

Psychological Consequences of the Police Role

Hans H. Toch

Michigan State University \*

Gilbert and Sullivan were probably joking when they proclaimed that "a policeman's lot is not a happy one," but law enforcement officers tend to view this hypothesis as an established fact. In professional publications and in conferences concerned with police problems, the theme of the "unhappy lot" emerges with increasing frequency. The composite picture is that of dedicated missionaries hemmed in by political interference, blocked by deluded judges, cramped by tightfisted legislators, and misrepresented by a bad press. Worst of all, police contend, the man in the street seems inclined to bite the hand that protects him. He blames for inevitable failures, and reacts to successful enforcement as if it represented a personal threat.

These things are perceived by police officials in an age when they strive for the respectability of a profession. Professionalization, as they see it, is to be accomplished by improved selection procedures, more sophisticated training programs and the use of scientific methods and data to raise the quality of law enforcement.

It is probably obvious that the policeman's portrait of the "policeman's lot" is only partially correct. If the situation were exactly as characterized, only saints or psychotics would be tempted to enter the police profession, and experience tells us that most law enforcers cannot be classified under either of these headings. However, police do view themselves as playing a saintly role in a hostile world, and this is a fact. Their puzzlement and annoyance is also a fact, as is the hostility or indifference to police on the part of various publics, including other persons involved in the administration of justice.

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What accounts for these ill feelings and resentments? How can the police be aided to find contentment and acceptance? I shall briefly comment on these two questions. As a working premise, I should like to propose that the police role itself, as defined and practiced today, is conducive to social tensions and therefore self-defeating. This assumption implies that greater police efficiency requires not only increased sophistication, but also a redefinition of the role.

What are some of the psychological and social consequences of the police role? The most obvious one, of course, is the impact of sanctioned power. The law enforcement officer embodies the law so visibly and directly, that neither he nor the public find it easy to differentiate law and enforcement. Police speak of "contempt for the law," for instance, when they refer to persons who don't like the police. This equating of "law" and "police" is not merely semantic juggling designed to sanctify the police function, but also a recognition of the syncretic nature of the police concept in the public mind. As Bruce Smith pointed out,

"Relatively few citizens can recall ever having seen a judge; fewer still, a prosecutor, coroner, sheriff, probation officer or prison warden. The Patrolman is thoroughly familiar to all. His uniform picks him out from the crowd so distinctly that he becomes the living symbol of the law--not always of its majesty, but certainly of its power. Whether the police like it or not, they are forever marked men." 1

A police officer is partly a symbol, and police work consists to some extent in the creation of illusions based on symbolic attributes. It is in this fashion that an empty police car can slow down turnpike traffic, and that the presence of half a dozen officers can control a large crowd.

The police uniform is viewed as a symbolic license to judge and to punish. It does so, not only by representing the right to arrest, but also by connoting the punishing role in general. It is for this reason, for instance, that children may be threatened by means of pointed references to policemen.



The punishing role does not lend itself to the promotion of a lovable public image. It is true that law enforcement officers could echo the words of Colonel Calverly,

"It's one in a million  
That any civilian  
My figure and form will surpass,"

but this statement hardly takes into the account the feelings of civilians.

"Policemanship", in one sense, is an easy game to play, because members of the public are "one down" to begin with. They meet police officers on an unequal basis, with punishment implicit in every encounter. The application of a sanction, such as a traffic ticket, places adults in a position equivalent to childhood experiences involving the use of sanctions, and this induces appropriate feelings of childish impotence and sheepishness. These feelings may present problems for persons who like to view themselves as autonomous, responsible adults. Strong anti-police sentiments on such occasions may therefore constitute defensive reactions against regression. In other words, it is the symbolic connotations of police actions, rather than their direct impact, which may produce public resentment. These connotations can probably be ameliorated, but hardly completely eradicated, by police courtesy and sensitivity. Ultimately the typical contact between police and public remains one in which there is essentially one way communication against a backdrop of latent power.

This type of contact is not only detrimental to police-public relations, but also psychologically harmful to the police. The police officer loses his feeling of communality with the public. Instead, he perceives the public's resentment as an indication of his inevitable alienation from the social order. According to William Wartley, who has studied police attitudes and values, the typical police officer

"regards the public as his enemy, feels his occupation to be in conflict with the community, and regards himself to be a pariah. The experience and the feeling give rise to a collective emphasis on secrecy, an attempt to coerce respect from the public, and a belief that almost any means are legitimate in completing an

important arrest. These are for the policeman basic occupational values. They arise from his experience, take precedence over his legal responsibilities, are central to an understanding of his conduct, and form the occupational contexts within which violence gains its meaning." 2

The police officer also become conscious of the fact that he does represent a source of power. This awareness of power can lead to its self-justified use. Law enforcement personnel can come to take pride in their power potential, and to view the display of power as an end in itself. It is in this spirit that the police commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama encouraged spectators to his control of demonstrators with the words, "I want 'em to see the dogs work. Look at the niggers run."

The following item also makes the premise explicit:

"In Salt Lake City, after Mrs. Agnes Haynes complained that cops surrounded her car on a downtown street, searched her as an armed-robbery suspect and left without apology while a crowd looked on, Police Chief W. C. Skousen issued a proclamation telling all citizens that if they should find themselves in a similar situation, they should 'accept the inconvenience as an exceptional opportunity to observe how polic function when apprehending a criminal.'" 3

A related consequence of the police role is the fact that the use of, and encounter with violence in police work create a tendency to perceive violence with comparative ease. Richard Schulte and I were able to show, for instance, that one product of an excellent police training program was an increased facility to see pictures of violent actions. We discussed this finding as follows:

"Unusual experiences, after all, become 'familiar' in the course of any specialization. The funeral director or the medical intern, for instance, may learn to accept corpses as part and parcel of everyday experience. The dedicated nudist may acquire a special conception of familiar attire. The pilot may come to find nothing unusual about glancing down out of a window at a bank of clouds.

"In the same fashion, law enforcement training can produce a revision of unconscious expectations of violence and crime. This does not mean that the law enforcer necessarily comes to exaggerate the prevalence of violence. It means that the law enforcer may



come to accept crime as a familiar personal experience, one which he himself is not surprised to encounter. The acceptance of crime as a familiar personal experience in turn increases the ability or readiness to perceive violence where clues to it are potentially available." 4

In similar fashion, the fact that police work entails disproportionately many contacts with socially underprivileged and emotionally disturbed persons who do not display typical middle class conduct, can shape police perception of human nature and of appropriate social behavior. Don Kooken, formerly Captain in the Indiana State Police, points this out in his volume on Ethics in Police Service, when he states that

"Numerous contacts with antisocial persons are likely to cause policemen to assume a veneer of hardness. They often entertain the erroneous belief that courteous treatment of law violators by a policeman is an indication of weakness, of cringing or of servility. They will say that criminals are not entitled to the treatment accorded to gentlemen." 5

Westley points out that "the police believe that certain groups of persons will respond only to fear and rough treatment. In the city studied, they defined both Negroes and slum dwellers in this category." 6 By thus unfavorably categorizing one segment of the community, the police create a double standard in human relations. Placement in the outgroup deprives a person of his right to customary courtesies, to friendly consideration and to frank communication. It becomes at the very least possible to overtly express your contempt for him, and to deceive him and misrepresent your intentions when expedient. At worst, overt violence may be psychologically justified. Thus a former police chief in South Dakota who had subjected Indians to a variety of inhuman treatments, insisted to The New York Times that

"it was always necessary to handle Indidnas 'firmly'. 'The Indian is not a law-abiding person, 'he said. 'As near as I can figure out, it's about like the Negroes down South: You can't let them get the upper hand.'" 7

To the extent to which such cognitive compartments accomodating "gentlemen"

and "criminals" or "law abiding" and "non-law abiding" citizens break down (as per force they must to some extent sooner or later) the police officer runs the risk of becoming a boor in relation to his friends and neighbors. He also can develop a somewhat paranoid outlook in his social perceptions, with a tendency to assign evil intentions to others. Society can come to be viewed as a vicious "dog eat dog" jungle, in which only force can insure peace and harmony. It is consequently not surprising to find professional law enforcement groups lobbying for the death penalty, for long-term imprisonment of drug addicts, and for other legislation which reflects punitive thinking about social ills.

Chief Hoover of the F.B.I. illustrates the prevalence of this outlook among even relatively sophisticated enforcement personnel. Bloch and Geiss succinctly summarize one of Mr. Hoover's comments about current trends in corrections. They point out that in the course of a short statement Mr. Hoover describes criminologists as "'sentimental yammerheads' and 'moronic adults' who show 'asinine behavior' and 'maudlin sentiment' and 'inherent criminal worship'. Hoover would prefer to ignore the 'moo-cow sentimentality' of 'hoity-toity professors'." <sup>8</sup> Police work would appear to lead to a stress on crime as a social problem rather than as a social product.

Another aspect of the police role which reinforces this development of the law enforcer's jaundiced eye is the premium which is placed on the assignment of blame, and on securing formal convictions. Since the police officer obtains his rewards and satisfactions from the successful identification of persons responsible for misconduct, and since such success is "confirmed" through prosecution, conviction and sentencing, any interference with this sequence may be experienced as terribly frustrating. In instances where the law itself blocks the road from suspicion to disposition, the law becomes an enemy of its ostensible servants. This is almost invariably the case with



laws, court decisions and administrative regulations which set limits to methods which may be used in obtaining evidence or in processing suspected offenders. Police can no more be expected to subscribe to the premise that persons whom they perceive as violators must be protected, than dedicated hunters are likely to grant the immunity of deer. The concepts of enforcement and civil rights are clearly cognitively dissonant for the police.

When law is seen as conflicting with enforcement or when it presents enforcement difficulties, the police frequently operate extra-legally. They may harass prostitutes or homosexuals, for instance, when there is no recourse to prosecution. They may stage raids or "tip-overs" against gambling establishments when there are insufficient grounds for a search warrant. They may routinely frisk or search people in dark streets without reasonable grounds. 9

When the law does set limits, the police frequently test them. An example is the practice of holding arrested persons in police stations for the maximum amounts of time tolerated by the courts, as documented in a study of detentions by the Chicago Police between 1956 and 1958. 10

In summary, the label "law enforcer" is somewhat deceptive. Police - in the words of Bruce Smith - "have made furtive, and occasionally open efforts to circumvent the law under which they operate. Laws and ordinances which were unpopular have been ignored, and others which were persistently violated have only occasionally been enforced." 11

This situation is not in and of itself alarming or surprising. Full law enforcement is impossible. Many laws, such as those governing private sexual behavior, or those prohibiting any and all forms of gambling, are not passed with the intention of being enforced. Many laws are out of date, unrealistic, unenforceable, or blatantly magical. The police are keenly

aware of this fact, and have their own views about the relative merits of particular acts of legislation. Moreover, they are forced to allocate meager resources, to evaluate the circumstances surrounding each offense, and to adjust to a variety of social pressures. Police discretion is thus an inescapable fact. 12

What poses problems is not police discretion, but the frame of reference which governs the way it is exercised. An essentially punitive and negative frame of reference leads to decisions in which conflicts with the community are created and reinforced. If the aim is to maximize enforcement at the expense of other values, the resulting atmosphere makes it more difficult to achieve effective enforcement. Police officers of the last generation were unable to appreciate this paradox, and even sophisticated police administrators today tend to attribute public resentment against the police to ignorance or to educational deficiencies resulting in a lack of respect for duly constituted authority.

Pioneer efforts to change the orientation behind police discretion have mainly centered on problems of race relations. After the war, a number of large municipal police departments established "human relations" training programs, and several texts and manuals for this purpose appeared. By 1950, this type of course was offered in over 30 cities. Workshops, seminars and institutes dealing with ethnic tensions and other community relations problems have awakened considerable police interest. 13 This type of development is one which suggests the possibility of expanding the traditional police role.

Other trends toward change are apparent in police work with juveniles. Units within police departments have begun to deal with youngsters from a therapeutic vantage point. Police athletic leagues and similar community programs illustrate efforts to enter into the delinquency prevention area. Attempts to improve public relations have ranged from sponsored tours of



police stations to the creation of civilian police advisory boards.

Such developments are to date scattered and relatively small scale, because many law enforcement officers view them as unpolicelike and threatening. Their view is not without a basis in fact. Police agencies which begin to render community services, to struggle with problems of crime causation, to engage in prevention programs and to assume other positive stances, are bound to start functioning differently, even in their traditional roles. Over three decades ago, Vollmer discussed the "socializing influence" of policewomen trained in psychiatric social work on their male colleagues in the Berkeley Police Department.<sup>14</sup> Such influence can be very real, provided institutional resistance does not block it. The infiltration of police departments by platoons of social workers in uniform would threaten two powerful institutions, both of which could be expected to react. The police, viewing their new colleagues as a malignant tumor in their collective anatomy, would at best treat them with the tolerance accorded to visiting aliens. The therapeutic professions, intent on maintaining their presumed monopoly on human relations, would distinguish between academically trained police officers carrying the sacred imprimatur, and the rest, whose duty it would be to conform to the traditional police stereotype. Obviously, these two types of institutional pressure can reinforce each other. Together, they can insure the segregation of therapeutic personnel in police settings.

To circumvent the push toward the treatment oriented ghetto, the arbitrary boundaries between professional human relations and professional law enforcement must be gradually erased. On the police side, a possible first step is the introduction of new content into police curricula. This might include sensitivity training and elements of therapeutic technique, intensive acquaintance with contemporary social problems such as urbanization, discrimination, poverty, unemployment and their social psychological consequences, a

course concretizing the implications of the Bill of Rights, and seminars in which aspects of the police role and their subjective correlates are honestly examined. Police candidates can thus come to view themselves as playing a crucial role in producing the type of social order in which crime and other symptoms of inter-personal conflict are reduced. Such a view can be fully justified. Unlike many of us, law enforcement officers are not encumbered with archaic quasi-medical or quasi-educational models of social change. The police thus may be in a unique position to lead the way toward the redefinition of professional roles which the pressures of our day demand.

This, however, is probably the Utopian view. A conservative prediction would be that the police role will increasingly emphasize human relations and social involvement. As a result, the New Police Officer will come to occupy a happier and more secure place in his community. The Old Police Officer, and most of the rest of us, will be fighting this promising trend every inch of the way.



### Footnotes

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5. Kooiken, D. L. Ethics in Police Service, Springfield, Ill., C. C. Thomas, 1959; p. 22.
6. Westley, op. cit., p. 40
7. The New York Times, June 13, 1962.
8. Bloch, H. A. and G. Geiss Man, Crime and Society, New York, Random House, 1962.
9. Material to support these generalizations is provided in an unpublished pilot project report The Administration of Criminal Justice in the United States circulated by the American Bar Foundation (1959)
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