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POLICE CYNICISM: POLICE SURVIVAL TOOL?

This article broadly defines cynicism as a pessimistic and suspicious outlook on the part of police officers towards their job, the public and society as a whole. Cynicism is an evolving characteristic of even the most idealistic police recruits. Since it appears to be inevitable, should it be considered an unpleasant epidemic and condemned, or should it be respected and embraced as a necessary police survival skill? Through comprehensive research and the author's self-analysis of journal entries made when he worked as a police officer, this article seeks to understand why police become cynical. Then it looks at the effects of cynicism on the police personality and police–community relations. While cynicism has negative side-effects for police personnel, its positive role in police work cannot be overlooked. The public expects a proactive, crime-fighting police force. For this reason, cynicism can be a valuable tool for the police.

Introduction

For twelve months I worked as a police officer in a municipal police department. Prior to the police academy and throughout my experience with the department I kept a journal of my ideas, feelings, frustrations and important events which ultimately chronicled my battle between cynicism and idealism. For the purpose of this article, cynicism is broadly defined as a pessimistic and suspicious outlook on the part of police officers towards their job, the public and society as a whole. A cynic expects nothing but the worst in human behaviour (Graves, 1996). It is the opposite of idealism.

Cynicism is a progressively evolving characteristic of even the most idealistic police officers. Since it appears to be inevitable, should it be considered an unpleasant epidemic and condemned or should it be respected and embraced as a necessary police survival skill? To answer this question, we must first understand why police become cynical and then look at cynicism's function in law enforcement.

Literature Review

Research shows that work itself must yield feelings of achievement, responsibility, personal growth and recognition to satisfy a

worker's ego. According to police cynicism studies, present methods of policing do not meet these self-actualising needs of a police officer (Albanese, 1999; Graves, 1996; Knapp Commission, 1972; Sykes & Brent, 1983; Bennett & Schmitt, 2002; O'Connell *et al.*, 1986; Anson *et al.*, 1986). Jerome Skolnick maintained that police personality emerges from police work's danger, isolation and authority. He believed that danger causes police officers to be more suspicious of people in general (cited in Albanese, 1999: 194). The Knapp Commission stated that at one time or another most citizens regard the police with varying degrees of hostility, and the police naturally return this hostility (Knapp Commission, 1972).

Cynicism has characterised the police in other times and places. During the French Revolution, the minister of police concluded that, with a few exceptions, the world was composed of scoundrels, hypocrites and imbeciles (Niederhoffer, 1969). Since it is evident that police cynicism is not just a modern phenomenon, there must be similar causes that account for a history of cynicism among police personnel.

According to Arthur Niederhoffer, the origins of cynicism are a by-product of anomie in one's social structure. The word 'anomie' was coined by sociologist Emile Durkheim in the late 1800s to describe a 'normlessness' or lack of attachment felt by some people towards their society (cited in Albanese, 1999). The typical adaptation to anomie in the police system is cynicism. As police lose respect for law and society, they lose self-respect as well, and they become cynical (Graves, 1996; Niederhoffer, 1969). Niederhoffer quotes a retired Washington DC Metropolitan Police Force supervisor:

I've seen good men completely ruined by the hopeless feeling. I have seen many become worthless to their department, to their community and to themselves. Worse yet, I have seen some few turn crooked . . . It is an insidious thing, all the more dangerous because it is not at once evident and apparent. It is similar to cancer. (Niederhoffer, 1969: 96)

Cynicism is not a personal characteristic of people who choose to become police officers. Research has shown that police officers do not differ from the general population in personality traits. Instead, occupational stagnation, conditions on the street and loss of respect for the law and the public are primarily responsible for police cynicism (Albanese, 1999; Skolnick, 1966).

Some researchers recommend 'cures' for police cynicism such as positive recognition, college education, continuing education, employee-oriented leadership, mentors, preventive psychological services, peer counsellors and community policing (Graves, 1996). I was unable to find any studies that explain how a police officer can go from the academy to retirement without becoming cynical.

Reasons Police Become Cynical

How work affects people's views of the world is a recurrent theme among many sociological studies (Skolnick, 1966). Blumberg (1985: 91) explains: 'when a policeman dons his uniform, he enters a distinct subculture governed by norms and values designed to manage the strain created by an outsider role in the community'. Policing is essentially a sequence of potentially hazardous encounters with the public, interrupted by stretches of boredom (Bittner, 1990; Barker, 1999). However, police academies warn recruits that they are always vulnerable and therefore the police system encourages sensitivity to danger. Jay Albanese (1999: 195) said that the 'link between danger and suspicion, coupled with constant challenges to their authority, may lead police officers to react to vague indications of danger'. Police officers may not always emphasise the peril associated with their careers, but the elements of police work combine to generate distinctive characteristics in police personnel: cynicism (Skolnick, 1966).

Patrol work defies a general job description since it includes an almost infinite set of activities. Yet, there is a frustration among police officers when the public refuses to accord them the professional status they desire (Niederhoffer, 1969; Bittner, 1990). The public is constantly telling the police how to do their jobs. Have you ever told your dentist how to fill a cavity, or your doctor the most efficient way to remove your kidney? This is one very important reason why police become cynical: they are specially trained to do a job, yet their jobs are controlled and criticised by those who have no real understanding of police work.

Laws are made by legislators who may have no background in criminal justice policies and practices. And, criminal penalties are most often set by an equally unqualified group of people. Police officers witness first-time marijuana users being sentenced to mandatory 20-year terms of incarceration while murderers are sometimes released from prison in less than 15 years. Newspaper readers complacently read stories about a mother or father who

has been arrested for child abuse but it is the police who face the grim, unpublished reality while they care for the bruised and socially withdrawn children waiting for Family Services to arrive. Police see the worst of society on a daily basis.

Police officers return to work only to encounter verbal abuse by the public, yet remain silent as they try not to let the words pierce their emotional armour. Police are often physically attacked without justification and then accused of using excessive force to control and arrest aggressors. Even if the force used was in accordance with the officer's training, the public's attention is often directed at the police officer's unsubstantiated misconduct while everyone forgets the primary reason the officer was called to the scene in the first place: to control the actions of the aggressor. According to Joan Barker:

Any serious resistance on the part of a citizen signals to the police officer that potential problems could arise on several levels . . . [P]hysically, there is more likely to be an altercation; legally, there is a greater chance of complaints or even lawsuits; logistically, more paperwork will be required; emotionally, an arrest that involves use of force is unsettling, even for police. (1999: 46)

Burnout and stress are caused largely by the excessive demands of the police profession. Alienation from society and cynicism are primary responses to these conditions (Graves, 1996). New police recruits quickly develop an us-versus-them attitude and begin to trust only other police officers: the only people who 'understand' how the world truly is (ibid.).

Effects of Cynicism on Police Personality

The informal culture of a police agency is a powerful force in shaping the attitudes of new officers (Haarr, 2001). People who choose a police career do not differ from the general population in personality characteristics. Rather, a police officer's 'working personality' grows out of his or her social environment rather than being a product of pre-existing personality traits (Albanese, 1999: 194). Skolnick maintained that the 'police personality' emerges from several aspects of police work: in particular, danger, isolation and authority. He believed that danger caused police officers to be more wary of people in general, making them more suspicious and cynical. This relationship between danger and cynicism organises the life of a police officer in all its aspects (Barker, 1999; Britz, 1997). A study by Richard Anson, J. Dale Mann and Dale Sherman suggests that 'cynicism is a

valued quality of the personality of [police officers] and is positively evaluated by important individuals in police organizations' (1986: 304).

Police have a high degree of occupational solidarity (Albanese, 1999; Skolnick, 1966). The indoctrination process for police recruits emphasises the danger of their new status and suggests that other police officers are their only protection against a treacherous and ostracising world (Barker, 1999). For this reason, police officers associate with one another, more so than people in other occupations.

I participated in simunitions training as a police recruit. It was the first time I experienced the anxiety of a car stop and the terror of looking down the barrel of a gun. When I returned home from the academy, I wrote the following:

Simunitions training is when we use real guns, cars, buildings, etc., and do actual motor vehicle stops and building searches. Other police officers play the role of the 'bad-guys' and the guns are converted to shoot paint-tipped bullets. When I was sent to search a building, and I was fired upon, I realized the first time that I was hit, that at that instant I would have been dead. I learned how vulnerable I am – the uniform doesn't make me invincible. I also realized how important it is to trust my fellow police officers.

When my friends and I talked about how dangerous the police officer's job really is, I mentioned how once I become a police officer, I will never be the same: I won't want to sit with my back facing the door at restaurants and I will notice things about other people that would put up a 'red flag' in my mind, yet other 'civilians' wouldn't even think twice about. I am not paranoid, but I will be suspicious and possibly cynical. This conversation was the first time I had really felt scared about being a police officer. It doesn't matter how I am as a person, once I put the uniform on, I am a target. I will become a member, and always be a member of a new fraternity – the fraternity of law enforcement officers. The decisions I make can impact the rest of my life and the instant that I made my decision to never let my guard down and always be suspicious of everything around me, is the day I did simunitions training. The day finally hit me that there is no one else to call if I need protection. I, the police, am the last line of civilian defense in an emergency situation. I once thought that I will initially trust everyone unless they give

me a reason not to. Now, this is not the case. I will suspect the worst, hope for the best, and I will never relax. The moment I let my guard down, is the moment I will regret it. (Caplan, 2000)

Police solidarity also stems from public criticism for commonplace activities that are viewed as unprofessional if done by a police officer. For example, police are considered lazy if they drink a cup of coffee while they are working and they are ridiculed for going to Dunkin Donuts, even if they are working the nightshift and it is the only place open at four o'clock in the morning:

Has it ever occurred to the critics that a police officer sitting alone in his patrol car, eating a bagel and coffee, or maybe even a donut, so that he can stay awake long enough to complete his shift, would much rather be at home with his family? The person wearing the uniform is not criticized, the uniform is. Unfortunately, such criticism touches a personal nerve. I'm sure that just as many construction workers and school teachers go to Dunkin Donuts, but they do not have a uniform that makes them stand out. (Caplan, 2001)

Brian O'Connell, Herbert Holzman and Barry Armandi (1986) distinguish between cynicism focused on the organisational and work-related contexts of police organisations. Organisational cynicism is mistrust towards the organisation while work cynicism is mistrust towards the service of the people and enforcement of the law. According to Richard Bennett and Erica Schmitt:

Police officers are sworn to carry out the goal of the police organization, which is to prevent or at least reduce crime. However, line-level officers quickly learn the impossibility of realizing this goal, leading to their perception that departmental administrators do not understand the daily demands the patrol officers face. This results in feelings of isolation from and resentment toward their superiors. (2002: 494)

The objectives of police organisations cannot possibly be carried out by line-level officers in ways that police supervisors and community residents would always approve of or expect (Fisher, 2003). Cynicism is a by-product of disconnection between administrative and public expectations on one hand and realities

on the other, and it further strengthens the solidarity among police officers (Bennett & Schmitt, 2002).

Community Relations

Police academies incorporate lessons designed to instil attitudes that are consistent with community-policing philosophies (Haarr, 2001). However, police recruits' attitudes change over time as a result of work-related factors and their respective communities' attitude towards the police.

I carry a Band-Aid in my glove pouch 'just in case,' and yesterday a toddler fell on the beach ramp. He had a small scrape on his knee and the Band-Aid worked perfectly to fix it. His parents were very appreciative and I think I surprised them by being so friendly and for having a bandage with me. (Caplan, 2001)

In contrast to the example of a mother thanking me for giving her son a bandage, I recall a time when I observed a sport utility vehicle being driven on the wrong side of the road. I gave the 17-year-old driver a warning so as not to burden him with a large fine and several points on his licence. However, he gave me 'the finger' when he drove away. 'I was pissed. I was so nice to him! This incident has changed my whole attitude', I wrote in my journal (Caplan, 2000).

Police cynicism is compounded by an emotional tug-of-war between the public's affection and hostility. Whitman Knapp states: 'Nobody, whether a burglar or a Sunday motorist, likes to have his activities interfered with. As a result, most citizens at one time or another, regard the police with varying degrees of hostility' (Knapp Commission, 1972). I once recovered a bicycle that was reported stolen by a young boy. He was so excited that he sent a 'Thank You' card to the police station. In contrast, a person who received a ticket for parking in a 'No Parking' zone screamed at me for writing him the summons. As ridiculous as it sounds for a student to be mad at a professor for giving a deserved failing grade, it is just as absurd for law violators to be angry with the police for catching them breaking the law. A police officer's role as a civil servant should not relieve the public of its responsibility for policing itself (Shecter, 1973). The perceptions of a community's level of support for police are a determinate of police cynicism (Bennett & Schmitt, 2002).

Police cynicism is a precursor to misconduct and the police officer's environment openly invites both (Shecter, 1973; Knapp Commission, 1972). Corruption is by no means uniform in

degree and I certainly do not promote police corruption or deny its existence. However, cynicism among the police towards the public is reinforced by the public's stereotypical thinking that all police are bad. Fairness requires that mistakes be judged in the context of the countless times police officers use good judgement and do the right thing (Toby, 2000). Antipathy among the police and their respective communities hinders all possibilities of forging constructive police–community relationships (Graves, 1996; Skolnick, 1966).

Discussion and Conclusion

A cynic expects nothing but the worst in human behaviour and it does not take long for police to become cynical. Police recruits enjoy the notion of retiring young with an admirable pension. By the time they reach retirement they are chronologically young yet they seldom feel that way. The physical and emotional toll on their bodies combined with the cumulative effects of cynicism has robbed them of their stamina, idealism and enthusiasm (Barker, 1999).

Looking back at my time as a police officer, cynicism created a barrier between the public and me which is antithetical to my reasons for wanting to be a cop: to have a close and mutually respectful relationship with the public. However, while cynicism has negative side-effects for police personnel, its positive role in police work cannot be overlooked. The contemporary public expects a proactive, crime-fighting police force. For this reason, police cynicism can be a valuable tool for police.

The police system encourages sensitivity to danger and officers who are cynical about and suspicious of their surroundings are better prepared for the unexpected. In today's society where anyone, from a kindergarten pupil to a senior citizen, can be a potential criminal it is the job of the police to assume the worst and hope for the best. It is in the public's best interest for police to be cynical. Just as a patrol car can be a criminal deterrent, an officer who is always suspicious, as opposed to laid-back and always trusting, is an even greater deterrent and locator of crime. At the same time, the officer will be suspiciously aware of his or her surroundings.

The police job inevitably produces cynicism; therefore, perhaps it is an evolutionary career trait: the cynical survive and the idealistic do not. Since police can be cynical about nearly all aspects of police work, they could, with appropriate leadership and training, learn to use their cynicism to improve a wide range

of police activities. Furthermore, because cynicism varies geographically, it can be tailored to meet the needs of police in their respective departments. This is where our concerns about police cynicism should be focused. We know cynicism exists in the police profession; and it is unpreventable. It is futile to try to prevent the inevitable. Instead, police academies should teach recruits ways in which to harness its potential as a crime-fighting tool.

Currently, the negative side-effects outweigh the positive aspects of cynicism. Perhaps this is because it is a tool that police officers are not properly trained to use. Police administrators must acknowledge cynicism's existence, harness its potential and teach officers how to use it effectively. Severely negative consequences of cynicism are manifest among only those officers who cannot properly employ it. Cynicism is a tool that comes with the uniform. It has a proper place on a duty belt, but when the belt comes off cynicism must follow. As with any other police tool, such as a gun, if used inappropriately cynicism can lead to disaster.

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