Citizens Academy: Police Culture, Community Policing, or Public Relations?

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Abstract

This article focuses on a comparison of police citizen academy stated goals and actual experience. The methods used are observational. Personal experience and communication are used to understand the socialization processes into police culture in the academy on classism, sexism, and racism.

"Congratulations! You have been selected to attend the Metropolitan Police Department's third Citizen's Academy." With these words, I realized I was in for a new experience--one that I had sought (via application and consent for a background check) but didn't really know what it would entail. I soon found out.

Over the next 12 weeks (one night weekly, for three hours at a time), we were exposed to police hiring procedures, an overview of the criminal justice system, use of force demonstrations, firearms training simulations, investigations and warrants, community-oriented policing, internal affairs, crime statistics, and a county lock-up tour. During that time, my participation focus changed from simply wanting to have a perspective on policing more appropriate for the many criminal justice classes I teach to that of a field researcher attempting to examine the climate of an organization as it manifested itself in a very public presentation as well as the method by which it socializes its new members.

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The Citizen's Academy purports to give members of the public a taste of what police recruits go through at the regular police academy. The Metropolitan Police Academy (MPA) training coordinator invited anyone who wanted to do so to talk to him about sitting in on MPA sessions. I jumped at this opportunity and wound up attending almost as many sessions of the MPA as I did the Citizen's Academy.

Very early in the course of this participation in the Citizen's Academy and observation of the MPA, it occurred to me that here was a research opportunity, not only because citizen's academies are relatively new but also because I was pretty much getting both a front and backstage view of the socialization function of this organization (Goffman 1959). Also, it has been argued that we need more observational studies of police (Mastrofski & Parks 1990).

Thus, the taking of extensive field notes accompanied all participation/observation. Much of this was done even as I was being exposed in each forum to this organization, since my overt role and the classroom-like format was conducive to this activity being unobtrusive.

The selection of MPA sessions for attendance was informed by a desire to compare these with similar Citizen's Academy presentations as well as those which might lend the most insight to my emerging research questions. As far as I can tell, I was not limited in the MPA sessions open to me. Indeed after a few weeks, I was told that I didn't need to call for permission to attend any of the sessions.

Police Culture

Since any kind of formal education, either about an organization (Citizen's Academy) or into an organization (MPA) can be considered socialization, and one of the main goals of any socialization is to inculcate individual actors with the values,

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beliefs, and norms that characterize the larger group which is doing the socializing, it could be expected that socialization into the "police culture" might be part and parcel of these academies. The question then becomes, "Is it a socialization into the traditional police culture as described by various observers, or is it socialization into some new, improved police values, beliefs and norms?"

Historically, criminologists (taking a rather reductionist approach) described what they referred to as a "police personality." This included such characteristics as authoritarianism, cynicism, suspiciousness, hostility, racism, and insularity (Kirkham 1976; Drummond 1976; Martin 1978; Milland 1986; Bouza 1990; Bartol et al. 1992; McNichol 1995; Senna & Siegel 1996). While there has been some research indicating that recruits do come to police work with many of these characteristics, most now believe that these characteristics are more the product of being members of law enforcement agencies and doing the work which is part of the role. Consequently, criminologists now tend to refer to the culture of police organizations and work producing the personality typical of police officers.

While the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) has the mantra of new, improved, politically-correct police culture, as evidenced by various aspects of its Vision Statement and remarks by members of the department (especially to the Citizen's Academy) that vision wasn't always obvious in what I observed. "We want to have a police department that reflects the community that we police" (Chief, MPD). While the Citizen's Academy was fairly representative (in terms of race and gender) of the community, and officer panels and other presenters reflected similar sensibilities, the recruit class at the MPA was all white and almost all male. There was one female recruit! This is not their only source of new officers. MPD has a program where individuals who have a four-year college degree and want to be cops for MPD

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will be financially supported in the formal educational
requirements for licensure as a police officer.

> About two years ago we worked on putting something
> together that would give us the opportunity to hire
> more women and more minorities. That's our Cadet Pro-
> gram. That program has accounted for 88% of our minority
> hiring for the past six years. The Metropolitan
> Police Department has never been under court order to
> improve minority hiring. I think we've been very successful.
> (Deputy Chief, Internal Services)

Nevertheless, the predominant selection of white males for the
standard academy might work against the stated goals of this
department. While the MPA training coordinator told the Citizen's
Academy that there is "... zero tolerance for racism and sexism
within the academy." My observations indicated some of both of
these in that academy, some even committed by this coordinator!

Racism

The first instance of this aspect of traditional police culture
was a baton exercise in which each recruit was required to strike at
a blocking pad for one minute which was held by another recruit.
The recruits tended to get tired before the time was up and were
urged on by their fellows. When one recruit (who had been a park
patrol agent) began to tire, another recruit shouted, "Pretend it's a
squirrel." Another chimed in, "Or a rabbit." A third shouted, "Get
that big coon." I was standing right next to the drill instructor; he
said nothing about this potentially racist comment. Later, recruits
urged others on with cries of "Pretend he lives in public housing,"
and "That's not the way they do it on the east side" (where there's a
heavily minority population).

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Later when the recruits went to the kennels for K-9 and stun gun training, taped to the bulletin board in the kennels conference room was newspaper picture of the city's latest homicide victim (a black male lying in the street) next to which someone had written Rodney King's comment, "Can't we all just get along?" While the lieutenant in charge of the dogs slowly erased the comment, he said in a lilting voice, "Noooooo!"

Just before the recruits were to graduate and hit the streets, they went through what were referred to as "officer survival scenarios." These involved members of MPD portraying victims and/or offenders while the recruits handled the scenario prior to receiving feedback on their conduct. One of the scenarios I observed involved a rape. One of the recruits asked the victim, "Was he black or white?" When she didn't respond, he asked: "Can you describe him?" She replied, "He had fuzzy hair." Shortly thereafter, the other recruit in the scenario called the report into the dispatcher and said: "Sexual assault, black suspect." I heard no department observer questioning of the description to which this recruit had jumped!

Thus, racism may be reinforced, even though the Chief told the Citizen's Academy, "We're dealing with that... If you want to be racist, that's your right as long as you leave it at home, because if it rears its ugly head at work, we're going to chop it off!"

Sexism

Near the end of the recruit academy, I observed a drill where recruits fought each other for three minutes. They were paired up by the training coordinator and were padded head-to-toe. The lone female was paired with a guy at least six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than her. There were males more her size, and no male recruits were that disproportionately matched. Apparently due to my look of surprise when this pairing was announced, the

training coordinator said to me: "He's not as strong as he looks, and she's strong for her size. Plus she worked at the women's prison for seven years, so she's had experience in some mix-ups." The coordination assistant (a woman) said it would have been better to have paired the female recruit with one of the smaller males.

As the woman was being helped into her equipment (all recruits were helped), one said something about it being a bit large for her. The coordinator said jocularly, "We don't have the little girl size for her." During their match, the guy took a fundamentally defensive stance and threw her around or knocked her down each time she charged him. They were clearly mismatched and he appeared to be hardly trying!

When I debriefed with both the coordinator and his assistant after the recruits had graduated, he said, "When I asked her who she wanted to be paired with, she said, 'Anyone.'" I asked what he expected her to say since she knew she was likely to be judged inferior to men unless she did more. The female assistant replied:

> That's exactly right. In a 'man's job' like this, a woman
> has to be twice as good in order to be thought of as okay.
> In my almost eight years on the street, whenever there was
> a fight--even if there were enough guys on him and other
> cops were standing around--I jumped in. If you don't, the
> guys are gonna say you're afraid to.

A related comment seemed to indicate that some of this apparent sexism might be filtered through the academy when the assistant stated, "In fact, some of the young guys are worse about this than the old-timers."

This may be due to the younger guys being more sensitive to potential competition from women for positions and promotions, as evidenced by another questionable comment from a male recruit

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during the fighting drill. When one of the recruits helping another to put on the padding got his face and hands very close to the crotch, another recruit ungrammatically called out, "So that's how you got hired as a white male!"

Cynicism/Hostility/Insularity

Certainly some of the students I get in my criminal justice classes (a requirement for licensure to work as a police officer in this state) are cynical and/or hostile, but most seem not, and the literature indicates that time in service tends to directly influence this (Senna & Siegel 1996). Nevertheless, I did see signs of it among MPA recruits (addressed later).

More prominently, a variety of officers to whom I was exposed seemed to manifest this element of traditional police culture, not the least of whom was the Chief who commented about offenders, "Crooks, thugs, and nuts. I don't know how to say it any better!" This was displayed at the Citizen's Academy more toward the end than at the beginning, as if they hoped we would be more receptive to it after a period of beginning to identify with the MPD. A panel of street officers fielded our questions and told us their experiences and opinions.

> The gang problem in this town is big time serious--
> I mean real serious. It's gonna get worse ... We
> don't have the manpower we should. We had more cops on
> the street than this in '72 and the call load has in-
> creased three times ... Do I sound negative or what?
> (member of officer panel to Citizen's Academy)

A bit earlier in the Citizen's Academy, the K-9 lieutenant told us, "It's gotten more violent out there. If they'll take us on--in full uniform--think they'll hesitate on you?" Even a generally

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positive officer who worked a bike patrol as a variation of community policing noted, "Some of these people, you arrest them, and before you get your paperwork done, they're out on the street."

Citizen's Academy members were given the opportunity to do a four to five hour ride-along with a street officer on patrol. I took advantage of this and asked to be assigned to an officer in a low crime precinct with which I am familiar. I arrived at the appointed time and was greeted by a sergeant who told me that the officers were in roll call right now, but she would send one out to me in a few minutes. While I was waiting, another officer came out to the desk and began talking on the phone. He seemed to become agitated and said, "He won't stand up for himself!" After he finished his call, he went out to his car muttering to himself, "Out to save the city from all evil." This was not the last I would see of this officer.

Soon, my officer came out and we began the patrol. We heard a radio dispatch about a domestic at an apartment building. My officer radioed the primary unit that he would stop, too. When we got there, we joined the agitated officer and a rookie. They were standing outside the main entrance. The officer was smoking a cigarette, wasn't wearing his hat (against regulations) and had his clip-on tie unclipped (also probably against regulations). He looked at my officer and said (in a loud, sharp tone), "When we pulled-up, there were two 'f--king a--holes' at the top of the stairs, but they left before we got to the door." It certainly seemed as if the one officer had an attitude problem consistent with certain aspects of traditional police culture.

I did see a number of things in both academies that were clear attempts to counter these aspects of traditional police culture (especially since these can result in police behavior that generates both civil and criminal actions).

With the recent rash of bad publicity MPD has received regarding excessive force and some other types of misconduct, I

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was especially interested in the presentation of ethical and Internal Affairs issues, so I attended as many sessions of these at the MPA as I could. Interestingly, almost half of those I wanted to attend were rescheduled or canceled. I was told this was due to other presenters' changing schedules, and since these sessions were handled by the MPA coordinator, he could more easily reschedule them. I have no reason to doubt this explanation, but I did tell him that if the recruits were not told the reason for the recurrent cancellation/rescheduling of ethics sessions, they might get the idea that this stuff is of little importance.

My first MPA exposure to these issues was from an Internal Affairs lieutenant, a "by the book" guy.

> This Blue Code of Silence--nice and honorable--I guess that's what they try to pass it off as. I always told my partners, "Do not do anything on this job that will get me fired. When we're called in, I'm going to be talking. Don't get in the back seat with a hand-cuffed suspect

> and try to get street justice, 'cause if I'm your partner, I'm going to tell!" There's a right way and the street way. If you ever want to be promoted, you'll take a test on the book. It helps you to do things by the book--even in career advancement ... The department is taking a dim view of people resigning/retiring when they're facing serious charges. We're firing them! The department believes there should be something on their record showing they're unfit to serve with our department, or some other department.

In one of the few ethics sessions that went off as scheduled, one of the recruits said to the coordinator, "Why don't we do it like Singapore? I'd be willing to give-up some of my rights. Our country is turning into a piece of sh-t." The coordinator replied to

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this cynical recruit:

> You know where the lowest crime rate in this state is?
> The state maximum-security penitentiary! Do you want to
> give up that many rights? Are you willing to give that
> same power to anyone I name? (Names two cops recently
> discharged for misconduct/brutality) For the same reason
> you won't, the general public won't give that power to you!

He acknowledged traditional police culture, however, when he
added, "I can't draw a line for you. This job will change you. It
makes you harder and more secretive. The police subculture
promotes some kinds of deviance." Bohm and Haley (1997) wrote,
"At times this culture has created a 'bunker mentality,' an attitude
of defensiveness and intolerance for anyone outside of law
enforcement." This would seem the antithesis of what's next.

Community Policing

MPD has had an initiative on community policing for
several years in which they pair a civilian crime prevention
specialist who has a background in community organizing with a
sworn officer in order to develop block clubs which they hope will
provide a foundation for the partnership at the heart of community
policing.

> The essence of community policing is the development
> of a partnership between community residents and the
> police with the intention of improving the quality
> of life of that community ... increase police
> accountability to the public. (Bohm & Haley 1997)

Mastrofski et al. (1995) echo many of these objectives.

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In the very first session of Citizen's Academy, the Chief told us that he felt it was part of community policing. "Be a resource ... ambassadors to your neighborhoods. Let the people come in and really see. Expose them (officers) at every opportunity to citizens." Commenting on the need for such a shift in focus away from traditional police culture and procedure, Bouza (1990) wrote:

> In recent years, thoughtful police administrators have seen the widening chasm between cops and the public they serve as an impediment to the sort of effective performance made possible by a true partnership ... Instead of prescribing quick answers, the cops shifted to focusing on consulting the citizens on what was need- ed and made plans to assault the problems, whatever their nature.

A community policing officer who spoke to the Citizen's Academy indicated something similar when he said:

> [E]mpower citizens in building community ... [H]elp people get back to being the village. The police department by itself can't fix it--together we can. We will work with you, we won't do it for you. You got to get everybody who has a stake in the problem to be part of the solution.

A regular patrol officer commenting on the community policing unit remarked, "[T]hey can do a lot more than a street cop can ... trying to make leaders out of these people so they can take care of more of their problems themselves."

Community policing is often seen as an approach that focuses on getting cops out of cars, and this might not be a bad thing according to a community policing officer, "As a cop in a car

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you deal with scumbags all night long, and you think all people are that way. When you walk a beat, you know it's not true." Cops walking a beat is not really a new idea but an old one which had fallen out of favor.

Public Relations

It is not hard to imagine that the major impetus for the Citizen's Academy was to improve MPD's image after a flood of bad publicity. Several decades ago, Preiss and Ehrlich (1966) wrote, "Selling the department to the 'local public' was construed as a general post responsibility." Indeed, MPD had recently hired a Director of Public Relations for the first time, a former media person who told the Citizen's Academy, "When cops commit serious crime, that should be covered, but sometimes it's not fair." A similar note was struck by the Citizen's Academy lieutenant during an officers panel, when she interjected, "The power of editing in the media is tremendous. With the number of calls handled in a year and the relatively few number of complaints, I think we do an excellent job."

We were told initially that the Citizen's Academy was an element in MPD's community policing. Near the end, a sergeant (who is also a state legislator) reiterated that, as well as a bit more when he remarked, "This is really the cornerstone of community oriented policing; it's really the cornerstone of our public relations, too."

Wrobleski and Hess (1993) seemed to be referring to citizen's academies when they wrote, "Large-scale educational programs have been successful when they have promoted dialogue rather than simply conveying information." And Wrobleski (1994) was definitely referring to community policing when he averred, "[M]ost of them are just public relations."

Also, many of the Citizen's Academy presenters (virtually

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all MPD officers of one sort or another) were almost obsequious in their greetings to us. Expressions like those made by one Park Patrol sergeant were common. "Thank you for your interest in the MPD. It's important to have people who care." The Chief summed up our participation in the Citizen's Academy by saying: "Your participation helped us by exposing cops to citizens in a non-confrontational situation--which I look to do at every opportunity!"

Furthermore, it seemed clear that MPD wanted to ingratiate themselves to us since they not only provided coffee and cookies at every session, but there were several kinds of cookies, soft drinks, and even fruit and cake every so often. This kind of cornucopia was not provided to the recruits, nor is it typical of most of the public meetings I've attended over the years.

Certainly, MPD is interested in countering its negative publicity with a multitude of methods, not just the Citizen's Academy. A discussion with the MPA coordinator about why something was happening at a time other than originally scheduled indicated that it was because he and the recruits were helping the Marines collect toys for needy children. "And it's good publicity, too; we'll be on the news."

Discussion

In order to understand the discrepancies between what the MPD states as its official policies and what I saw at the MPA and in other parts of MPD, we need to examine basic, interrelated sociological concepts of value conflicts, organizational ambivalence, informal structure, role strain, and ideal versus real culture.

Value conflicts reflect a situation where there is a lack of functional compatibility between several desired objectives in a particular social setting (Shepard 1996). Samaha (1994) suggests that there is an inherent tension between the two major goals of

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criminal justice: crime control and due process. With this tension at the heart of the "system," it seems likely that ambivalence and ambiguity are predominant characteristics of the culture of any organization which is part of this system. Indeed, Bohm and Kelly (1997) write, "America has never been sure precisely what role it wants its police officers to play. Much of the ambivalence has to do with our heritage which makes us suspicious of government authority."

Young (1991) also argues that there is much ambiguity in police culture, and Drummond (1976) writes, "They are fighting crime and doing social work. They are trying to handle those calls which they receive. They are still trying to succeed--without clearly articulated goals!" The MPA coordinator indicated much the same when he told the recruits, "You gotta decide to be a cop, not a social worker. Some of these lessons are hard learned." Room (1976) noted that conflicting norms both affect and reflect ambivalence.

Even if those goals are clearly articulated, that might not be enough. Bouza (1990) notes:

> Cops will translate organizational messages ... They
> will adapt their behavior to conform with what's expected
> or permitted and will avoid what is rejected ... Virtually
> all agencies have written procedures calling
> for truth, beauty and justice, yet the internal daily
> realities of agencies may be out of synchronization
> with these noble ideals ... The employees tend to
> respond to the value system transmitted in the daily
> actions of the hierarchy rather than to written policy.

Furthermore, even clearly articulated values and norms may not be without problems. In a situation of value conflict, ambivalence and ambiguity as well as role strain (or the lack of adequate mesh

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between the various expectations placed upon individual actors) are likely to be found. Merton (1976) states, "[A]mbivalence is located in the social definition of roles and statuses, not in the feeling state of one or another type of personality."

Circumstances of value conflict and role strain may both reflect and affect any organization's day-to-day operation. As Thomas and Luthans (1990) observe, "[A]n organization's culture is not controlled solely by management." Pelligrew (1990) suggests tension and lag tend to characterize interorganizational relations. In a situation like this, an informal structure is likely to be present and as noted by the Jarys (1991), "[I]nformal practices bend or circumvent formal rules."

In light of the discrepancy apparent between the values of MPD as expressed by the mission statement and what appeared to be the case in the MPA, one could make the case that what was presented to the community is simply for public relations and to improve the department's image -- Goffman's (1959) impression management! There was an attempt to socialize us to traditional police culture, to some extent. As one sergeant told the Citizen's Academy, "It's extremely important for you to see the issues we face in dealing with crime." Another officer told u,: "Get to know our side of it!" Conclusions like these are overly simplistic, however, and we need to consider the concepts of ideal and real culture.

Any group or organization may hold values and prescribe norms based on those values but may have many members who fail to conform to those values and norms either volitionally or because they find themselves unable to live up to the m. I believe that the MPD is sincere in its desire to enact a new, improved police culture predicated on the best sense of community policing. Nevertheless, as Thompson and Luthans (1990) wrote, "[C]hanging an established culture is difficult." Yates and Pillai (1993) note the tendency toward inertia and other obstacles to

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change in police departments. Consequently, traditional police culture dies hard, especially under the circumstances of value conflict, organizational ambivalence, informal structure, and role strain present here. As Merton (1976) indicated, "Indeed the experiences of the organization will be more deeply ingrained-- through its history, tradition, culture, and the sheer inertial structure of all organizational life--than those of any of its individual members." Furthermore, Robinson and associates (1994) suggest that community policing may even exacerbate some of the strains inherent in police work.

Indeed the first night of the Citizen's Academy, the Chief told us, "The biggest hurdle inside our organization is changing the police culture; our walls are bigger than yours." As one community policing officer told us somewhat later, "My sergeants were totally uncomfortable with the notion of community policing." White officers have the lowest commitment to community policing (Yates & Pillai 1993).

Thus, the wheels of bureaucracy almost always grind slowly, especially when they are wheels of change! The Citizen's Academy seems to have been more indicative of where the MPD is going--toward community policing and a new, improved police culture--rather than where it is or has been. The same may be true for the MPA, although to a lesser extent. Consequently, I believe it will be take some time and continued, very concerted efforts for the MPD to be the type of department it professes to want to be.

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