachel J. DiMonda*

ABSTRACT

This is a particularly difficult moment for the belief in a justice founded on love, but perhaps instead of despair, this is a moment to recognize what is possible. Policing done properly is a gift of love, but how to achieve such a thing seems wholly beyond reach. Egon Bittner and Martin Buber offer insights that may help us realize a justice founded on love and, in particular, a policing worthy of serving our children.

Key Words Policing; love; Buber; Bittner.

INTRODUCTION

Things are rough right now if you carry anything like hope for an enlightened policing. We simply must do better, but neither abolition nor reform can succeed on their own without a *loving idea* as a guide. Reform wanders wildly, chasing the next sexy statistical model or best practice. Abolition does nothing more than invite all new catastrophes. From either perspective, we only end up reconstituting renewed versions of our old institutions, complete with similar failures, along with a whole raft of new ones. Our institutions, because they reflect us – who we are and what we value – also have the potential to amplify the noblest in us. We *need* them. We need them to be better, but we need them. *There will come a time* when we no longer need them. Until we no longer need them, though, we need them to be worthy of our children.

Bittner reminded us that, unlike for physicians whose adversary demands of them no compunction regarding its eradication, regardless of the circumstance, police officers will find themselves “opposed to some articulated or articulable human interest” (Bittner, 1970: 8). This inherent oppositionality is the crucible of conflict between police and community. At the very same time, though, *it is one of the rare brands of moments in which true beauty is possible*. At the very epicentre of the collision between police and community lies the promise of true ultimacy (Tillich, 1967).

Policing done properly is a gift of love (DeValve, 2015), and we understand this to be axiomatic, *especially* in this moment. Instances of loving policing are not unheard of, of course, but it is our argument that such instances are neither aberrations nor performative kindness. *We argue that they point directly to the truest, most fundamental nature of policing itself*. They are instances of *success*; they are the

moments that matter. For those viewing the world through an evidence-based empirical framework, *these* moments are the things you should count most of all in data-driven efforts. *These moments* are what *truly matter*. I am thinking of moments like officer Lawrence DiPrimo’s gift of shoes to a seemingly unhomed human on a cold November night. Well-lit *stacks* of brand-new shoes in boxes sat behind even more well-lit samples of featured footwear; the shoes were behind a paywall, though, and officer DiPrimo did the only *sane* thing – the thing *nobody else at the time had the courage to do*. We think he used his credit card.

“Sure,” comes the retort, “moments like that are to be encouraged, but the *real* purpose of policing is law enforcement and order maintenance, not community relations.” No, your indirect invocation of Bittner’s (see, e.g., Brodeur, 2007) insight about the tension between the police role (i.e., the distribution of non-negotiable force according to exigent circumstances) and the police mandate (i.e., do something now about something not okay that is happening now) (Bittner, 1970) is not without merit. Notwithstanding its genetic disposition toward oppression and its history of brutality, policing is vested with a charge to confront dangerousness in the human sphere, and that charge comes with the necessity of the possibility of coercive custody. Here, though, there be dragons. The core question in *The Rebel* is whether innocence, once it chooses the name of action, can ever refrain from murder (Camus, 1956/1991): Can a well-meaning community choose to act against the threat or actuality of harm without relying upon harm as a tool? That the police as an institution claims a corner on the legitimate-force market does not justify understanding that institution in terms of its monopoly alone. Bittner’s dyad did precisely this: It insisted on viewing the police through its force monopoly first and defining

Correspondence to: Michael J. DeValve, 311-C Maxwell Library, Bridgewater State University, 10 Shaw Road, Bridgewater, MA, USA. Telephone: 508-531-2667. E-mail: mdevalve@bridgew.edu

To cite: DeValve, M. J. & DiMonda, R. J. (2026). Choosing courage: Builders or abandoners?. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 11(1), 34–37. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.516>

© Author(s) 2026. Open Access. This work is distributed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license. For commercial re-use, please contact sales@sgpublishing.ca.

SG PUBLISHING Published by SG Publishing Inc. **CSKA** Official publication of the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.

“peacekeeping” as the remainder (even though for him that remainder was more interesting). The role-versus-mandate tension (e.g., Bittner, 1967) drove a brand of organizational tension closely resembling institutional theory (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Much is revealed in this dyad about how we misperceive and misuse the institution, about how it lives in schism, divided against itself relative to a near impossible job, but these things – all of them – really are symptoms and not illness.

Bittner and others take as axiomatic the notion that the police, to operate effectively, need more than merely the consent of the community. When the community perceives the police as honest and community members trust the police to do their jobs well, there is often a *genuine* outcome for officers, institutions, and the communities they serve. What is meant by “well,” though, poses more than petty semantic confusion. The notion is interesting: Few professions require as much proof of integrity as police officers do. Bittner observes that physicians elicit a “trepidated fascination” (Bittner, 1970: 8) in much the same way police officers do, and for related reasons. It is not often you hear, though, of physicians needing to explain why they must maintain patient confidentiality or that patient well-being is the proper focus for their energies, much less to defend being direct with treating, say, an ingrown toenail. Again, no knees are bent in prayer for the well-being of *Clostridioides difficile*. Where the physician is definitionally compassionate and fixed on our well-being, Bittner argues, because of the presence of that articulable counterpoint of human interest, police officers generally do not enjoy a clean run at such a thing as well-being. It turns out that they *do* actually have ready access, but they may be unaccustomed to seeing it as such.

Bittner knew that the police are expected to navigate the nearly unnavigable path between the Scylla of “be right” and the Charybdis of “do something” (Bittner, 1970: 9) and that this expectation was not of their making alone, even if they adopted and perpetuated it (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Recall that our organizations reflect us – *you and me?* Sometimes the likeness we greet is not so welcoming.

Let us consider another dyad that takes Bittner’s insights further: Buber speaks about “being” and “seeming” (Friedman, 1965: 27–28). The person inclined to *being* gives herself (not merely of herself) unconditionally, automatically, and completely, even instinctually. The *seeming* concerned person is invested in how others *think* of her and not with being in an unmediated way (Friedman, 1965: 27–28). Seeming relations hang on whether one is understood to *appear* compassionate, *look* brave, or *seem* invested. Written up in scale, we can see much of the literature on police legitimacy come into focus as being concerned with seeming relations and not being relations. For example, Tyler (2004) defined legitimacy as both supporting legal authorities and feeling a personal duty to follow their rules. When people believe an authority is legitimate, they give it permission to decide how they should act in specific situations. However, Reisig, Bratton, and Gertz (2007) found that trust and obligation to obey are two separate things. Trust influences whether people will choose to work with the police and follow their rules, but obligation does not seem to affect either. This distinction implies that what looks like legitimacy on the surface may operate differently in practice. Over the past 30 years, police

studies consistently have shown that public support for the police has not increased even with a *considerable* drop in violent crimes nationwide (Tyler, Goff, & MacCoun, 2015). If reducing crime were the focal concern of police action, there might be reason to celebrate. Legitimacy and “legitimacy” are the driving concerns of leadership and action when the thing itself (i.e., reducing crime) cannot be. It is an accustomed lie, the kind of lie we might hear on television; it is a lie normalized by virtue of its abundance. It feels not so awful to be concerned with *seeming* legitimate. Seeming relations are understandable, Buber (2014/1947) tells us; they are rooted in the need for “confirmation” (Friedman, 1965: 28), but it is a cardboard confirmation one receives through seeming relations. It is fraud, but it comes complete with shiny, fancy outcome variables.

Another protest intones: Moments such as DiPrimo’s grace should be celebrated and encouraged but not at the risk of officers’ lives. Actually, you would be mistaken. We would agree, probably, that one of the most desirable capacities for the ablest of officers would be courage, but we might disagree about what courage means. It is not the icy courage on display in the *Iliad*. The real hero there is force, as Weil (2015) observes, and the star does not share the stage. Courage as *we* mean it pays homage to Buber’s (Friedman, 1965) idea of courage: Resisting the heroin-like high of confirmations that come from seeming relations, courage is the choice to relate to others authentically, immediately, and totally *regardless of confirmation* that may come from it. The stark nobility of policing does not stem from power or force, from tools or weapons, and it *sure as shit* does not hide behind a mask. Policing is a respected endeavour *only* when and *precisely* because police officers are understood to place others’ needs before their own. Policing comes into rarified company like medicine and education, though, when officers, departments, and the institution as a whole shun seeming relations and regard every person and, in particular, those people who need care in moments of dire desperation immediately, totally, and authentically, without agenda or guile, fully cognizant of their finitude as well as their infinitude.

Another dyad in Buber’s philosophical anthropology is the state versus the community. A state can live its own life and have its own agenda that may have little to do with its charter. The state “has *no intention* of promoting mutual understanding and the relationship of [person] to [person]; it strives, rather, for atomization, for the psychic isolation of the individual. *The more unrelated individuals are, the more consolidated the State becomes, and vice versa*” (our emphasis) (Friedman, 1965: 25–26). This condition is the case when the state operates solely through *I-It* regarding. *I-Thou* relations take time and treasure, and they *assure* heartbreak. It is not easy, especially when confronting the tide of suffering the way justice professionals must do. That we seek to minimize our own suffering by limiting exposure to *others’* suffering is understandable, but written up in scale, it results in the tendency of institutions to become reified into golems that serve *their* perceived interests within space granted by their mandate. Thus, engaging authentically with the suffering agencies face serves to ground them in their mission and likely counteract decoupling. Policing from an *I-Thou* vantage thus not only helps realize policing from love, but it also makes police organizations stouter and more capable.

One way such *I-Thou* relations can happen is through focusing of organizational attention on the dyadic interaction between each organizational member and another person. Justice should be understood as dyadic in nature (e.g., DeValve & Brightman, 2018); organizations provide the ground, but the figure of justice always arises just between two people. For us to understand the failures of justice, we first must understand these dyadic moments – why they fail and how they succeed.

All of these dyads arise from Buber's (1970) *I-It* and *I-Thou* relations. For Buber, humans are beings that have elements of finitude (we die) and also infinitude (we are divine lamps). All living is rooted in encounter with another, and the crucial component of that encounter is the condition, the state of things, within the perceiver. *I-It* relations are traditional subject-object relations; a person experiences another, but the experience is an inward one, where the other is understood in the perceiver's own terms. Such perception is always washed through the perceiver's frame of reference for understanding. *I-Thou* relations, on the other hand, move outward from the perceiver and occur between a perceiver and the world. *I-Thou* relations are unmediated and total, regarding the other on her own terms, including a regarding of both the mortality and the divinity of that other. Such regarding is the natural playing field of the Imam, the physician, the educator, and the cop.

Buber (Friedman, 1965) insists that in a clinical moment between therapist and client, *I-Thou* regarding does not need to be two-directional. The client need not regard the therapist from an *I-Thou* perspective. We give ourselves to our students, do we not, without the condition that they return the favour? *Police must figure out how to regard every person from an I-Thou perspective even when, and precisely because, the one being regarded may have no capacity whatsoever to return the regarding in kind.* This one simple notion (and herculean task) banishes altogether the concern with police legitimacy, and it places policing among the noblest endeavours humans could undertake. It is consistent with Bittner's intentions for policing, but it is more actionable than merely wanting officers to be both Solomon and Sampson.

It is possible, we think, to witness the shoreline of regarding, and both Buber and Bittner speak of a remainder that reveals. Earlier, we mentioned the remainder that Bittner (e.g., 1967; 1970) saw: peacekeeping is the remainder of the demand for service and of self-directed police action after we factor out that which is legalistic in nature. In dialogue, Buber (1965: 112) tells us, we can consider the occurrence of language, that unmediated emergence of speech, from a need for intellectual intercourse. After we remove all of the "physical and psychic phenomena" from that intercourse, there is something else, hovering somewhere between the two dialoguers. This remainder is *dialogue*: the place where two hearts meet in between, where "communication" becomes "communion" (Buber, 2014: 5). The collocation of Bittner's remainder (and his real interest in policing's promise) and Buber's remainder, we suspect, is the address where we can find a policing worthy of our children.

DiPrimo's grace is not unique. Officer Gaetano Acerra gifted a 13-year-old boy a bed after responding to a call that the young boy was threatening to run away from home. Upon arrival, Acerra noticed the boy's room did not contain a bed. The boy disclosed that he had been sleeping on the couch.

Acerra returned a week later with a bed. Officer Justin Roby was responding to a shoplifting call, but after arriving on the scene, what seemed like a standard call turned into a moment of love. The man who had been accused of shoplifting had taken only baby formula. Instead of arresting him, officer Roby purchased several cans of formula for the man's child. When asked about his choice, he stated, "Behind the uniform, I am a human being I have a little boy. I am a father just like this gentleman is" (San Antonio Police Officers' Association, 2025, n. p.).

Where is the articulable human interest that ranges itself against providing shoes for unhomed humans or beds for needful children? Well, from us. By "us," of course, I mean we who participate in late-stage capitalism. At the heart of capitalism is two-stroke avarice; deprivation may not be the point *as such*, but the *my-having* thrust energy of capitalism needs the corresponding vacuum, the *you-not-having*, to achieve peak horsepower. DiPrimo's friend having shoes, Acerra's friend having a bed, and that dad having formula for his child diminish the acquisitive bliss of others who had to buy their own stuff.

Moments of beauty (see DeValve, 2023) come in myriad shapes and sizes, but they all move us toward a closer proximity to love's wisdom. Not all will involve an officer's credit card or working on one's bank shot. Some will be ugly. Some will rip the heart from your chest. Sometimes force will be needed, and it would be natural to think of those instances of force as failures. They are. Each instance of the use of force is a failure of a kind. If love guides thought and action, perhaps uses of force might inform future similar moments away from similar failures. In such circumstances, again, if love guides, force is used far less often, the force used is guided by the wisdom of nurturance, and the greater risk shifts onto the officer and away from the harmer. Beccaria insisted that any punishment that exceeded what was needed to achieve deterrence was definitionally tyranny. *All* formally imposed, state-crafted suffering *must* be applied through an *I-Thou* window. *All* instances of force *must* be guided by an *I-Thou* regarding of the other. *Any* instance of state-inflicted pain that cannot fit through that frame *is definitionally tyranny*. Rest assured that all such force, when visited upon another, injures in both directions. Newton's Third Law applies here: every gun fires in two directions at once.

CONCLUSION

And we suspect that at bottom *none* of what we have written is truly surprising. Probably if you have given the time to sit with all of this, what has been said here was written on your heart long before you and we met.

The answer to the ultra-realist's foundational question (Hall & Winlow, 2017) is already in hand; we *already know* the reason why people choose the possibility of harm over the promise of community (Hall & Winlow, 2017). At the very bottom of the criminological question is a simple truth: Each instance of human failure happens because of the condition of the harmer's heart. Whether the harm is in the context of warmaking, strong-armed robbery, mass deportations, corporate malfeasance, dubious banking practices, mass sexualization, rape of children, or other brands of deceit, it is rooted in the condition of a single person's heart.

What is *really* fascinating about criminology, then, is how desperately we work to *forget what we already know* (see, e.g., Midgley, 1979). Instead, what seems to drive the criminological wagon is the effort to discover the shoreline of least-we-can-do-ness: the space in which ultra-realists run rampant, levelling splintering broadsides at the policies of both conservatism and neoliberalism. They have made crystal clear that our current understanding of justice in practice is nonfunctional and that its chattering functionality is unsustainable. Contemporary justice practice is the effort to discover “what works” as well as possible against the problem of interhuman harm *without* assuming the terrifying burden of encountering authentically and fully those who do harm. A fundamental rethinking of our relations – power, courage, value, meaning, and justice itself – is a vital project for critical criminology and for zemiology.

What can we insist upon for policing? Well, as is the case with most human interaction (Buber, 1970), the focus for progress toward highest wisdom must be on choice, centering for us the notion of courage: do we seek to *make* something or do we let the moment pass? Are we builders or are we abandoners? When we say, “make something,” we do not refer to things like “public safety” or “deterrence” any more than a master educator will say “learning” or “smartened students” or a wise physician will say “an unbroken bone” – these are not real things. Real things arise between two beings through their mutual encounter. A community is safer when each of its members is regarded for her divinity, for her capacities, her shortcomings, mistakes, and successes. This is what is meant when we say that policing done properly is a gift of love.

FUNDING

No funding was provided to support this scholarship.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Department of Criminal Justice, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA, USA.

REFERENCES

- Bittner, E. (1967). The police on skid-row: A study of peace keeping. *American Sociological Review*, 32(5), 699–715. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2092019>
- Bittner, E. (1970). *The functions of the police in modern society: A review of background factors, current practices and possible role models*. National Institute of Mental Health. Accessed August 19, 2025, from <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/147822NCJRS.pdf>
- Brodeur, J. P. (2007). An encounter with Egon Bittner. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 48, 105–132. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-007-9084-2>
- Buber, M. (1965). The word that is spoken. In M. Friedman (Ed.), *The knowledge of man* (pp. 110–120). Harper Torchbooks.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. Charles Scribner and Sons.
- Buber, M. (2014/1947). *Between man and man*. Martino Fine Books.
- Camus, A. (1956/1991). *The rebel: An essay on man in revolt* (Kindle ed.). Vintage.
- DeValve, M. J. (2015). *A different justice: Love and the future of criminal justice practice in America*. Carolina Academic Press.
- DeValve, M. J. (2023). A theory of suffering and healing: Toward a loving justice. *Critical Criminology*, 31, 35–60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-022-09667-4>
- DeValve, M., & Brightman, S. (2018). The little things: Deconstructing Christian doctrine and theorizing a loving justice. *Journal of Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology*, 10, 34–52.
- Friedman, M. (1965). Introductory essay. In M. Buber (Ed.), *The knowledge of man* (pp. 11–58). Harper Torchbooks.
- Hall, S., & Winlow, S. (2017). Introduction: The need for new directions in criminological theory. In S. Hall & S. Winlow (eds.) *New directions in criminological theory* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>
- Midgley, M. (1979). *Beast and man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Routledge.
- Reisig, M. D., Bratton, J., & Gertz, M. G. (2007). The construct validity and refinement of process-based policing measures. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34(8), 1005–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854807301275>
- San Antonio Police Officers’ Association. (2025). An officer’s kindness. Accessed September 27, 2025, from <https://sapoa.org/an-officers-kindness/>
- Tillich, P. (1967). *Systematic theology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tyler, T. R. (2004). Enhancing police legitimacy. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 593, 84–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203262627>
- Tyler, T. R., Goff, P. A., & MacCoun, R. J. (2015). The impact of psychological science on policing in the United States: Procedural justice, legitimacy and effective law enforcement. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 16(3), 75–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100615617791>
- Weil, S. (2015). *The Iliad, or the poem of force*. *The Anarchist Library*. Accessed September 27, 2025, from <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/simone-weil-the-iliad>