

2001

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### Recommended Citation

Bumgarner, Jeff (2001) "Police Professionalism: An Occupational Misnomer?," *Great Plains Sociologist*. Vol. 13 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/greatplainssociologist/vol13/iss1/4>

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## **Police Professionalism: An Occupational Misnomer?**

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, much has been written about police professionalism by scholars and practitioners alike. Prevailing in these writings are discussions about various factors thought to be associated with professional policing, such as training and formal education, the organizational structure of the police agencies, and community policing initiatives. However, what is often being described as indicators of professional law enforcement are simply good police practices which, however worthwhile they may be, are not synonymous with professionalism. This article seeks to examine the occupation of policing against the backdrop of professionalism as defined in the literature.*

### **Introduction**

It is not uncommon, particularly in police journals and magazines, to read articles by practitioners extolling the benefits of police professionalism. However, professionalism as described in these publications by author-practitioners frequently fails to resemble professionalism as described in scholarly works. Instead, professionalism is simply equated with good police practices.

Griffin (1998), for example, identified five ingredients to police professionalism: integrity, intellect, initiative, industry (i.e.

work ethic), and impact (i.e. influence). While few would challenge the merit of these attributes being exhibited by police officers, this quasi-definition of professionalism is clearly not rooted in the relevant sociological literature. At best, Griffin's definition and that which emerges from the classical professionalism literature converge on the tangents and only by coincidence.

There has long been debate over the proper vocational classification of law enforcement. Endemic to this debate has been the question of whether police work is a profession. The U.S. Department of Education has historically classified policing as something else. With the grouping of law enforcement training programs under the "trade and industrial" category by the U.S. Department of Education, policing has shared vocational recognition with carpentry, masonry, cosmetology, and auto mechanics, among other things (Calhoun and Finch, 1982). Is this an appropriate placement for law enforcement on the vocational continuum—with the trades? Or is policing more akin to law, medicine, the ministry and other professions in its occupational characteristics?

This article attempts to consider the question of whether the field of police work is, in fact, a professional one in light of the literature on professions and the professionalization of occupations. Through examination of the literature, it is suggested that policing as a vocation may be conceptually unaligned with some aspects of

true professions and professionalism and therefore talk of “police professionalism” involves the mismatching of terms.

This is significant because politicians, bureaucrats, academicians, and the public have demanded that police officers become “professional” and act “professionally” without any regard for what that means. “Police professionalism”, left undefined and obscure, can be wielded like a club against the police when ever they fail to live up to critics’ ideas of proper police practice. When reminding the police of how unprofessional they have acted from time to time, critics frequently fail to acknowledge that professionals are generally afforded greater deference to act as they think best, as opposed to the more rigid conventions followed by para-professionals, craftsmen, technicians, etc. Even more interesting is that fact that the co-opting of the term “professional” by police critics has happened with the unwitting complicity of the law enforcement community desiring professional status, even while failing to embrace professional privileges and traditions.

This article does not suggest that policing should not become a profession in its own right; perhaps it should. Or, perhaps it shouldn’t. After all, many would probably prefer a police “technician” model—where procedure is always followed by the book and there is a previously identified solution for every problem—one need only look it up in the manual. In any case, the article does suggest that “professionalism” means something that

currently does not—and may or may not in the future—properly and fully characterize law enforcement on the occupational spectrum.

### **Professionalism Defined**

Much has been written about exactly what is a profession and what is professionalism. Smith (1998) indicated that a profession is essentially and simply “a group of individuals pursuing a learned art as a common calling in the spirit of public service.” The literature on professionalism, however, suggests that such a pithy definition is inadequate as it only touches on a few of the many key characteristics of professionalism.

Hall (1968) noted that there are two basic types of attributes of any given profession. First, there are those attributes that are a part of the structure of the occupation, such as formal education and entrance requirements. Hall’s second basic type of attributes relates to the attitudinal characteristics. Attitudinal characteristics include the notion of “calling” that Smith referenced, but also include much more.

Wilensky (1964) observed a number of structural tendencies that occupations consistently embrace as they become a profession. These tendencies, in sequence, include the creation of a full-time occupation; the establishment of a training school (which

eventually becomes affiliated with established universities) reflecting the knowledge base of the field and efforts by early leaders to improve the field; the formation of professional associations; and finally the formation of a code of ethics.

While the structural attributes are visible and therefore commonly equated with professionalism, they would not come to fruition but for the attitudinal attributes Hall identifies. Indeed, structural and attitudinal attributes of professions seem to be inextricably interwoven.

Hall's (1968) attitudinal attributes of professions include: the use of the professional organization as a major reference; belief in self-regulation; belief in service to the public; a sense of calling to the field; and autonomy. Each of these attributes are examined separately, followed by consideration of the structural attribute of professional education.

### *Professional Referents*

The attitudinal attribute of professional referents relates to the degree to which one's occupational values and identity are shaped by professional associations and the standards of the profession (Goode, 1957). Bucher and Strauss (1961) note that professions are viewed as relatively homogenous communities whose members share identity, values, definitions of role, and interests.

The evolutionary development of professional and disciplinary associations is remarkably uniform (Moore, 1970). The initial criterion for membership is primarily that of self-identified interest or practice in the subject; early in a profession's development, congeniality may be put above competence in admitting new members. However, over time, as the group achieves standing as representing an occupational specialty or intellectual discipline, "the standard tendency is for technical criteria of membership to be given increasing prominence, at the expense of well disposed amateurs. ...What a professional association, adopting technical qualifications for fully-authentic membership, loses by way of friendly discourse among a group of common believers it is likely to gain by the recognition of membership as an authenticating agency for its constituency" (Moore, 1970, p. 115).

Azzaretto (1992) identified professional certification as one way a profession affirms its authority and legitimacy on its members. He noted that professional certification is a voluntary process regulated by the profession to advance the competencies of individual practitioners and to enhance the prestige of the profession. Certification is accomplished by mastering a body of knowledge and set of competencies identified by the regulating professional association and then submitting to a regulatory

mechanism set up by the profession to gauge the proficiency of its practitioners (Azzaretto, 1992; Galbraith & Gilley, 1995).

*Self-Regulation*

A related but distinct attitudinal attribute to professional referent is self-regulation. This refers to the appropriateness of collegial regulation, i.e. practitioners judging practitioners. Moore (1970) stated that there is a "strong and normatively supported tendency to emphasize the collegiality of the occupation" among the professions—especially those still attempting to gain full professional status (p. 109). Frequent terms used to describe professional peers include colleague, fellow, and even brother. Given that entry into the professions is controlled, it is assumed that all members of a profession can be colleagues (Bucher and Strauss, 1961).

Moore identified a number of purposes behind self-regulation. These purposes include preserving and enhancing standards, enhancing occupational prestige, controlling the number of authenticated practitioners in order to reduce competition and increase income, and finally, to protect a particular orthodoxy within the profession from alternatives.

Moore's observations concerning the purpose of self-regulation are echoed by Macdonald (1995) in his discussion of the objectives of any profession. He said the chief objective of a profession is to ensure a monopoly of service, which is

accomplished through the culmination of a profession's secondary objectives – namely, establishing an exclusive jurisdiction of service, producing professionals by regulating and tailoring recruitment practices, and maintaining a monopoly of professional education.

The importance of authority and jurisdiction of the professional to practice is a key component behind self-regulation. After all, if laypersons are not qualified or permitted to practice within a professional realm, how much less so are they in a position to judge qualified practitioners?

Greenwood (1966) identifies authority as the primary distinction between professions and other occupations. In the professional realm, the customer is not always right; the professional is. It is the professional who dictates. Why would a client permit this? The answer is because the client, and society at large, has been convinced of the profession's unique trustworthiness and therefore yields to the exclusive jurisdiction and authority of the professional in his or her element.

Along these lines, Wilensky (1964) observed that the ministry and carpentry both require technical knowledge, yet the later is not a profession. "Many of us might construct a homemade bookcase, [but] few would forego a clergyman at the grave" (Wilensky, 1964, p.139).

McGlothlin (1967) notes that professions are granted their exclusive jurisdiction by laypeople because they deal with matters

of great urgency and significance. "Baby sitters, barbers, beauticians, or bartenders can never be considered as members of professions since their ministrations, although frequently desired and sometimes pleasant, are hardly matters of utmost importance" (McGlothlin, 1967, p. 4).

Another aspect to self-regulation is the manner in which colleagues evaluate colleagues. Professionals honor the work of other formally qualified professionals in the field. Professionals must also be aware of their own limitations and honor the claims of other specialties within the field. Colleague criticism is rarely performed before laypersons (Goode, 1957; Wilensky, 1964). Doing so would diminish the standing of the profession in the eyes of the public and could ultimately threaten the profession's exclusive jurisdiction.

### Service

A third attitudinal characteristic of professionals relates to their service orientation. This refers to the indispensability of the profession and the view that the work performed is beneficial both to the public and the practitioner (Hall, 1968). McGlothlin (1967) noted that society allows a profession to be a monopoly because it is convinced that the profession is dedicated to an ethical or altruistic ideal in serving society. Without altruism there would be exploitation.

The service orientation of the professional can be described as desiring to serve the interests of clients and the community first, rather than one's own interest (Moore, 1970). This description relates back to the character of the professional.

Smith (1998) said of the importance of character to the true professional:

*"[For the professional] character means embracing and employing in personal and professional life high moral principles and ethical values despite client demands and economic pressures; insisting on professional independence and retaining...the ability to say 'no'; living and practicing with integrity; dealing honestly with our clients and others and giving true value for our professional services..."*

The service ideal of the professional is typically articulated in the form of a code of conduct or code of ethics. A formal code of ethics will embody rules to protect the clients, as well as address the unqualified and unscrupulous practitioners (Wilensky, 1964).

Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) likened professional codes of ethics to gentlemanly and priestly behavior:

*"...that the observance among [priests and gentlemen] of certain standards of conduct was largely secured by the mere pressure of opinion and tradition and without the aid of penal sanctions. In the case of the rules of professional conduct, which are largely an adaptation of the standards of the priest and the gentleman to the requirements of certain vocations in present-day life, the same is true."*

Calling

The fourth attitudinal attribute of professions and professionals is calling. Hall (1968) notes that this attribute reflects the dedication of the professional to his or her work—a dedication that is greater than the extrinsic rewards. In other words, the professional's occupation is not just a job to pay the bills. The professional wants to work in his or her chosen field for the work's sake.

Moore (1970) stated that a professional calling involves the acceptance of the appropriate norms and standards, and identification with professional peers and the profession collectively. A genuine calling would not be evident in a youth who seeks training in a professional realm and then uses that training as a stepping-stone for some other vocation. Moore observed that if such intentions were known in advance by the professional school, such a youth may not even be permitted to enter the training in the first place. Commitment to the field is requisite for a true professional (Smith, 1998).

Autonomy

The final attitudinal attribute common to professions is autonomy. This attribute like the proceeding four is interrelated to other attributes. Hall (1968) described professional autonomy as involving the belief that the practitioner ought to be able to make

his or her own decisions without external pressures—i.e. from the client, from laypersons, or from the employing organization.

Roberts and Dietrich (1999) tie professionalism to the ability to engage in complex decision making. Assuming the professional has such skill, it is no wonder such a premium is placed upon autonomy, particularly where the alternative amounts to second-guessing on the part of novices.

Scott (1965) writes that professionals find themselves working in one of three types of work contexts when not in private practice. In the truly autonomous setting, the professional is only subject to his or her own colleagues. The classic example is that of a law firm or clinic. The second type of setting is a heteronomous one, where the professional is subordinated to an externally, and sometimes legislatively, derived system, e.g. a school or library. Scott's last type of professional work context is that of the professional department, such as a legal department in an organization. In this case, professionals are part of a larger organization and may not be able to affect the manner in which their own work is structured.

It is Scott's second work setting that tends to pose the greatest threat to autonomy. The professional status of a lawyer is not jeopardized when working for a company, nor is the professional status of a doctor at stake when working in a prison. While Scott seems ready to permit it, the balance of the

professionalism literature is quiet on the ability to even claim professional status when workers are limited by definition to heteronomous settings—workers such as city managers, librarians, and even police officers.

*Professional Education*

Professions are distinguished from many other vocations in that professions require of its members more than mere technical competency (Mayhew and Ford, 1974). Professions utilize a systematic body of knowledge. This knowledge includes both the theoretical and applied (Brody and Wallace, 1994) and should always be expanding through observation and experimentation (McGlothlin, 1964).

Harris (1993) argues for the essentiality of “reflection” in professional practice. While specialized bodies of theoretical and applied knowledge remain critical to the professions, reflective practice approaches and applies those bodies of knowledge artistically. Therefore, professional education should not emphasize specialized knowledge to the exclusion of thoughtful, art-like practice. Rather, reflection and knowledge must be intertwined with each other in professional education—just as they are in good professional practice.

McGlothlin (1964) identified two broad aims of professional education: the aim of sufficient quantity and the aim of sufficient quality. The former aim refers to the recruitment of would-be

professionals and the capacity of professional schools to produce the desired number of new entrants into the field. The latter aim refers to the production of professionals who are competent, who understand the society in which they operate, and who exhibit ethical behavior. A quandary exists in that the first aim is often confounded by the latter, and vice versa.

Although Wilensky (1964) indicated that training schools for would-be professions must eventually attach themselves to established universities to further the process of professionalization, Moore (1970) cautioned such an occurrence is not all-telling. He noted that university recognition of an occupation is no guarantee of quality. He said "one or a few universities with rather pliable standards may simply be used as a spurious authenticating mechanism for an occupation" (Moore, 1970, p. 120). For Moore, quality is jeopardized through the lowering of standards and credentials.

Mayhew and Ford (1974) echo the concern for quality in professional education housed within universities but in a different way by voicing concern for the pragmatic capacity (or lack thereof) of professional schools. They note the tendency of universities to fill the professional school vacancies with faculty exhibiting scholarly credentials, but often failing to demonstrate practical knowledge or experience. As Rosenstein (1969) said in connection with a study of the Engineering School at UCLA after observing a

trend of hiring strictly on the basis of academic credentials, "...the long-term consequence for the professions is evident, for it is apparent that the professional schools cannot play the science game and survive. ...If professional schools have nothing more to teach than science or mathematics or even humanities, it is doubtful that they can do a better job than the respective schools of science, mathematics, or humanities" (p.7).

Morgan (1994) calls the divergence of views between Moore on the one hand and Mayhew, Ford and Rosenstein on the other as the epistemological debate. What is the appropriate mix of theoretical and applied knowledge in professional education? While not answering the question directly, Morgan implores professional education to mindfully incorporate the liberal arts, for doing so will help new professionals cope with the conflict, uncertainty and moral ambiguity inherent in their day to day practice; develop an appreciation for multiple sources of knowledge; and cultivate a critical capacity to constantly reassess the ends to be served by professional practice.

### **Measuring Up to Professional Status**

Given the literature on true characteristics of a profession, one must ask if the field of policing measures up to those characteristics and therefore deserves professional status. Unfortunately for proponents of policing as a profession, it is

evident even at an intuitive level that Hall's attitudinal attributes of professional referents, self-regulation, and autonomy, as well as Wilensky's and Hall's structural attribute of professional education, are lacking where the practice of law enforcement is concerned.

*Policing and Professional Referents*

There is little doubt that common values can be found throughout the occupation of policing. Indeed, many have written extensively about the seemingly impenetrable and universal police culture. Often, this shared culture is reflected in the existence of police associations. However, the formal influence of these associations over the occupation of policing is minimal. Typically, these associations serve as a fraternal mechanisms, and in some cases, as collective bargaining units (which itself is uncharacteristic to most professions). Unlike other professions, police associations typically have little to do with the certifying of standards by which the occupation will operate.

*Policing and Self-Regulation*

One considerable obstacle for proponents of policing as a profession continues to be the issue of self-regulation. It cannot be said today that policing is an occupation of practitioners judging practitioners. Peace officer standards and training boards (POST Boards) frequently include law enforcement membership, but by no means exclusively so. Further, civilian review boards that sit in judgement over many departments are typically even less

representative of the practitioner's perspective. It is precisely because police practitioners are thought by some to not be trustworthy with the task of oversight that these boards are created in the first place. The notion of a layperson review board for medicine, established to oversee the actions of surgeons at work, is patently ridiculous. But some how, this idea is not so ridiculous with regard to policing.

It should also be noted that neither can internal affairs units, although comprised entirely of police officers, be equated with that standards and misconduct boards such as you see in other professions. Internal affairs officers are investigators (not judges) who inquire into an officer's practice ultimately at the bidding of the criminal justice system or, for less serious deeds, the bidding of the police chief or sheriff. Their mission is not to protect the integrity and jurisdiction of the practice of policing. Rather, their mission is more narrow: to enforce laws and departmental regulations. In light of the above, policing cannot reasonably be thought of as meeting the criterion of self-regulation on a par with other professions.

### *Policing and Service*

Most members of society would concede that policing is an indispensable occupation, the services of which society could not do without. Studies have shown that police officers also view their field in this light. Furthermore, the field of police work does have a

recognized code of ethics, as other professions do, expressing the occupation's service orientation. Although the code's provisions are not routinely examined, and some are widely ignored (e.g. the promise to never except even minor gratuities such as free coffee), the mere existence of such a code helps meet the service attribute. Hall's "service" is one professionalism attribute that *does* appear to fit police work.

*Policing and Calling*

Policing also appears to measure up to the attribute of "calling." Although we have all known police officers—especially ones late in their careers—who do not like their job, it is clear that many get into the field in the first place to help others, to catch bad guys, and to generally contribute to the well being of society. Many studies have shown that policing's intrinsic rewards play a significant role in sustaining police officers in their work, particularly since the pay for public servants will hardly make them rich. In fact, Bumgarner (2000) found that law enforcement students intending to become police officers would still do so if the pay were less than it is. In light of this, police work appears to align well with the attribute of "calling"—at least to the extent as you find in most other professions.

*Policing and Autonomy*

Policing as generally constituted today cannot be said to lead to autonomy for the police practitioner. Although community policing efforts around the country go varying distances to provide officers with discretion to solve problems, police and civil hierarchy has yet to be sufficiently mitigated to foster truly autonomous police officers. In fact, it is unclear if society even wants autonomous officers given the weighty responsibilities and coercive powers of the police. Certainly, policing today still exists in a heteronomous setting which by definition subordinates officers to externally derived authorities—not just from an administrative standpoint, but in the exercise of all realms of practice. For better or for worse, police work is not autonomous.

*Policing and Professional Education*

As far back as 1931, the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, appointed by Herbert Hoover and commonly known as the Wickersham Commission, urged that all police officers should have college degrees (Wickersham Commission, 1931). The commission's position on police education was reiterated by the International Association of Chiefs of Police in 1965 when it stated: "Generally, it is conceded that today's law enforcement officer has a need for higher education. It is also generally agreed that within the next few years law

enforcement officers will find higher education imperative” (Crockett and Stinchcomb, 1968).

The Wickersham Commission’s prediction notwithstanding, the numbers suggest that higher education has not come to be imperative to law enforcement. Today, only 1% of local law enforcement agencies require its recruits to have a four-year degree and 75% of law enforcement agencies have no formal policy linking education with promotion (Baro and Bulingame, 1999). These statistics highlight one of the most overt signs that policing as an occupation falls short of a true profession: the absence of an establish professional school as is common to other professions.

## **Discussion**

As a former law enforcement officer, I have always been interested in the occupational status of policing. Although labels such as tradesman, craftsman, para-professional, and technician are not pejorative ones, there is a tendency today to identify virtually any and every vocation as a profession and to describe best practices within that vocation as being “professional.” As the literature suggests, doing so is simply a misappropriation of the term and may only serve to undermine the unique qualities of true professions.

Morgan (1994) suggested that the process of how an occupation came to exhibit the various attributes and elements

associated with professionalism is just as important as the attributes and elements themselves when determining what vocations can lay true claim to the banner of a profession. He wrote (p. 19):

*"...the sociological perspective emphasizes three sets of factors that pull a practice along the professional status continuum. First, professions arise in response to a social demand for a body of esoteric knowledge and skills. ...Second, the knowledge must flow from a body of consistent and integrated theory. Finally, a guild is created to monitor the creation and application of the special fund of esoteric knowledge in skills.*

*"While sociologists emphasize the factors that pull a set of practices toward professional status, political scientists emphasize the use of instrumental power that is needed to push a set of practices in to the status of a profession. According to this view, a practice acquires the status of a profession once the group successfully mobilizes sufficient political power to be delegated the authority to monopolize control over the marketplace. Pushed to its extreme, this view reduces professional associations to just another vested interest group."*

For Morgan, many occupations claiming to be a profession would be somewhat suspect in their claims because they took the political rather than sociological road in their occupational evolution.

Morgan's observation quite possibly may explain the increasing use of the professional label for policing. The occupation, as well as the political dynamics at work within and outside the occupation, may be pushing policing into the status of a profession without the occupation adhering to the sequence of

events that has characterized the emergence of other, traditional professions.

Professional police officers – i.e. officers that find value in professional referents, are self-regulated, have a high service orientation, are called to the practice, are autonomous in their decisions, and who have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills through a standardized professional education – may indeed be something to aim for. But as the occupation of policing is presently constituted, many of the above attributes are simply not observed in the occupational context of policing and in some cases are entirely unavailable to the law enforcement practitioner regardless of one's professional orientation. Until this condition changes, talk of the professional police officer remains a misnomer. Ultimately, society must decide what kind of police officers it wants and then let the occupational labels fall where they may.

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