

An Exploration of Police Leadership and Culture

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Introduction

Leadership is complex. Particularly for leaders of policing organisations facing a multiplicity of internal and external challenges against a backdrop of reduced public trust and increasing politicisation of law enforcement action. The proposed paper presentation explores this complexity through the dynamic relationship between police culture, leadership, and the self-determination of police personnel. Demonstrating the unique contradictions, tensions, and forces influencing leader-follower relationships in policing organisations.

Literature Review

The financial year 2022-2023 saw the highest number of voluntary police leavers overall and as a proportion of the workforce since records began in 2003 (The Home Office, 2023). Despite initiatives to improve matters, research of police leavers continues to highlight poor leadership as a dominant influence upon the decision to resign (Charman and Bennett, 2022). Including a perceived lack of support, autonomy, and voice in leavers relationships with leaders. Which, this author notes, has direct influence upon leavers self-determination.

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a motivational theory asserting the need for individuals to perceive the fulfilment of autonomy, competency, and relatedness in order to experience growth, positive motivation and well-being (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000). In the work environment leadership has the potential to significantly influence attainment of these needs (Oostlander et al., 2014) in addition to being both and influence upon and influenced by the pervading culture (Jerab and Mabrouk, 2023).

The concept of police culture concerns the norms, values and beliefs shared by policing practitioners (Bacon, 2022). Its central tenets including the possession of specific values, the importance of identity, the meaning ascribed to police work and an action orientation; coupled with characteristics of pragmatism, solidarity, cynicism, mission focus, machismo, and conservatism (Caveney et al., 2020). Classical approaches emphasising adherence to hierarchy, discipline, command and control ethos. In addition to the strong in-group mentality and internal solidarity expected of police personnel (Myhill and Bradford, 2013) which include suspicions of leadership and their ability to deliver positive change (Villiers, 2003). All of which will have significant influence on leader-follower relationships via their influence upon follower self-determination. Whilst the prevalence of these characteristics continues to be recognised, greater subtlety has emerged such that previous simple depictions of police culture are increasingly superseded by more complex and contingent conceptualisations (Caveney et al., 2020) as explored from a leadership perspective in the proposed paper.

Methodology

Participants in this study are volunteers from three English police forces of contrasting size, rural-urban location, socio-economic context, and crime and public order demands. In each force the volunteers represented a wide range of ranks and roles including intelligence, investigative, neighbourhoods, and response personnel working at levels from constable to chief officer ranks and civilian equivalents. Forty-four semi structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing and the results subsequently analysed using the researcher's own thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) tooling within Microsoft Excel. The first round of analysis yielded 164 individual codes which were classified into 46 categories. The author observing during the assignment of themes the emergence of notable contradiction and complexity. Initiating their application to this conference to obtain expert peer engagement and feedback via their presentation and subsequent discussion. Having completed the data analysis, the author proposes to validate findings with participants through provision of a briefing paper and qualitative questionnaire. The results of which will, together with the interview findings, inform recommendations for future police practice.

Preliminary Findings

The initial findings of this work demonstrate an overwhelming expectation that police leaders support, empower and show solidarity with their teams, fulfilling their needs for relatedness, competency and autonomy, whilst fulfilling cultural expectations and values of being honest, authentic, ethical, brave, confident and humble. However, strict adherence to rank in decision making, enduring lack of equity between officers and staff, expectations of accountability, high workloads, a reaction orientation, politicisation, and bureaucracy are prominent among the multiplicity of factors associated with and influenced by police culture which thwart this attainment. Impacting the quality of the leader-follower relationship and follower motivation.

Implications for Practice

Through exploring the intersection of police culture, leadership, and follower self-determination this research seeks to address at least in part, the challenges identified by Charman and Bennett, (2022) in respect of perceived organisational injustice associated with leader-follower relationships. Further, through greater understanding of the leader-follower relationship it is hoped to contribute to the collective development of leadership skills in policing organisations, moving away from a focus in those in formal leadership and authority positions. In addition to generating conversation and reflection amongst police practitioners in respect of their in-work relationships. Thereby increasing the likelihood of the benefits of enhanced interpersonal relationships being more widely realised in policing, including improving retention rates amongst practitioners. Further, whilst focused upon policing, this study may have applicability to other similar hierarchical rank-based cultures, such as the military. Exploring this potential transferability may represent an avenue of further research post-project.

Implications for Theory

The proposed study seeks to potentially contribute to the fields of police and leadership studies including furthering understanding of the influence of police occupational culture on the functioning of police organisations, particularly the ways in which leaders and followers engage and the implications of this for structure, governance, policy, and process. Whilst also developing understanding of the ways in which self-determination may be both enabled and thwarted by cultural phenomena, and the implications of this for the leader-follower relationship.

Further, Uhl-Bien (2006) observes gaps in understanding of the interconnected social, cognitive, and political processes which influence the emergence of leadership and create interdependencies. Particularly in respect of compatibilities of values and interests, degrees of contribution and the sensemaking surrounding these by participants. Including exploration of values and other facets of culture, such as shared histories and individual versus group interpretations of these. Which ultimately influence the resulting social order. The present research may offer a contribution here in working with police practitioners to develop understanding of the interplay between culture and leadership as a broader concept than the formal hierarchy. And further help explain variations in relationships between leaders and followers across policing organisations.

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