Police Subcultural Traits and Police Organizational Failure

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Abstract
Due to the high-risk and unique mandate of police agencies, police organizational failure can be tragic and catastrophic. This article looks at police subcultural traits that could lead to organizational problems and, ultimately, organizational failure. Through a case study analysis of four major police commissions (Knapp, Mollen, Christopher, Rampart) subcultural traits were identified in each that could have led to the organizational failure documented and investigated by these commissions. These traits were categorized and coded using axial coding and the results reported.

Keywords: Police Corruption, Subculture, Knapp, Mollen, Christopher Commission, Rampart, Police Organizational Failure, Decoupling.

Introduction
In 1994, New Orleans police officer Len Davis was arrested after Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) surveillance captured Davis planning and ordering the murder of Kim Marie Groves, a single mother of three, who had filed a complaint against Davis with the police department just days before her death (Copeland, 1994). Officer Davis utilized his police issued radio to order the killing (Walker, 2001). In 2004, during a riot celebrating the Boston Red Sox’s American League Baseball Championship Series win over the New York Yankees, 21-year old student Victoria Snelgrove was accidentally killed by a pepper-spray pellet fired by police from a less-than-lethal compressed air weapon intended to subdue unruly crowds (Slack, 2005). While these two incidents may not seem to have much in common, they are both examples of police organizational failure.

It is assumed, often incorrectly, that members of law enforcement organizations are, or should be, immune to decision-making mistakes (Greene, 2007, Kappeler et al., 1994; van Meter, 2001; Walker, 2001). Further, it is often assumed that law enforcement management should always be aware of problems occurring within their organizations, which can lead to organizational failures.

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One of the most influential characteristics of police organizational failure is police subculture. Indeed, the subculture of police agencies, and moreover, the deviant subculture of police agencies can and does often lead to issues that contribute to police organizational failure. As discussed, catastrophic police organizational failure can and often does, lead to tragic consequences.

Literature Review

There is a large base of literature which focuses on the subculture of police organizations. Miller (2008, p. 2) alludes to the idea that subcultures are a natural formation of human social environments. In describing the social interactions of the workplace, he writes, “every workplace is a family, a tribe, a community.” According to Kappeler et al. (1994), internal methods of police organizational governance can be formal and informal. In general, organizational subcultures can be considered part of the informal organizational structure. Formal internal sanctions take the form of adherence to a standard of rules, codes, and procedures (Gaines, Kappeler, & Vaughn, 1994; Kappeler et al., 1994). Formal rules and procedures are applicable to all organizational members, and sanction for failure to comply with formal rules is generally official.

Lindgren (1981, p. 11) describes police subcultures as “inherently violent.” Accordingly, police organizational members often find themselves distanced from society because of the nature of their work, and the lack of understanding of their subculture and environment by the general public. They form a normative culture, where informal codes of conduct are met with non-acceptance or disapproval by the public caused by a misunderstanding of the subculture (Kappeler et al, 1994, p. 18). Kappeler et al. (1994) explain:

Any given law enforcement officer may behave within the accepted bounds of police custom, but when that behavior comes to the attention of the public and is viewed from the public’s understanding of external standards of conduct or from an individualistic conception of misconduct, it may be seen as deviant. Although a behavior is accepted within the internal normative structure of the police occupation, it may not be acceptable to society. (p. 18)

This perception by the public of police behavior extends to misconduct and error. As Alpert and Smith (1994, p. 481) write, police are “permitted only a margin of error in judgment under conditions that impose high degrees of physical and mental stress.” Consequently, public disapproval or lack of understanding can help fuel the formation of police subcultures.

Informal controls, including the norms of the police subculture, within police departments play an equally, if not more, important role in the study of organizational dysfunction. According to Hollinger and Clark (1982, p. 342), there is “more constraint by informal group social controls than the formal constraints of the organization.” Internal informal controls refer to the traditional standards, customs, and practices of the police organization (Kappeler et al., 1994, p.17). Sanctions for deviating from these customs are unofficial and usually the result of the actions of co-workers (Kappeler et al., 1994, p.17).

In her book, The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA (1996), Diane Vaughan describes a vast organizational subculture guided by both formal and informal norms. Specifically, the norms and beliefs of the
engineering profession are guided by education and experience, making them different when compared to the norms and beliefs of organizational managers. Vaughan’s observation is applicable to police organizations because the norms, beliefs, and experiences of street-level organizational members will be different than organizational managers. As Elizabeth Reuss-Ianni (1982, p. 121) states,

there are two cultures which confront each other in the department: a street cop culture of the good old days, working class in origin and temperament, whose members see themselves as career cops; opposed to this is a management cop culture, more middle class, whose members’ education and mobility have made them eligible for jobs totally outside of policing, which makes them less dependent on, and less loyal to, the street cop culture.

Organizational deviance, however, is not exclusively destructive. According to Warren (2003, p. 622), deviance can be constructive if the deviance is in response to harmful organizational behavior, such as in the case of whistleblowers. Because the whistleblower may be failing to conform to formal or informal norms, the behavior is deviant from the norms. This behavior, while deviant, could “not only rescue an organization from failure, but also save human lives.”

Therefore, the overall nature of police organizations and police work provide an environment in which individuals are imbued with vast authority, including the authority to use force against other individuals. Because of the militaristic structure of police organizations, and individual units, organizational members are committed to discipline and to a hierarchy based on rank. Additionally, police work is inherently stressful and dangerous. As stated by Williamson et al. (2007, p. 20), police invariably come into contact with violence on a near-daily basis, and encounter “opportunities to engage in inappropriate behavior.” These attributes, when coupled with decentralized authority and a tendency for officers to work in small, tightly knit pairs or groups without strict direct supervision, promote a setting favorable for the development of organizational deviance or dysfunction.

Because this article addresses organizational failure, it is necessary to define the parameters of failure. For any organization, it is not a matter of “if” the organizational will fail, but “when.” All organizations will fail in the normal course of business (O’Hara, 2005). Hall (2003, p. 239) says, “Organizational failure is a fact of organizational life. Failure will happen no matter how elaborate of a system an organization deploys.”

Walshe, Harvey, Hyde, and Pandit (2004, p. 201) argue that there isn’t one generally accepted term of organizational failure. For the purposes of this study, organizational failure will be defined as an event or events created within the organization or by the organization which create a significant threat to organization’s success, effectiveness, or, existence. It is important to note that there are levels of organizational failure. Minor mistake and error may result in acute organizational failure, which affect organizational effectiveness or success, but are rarely a threat to organizational survival; however, the problem can be quickly remedied in a health organization. While organizational death is possible in some organizations, the death of a police organization is not an option. Policing is a function of government and must be maintained.

According to Sarre, Das, and Albrecht, catastrophic failures can result from systemic organizational deviance (p. 377). Additionally, catastrophic failures will result in
organizational outcomes that are not part of the official mission (Liberatore, 1999). Regardless, catastrophic failures involve a negative impact on human life, and can be characterized by a high-human cost, whether actual loss of life or negative impacts on health and quality of life (Allcorn, Baum, Diamond, & Stein, 1996; Pearse, Dana, Lanigan, & Pook, 2001).

It is then reasonable to conclude that catastrophic organizational failure occurs when an organizational event (or events) leads to failures that threaten the existence of an organization leading to organizational death and/or different levels of human cost. Because of the high-risk nature of police work and the authority to use force, the ratio of consequence to failure is potentially much higher than other organizations. Therefore, when the organization is part of the criminal justice system, then failure can have devastating repercussions. In the case of catastrophic police failures, these events usually result in public out-cry and intense scrutiny by the media. In larger police organizations, independent commissions and external watchdog agencies convene to investigate questionable police behavior, uncover misconduct, and provide recommendations for organizational change.

Subculture - Coding Categories

While police subculture has inherent characteristics that can lead to deviance, the decoupling process develops if the subculture distances itself from the parent organization. When coding conditions of dysfunctional subcultures the following subcategories were identified based on a review of the literature: loyalty, reward, normalized deviance, cultural separation, and subunit identity. These subcategories reflect the processes by which a police subunit distances itself from the parent organization, either intentionally or through complacency.

Loyalty

Police personnel typical socialize with each other, reinforcing an “us versus them” mentality. As Skolnick (1966, p. 52) stated, “police show an unusually high degree of solidarity.” Police will maintain a strict bond of loyalty, protecting, defending, and participating in deviant activities (Westley, 1970). Police personnel often fear severe informal social sanctions for breaking the bond of loyalty (Westley, 1970). Instances of loyalty of deviant officers, whether participating in deviance or not, will be coded as “loyalty.”

Reward

Reward for deviant behavior includes formal reward, such as praise from fellow officers and job security from organizational management for producing favorable statistics, to informal rewards such as those given for deviant actions at the street level (Drooyan, 2000; Parks, 2000). All such instances will be coded as “reward.”

Normalized Deviance

Instances of normalized deviance are so commonplace as to be considered normal by the organization and its personnel (Vaughan, 1999). Examples of normalized deviance include behavior justified because it was normal, not sanctioned, or characterized in the context that “everyone did it this way” – such instances will be coded as “normalized deviance.”
Cultural Separation

The separation between particular organizational groups, such as gang subunits within police organizations (Katz & Webb, 2006) and other subunits (e.g., hotspot patrol units) will be measured as “cultural separation.” Cultural and social separation among police divisions, such as vice units and homicide divisions (Westley, 1970) will be coded within this category. Cultural separation can also include competitive tendencies among organizational groups.

Subunit Identity

Police subunits are prone to decoupling due to functional loose-coupling to the parent organization (Katz & Maguire, 2002; Orton & Weick, 1990). A presupposition of decoupling is that subunits will attempt to drift from the parent organization’s goals and gain a separate identity singular all to itself. Measures of “subunit identity” will include initiation of formal or informal changes by the subunit which distances its members from the parent organization, such including unique, unsanctioned uniforms, policies, or procedures.

Methodology

To perform the necessary analysis and application of the theoretical framework, this article is designed as a case study. The units in this study will be catastrophic failures of police organizations, all of which resulted in organizational reforms. Since most police departments, regardless of size or location share some similar attributes, the results of this study will be applicable to a larger population of units.

The phenomenon of police organizational failure cannot be addressed as a single event, but rather a complex process which encompasses many organizational factors. The unit of analysis for this study will be the organization. Study of such organizational failures should be framed as a naturalistic study, examining possible factors within their context.

Cases to be studied involve rich data that encompass both the macro-level (organizational-level) and the micro-level (individual-level). The case study design will benefit from the inclusion of both levels of data, and is uniquely suited for the analysis of both micro- and macro-level data simultaneously (Gerring, 2007; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). This approach provides for a structured analysis of the complex interactions between individuals and the police organization.

Because the failures examined are well-investigated and documented, indicators of failure related to subculture should be apparent within the literature. The failures examined have also produced policy changes, and, in some cases, technological advancement, which is intended to prevent or warn against a reoccurrence of the failure. The Knapp (1972) and Mollen (1994) Commissions in New York City, and the Christopher (1991) and Rampart (Droooyan, 2000) Commissions in Los Angeles each provide well-documented accounts of catastrophic police organizational failures.
Results

The following table lists the items coded within each of the Commissions under the subject of subculture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commission</th>
<th>Subculture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knapp</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mollen</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rampart</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>227</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subculture – Coding

All commissions found problems with respect to subculture, loyalty, code of silence, or systemized, normalized deviance, which contributed to the catastrophic organizational failure. Usually, these instances were easily identified, and were distinguished from other categories by keywords such as “systematic” or “systemized,” “customary,” “generally accepted,” or “unwritten rules.” Views and attitudes of Departmental members during the investigation of the Knapp Commission included: “police officers, sharing the general attitude that gambling does no harm, themselves regard[ing] gambling money as “clean” graft” (Knapp, 1972, p. 73); the phrase “general attitude” reflects an understanding of the views and attitudes of the police culture at that time.

Likewise, the following statement was coded as ‘subculture’ as it reflected general attitudes and actions, but not rationalizations of action: “A large number of witnesses complained that there is a general climate of hostility between the police and members of minority communities in that discourtesy and verbal harassment by LAPD officers are commonplace” (Christopher, 1991, p. 75). That is, the Commission did not offer an explanation that would trigger coding into another category, such as distrust of the public or retaliation for lack of respect.

Most instances of subculture coding were easily identified by following the categorizations of the commissions themselves. A “problem group” of officers was identified in the following statement: “What leaps out from the department's own statistics -- and it's confirmed by LAPD officers at the command level and in the rank-and-file -- is that a "problem group" of officers use force, and are the subject of complaints alleging excessive or improper force, far more frequently than most other officers” (Christopher, 1991, p. 32).

Group identity, also characterized by “loyalty,” was a recurring theme within the commission reports. The Knapp Commission found that “One strong impetus encouraging grass-eaters to continue to accept relatively petty graft is, ironically, their feeling of loyalty to their fellow officers. Accepting payoff money is one way for an officer
to prove that he is one of the boys and that he can be trusted” (Knapp, 1972, p. 65). This is similar to the Rampart commission findings that “Rampart CRASH officers developed an independent subculture that embodied a ‘war on gangs’ mentality where the ends justified the means, and they resisted supervision and control and ignored LAPD’s procedures and policies” (Droovy, 2000, p. 2).

Subculture – Knapp Commission

Of all the commissions, the systematic corruption revealed within New York City Police Department by the Knapp Commission was the most organized and deeply-rooted. The gambling “pads” were commonplace and the “nuts” were relied upon by officers for income and compensation (Knapp, 1972). For example, the Knapp Commission report found that, in the event an officer was transferred or left the department, “This loss of revenue was customarily made up to him when he was transferred out of the division at which time he would receive severance pay in the form of two months’ payments after his transfer” (Knapp, 1972, p. 75). Because of this, the normalized deviance was highly organized and structured, revealing set rules and payout amounts based on rank, seniority and location (Knapp, 1972).

The Knapp Commission regularly refers the gambling pads as “systemized” as highlighted by the below statements, coded into subculture:

This pattern of collection and distribution appeared to Commission investigators to be quite standardized. (Knapp, 1972, p. 75)

In a highly systemized pattern, described to the Commission by numerous sources and verified during our investigation, plainclothesmen collected biweekly or monthly payoffs from gamblers on the first and fifteenth of each month, often at a meeting place some distance from the gambling spot and outside the immediate police precinct or division (Knapp, 1972, p. 74)

This permeating normalized deviance contributed to a highly defined police subculture, which also reflected a “code of silence” and an intense group loyalty which perpetuated the deviant culture. This is evident from the statements below:

The other patrolmen asked no questions when he was approached for drugs because “it was a pretty regular thing for one officer to give narcotics to another officer” (Knapp, 1972, p. 108).

The patrolmen also stated that he had chosen this particular fellow officer to ask for narcotics merely because he knew him better than some of the others, but that he could well have approached many other men in the unit and made the same request (Knapp, 1072, p. 109)

He testified that one of the ways in which he obtained narcotics was to take it from dope addicts in the street, without making an arrest.

“Q. Was this a common thing in the Narcotics Division?
“A. That’s where I learned it from.
“Q. You learned it from other members of the Narcotics Division?
“A. Yes (Knapp, 1972, p. 102).
What is unique about the normalized deviance shown in the Knapp Commission is the vertical and horizontal nature of the deviance. Deviance is most likely seen in street-level officers, as the authority is decentralized to allow for greater discretion (Kappaler et al., 2004; Lindgren, 1981; Mastrofski, 2004; van Maanen, 1978; van Meter, 2001). However, in the NYPD during the time analyzed by the Knapp Commission, the supervisors were as much a part of the deviant subculture as the street-level officers.

**Subculture – Mollen Commission**

The most significant element of subculture as uncovered by the Mollen Commission was the “code of silence” to which most police department members subscribed. The Commission concluded that, “the code of silence and other attitudes of police officers that existed at the time of the Knapp commission continued to nurture police corruption in efforts at corruption control” (Mollen, 1994, p. 51). The code of silence created a barrier to the investigation of the Mollen Commission and fostered a group identity within the police department which contributed to “aspects of police culture and loyalty that foster and conceal corruption” (Mollen, 1994, p. 47). The Commission found that, “the pervasiveness of the code of silence is bolstered by the grave consequences for violating it: officers to report misconduct or ostracized in her asked; he come targets of complaints and even physical threats; and are made to fear that they will be left alone on the streets in a time of crisis (Mollen, 1994, p. 53). Additionally, “brutality is also used as a right of initiation to prove that an officer is tough or "good" cop, one who can be accepted and trusted by his fellow officers not to report wrongdoing” (Mollen, 1994, p. 47).

The investigation of the Mollen Commission also revealed that police brutality had quickly become part of the police culture: "[Brutality] is a form of acceptance. It's not just simply giving a beating. It's the other officers began to accept you more" (Mollen, 1994, p. 47). This form of corruption only served to separate the police further from the public, unlike the widely accepted for of corruption from the Knapp Commission days. The Mollen Commission, however, labels police brutality as a symptom of corruption, claiming it is “unlike serious corruption” (Mollen, 1994, p. 49).

**Subculture – Christopher Commission**

The police subculture of corruption and brutality in the LAPD of the Christopher Commission period, while not as systemized and structured as that of the Knapp Commission era, was still widely accepted and known throughout the Department. Testimony at the Commission hearings acknowledged the fact that “we know the bad guys are. Reputations become well-known, especially to the sergeants and of course to lieutenants and the captains in the areas. We know the ones who are getting into trouble more than anyone else” (Christopher, 1991, p. 32). Rather than the blatant acceptance and participation of corruption seen in the Knapp era, the Christopher Commission found an acceptance by inaction, a “willful blindness” akin to that found by the Mollen Commission.

Indeed, much of the normalized deviant behavior of the department, and general police attitudes and work ethic, presented not only the siege mentality and code of silence generally present to some degree, even in healthy, functioning organizations, but an internal system of favoritism, racism, homophobia, and gender bias unlike that reported in any of the other reports analyzed for this study. The Commission report heard testimony
from minority officers expressing "the strong view that the "good old boy" network among white staff officers and supervisory personnel" (Christopher, 1991, p. 83) hindered movement in the department, and subjected them to hostile work environments. Police brutality was seen as a necessarily part of the job, and, for many officers, "persuasive evidence that most female officer uses style policing that minimizes the use of excessive force in inappropriate confrontations" (Christopher, 1991, p. 83). The subculture of the Christopher Commission LAPD reflected adherence to the police identity, as long as the officer was not a racial minority, a female, or a homosexual. These demographics of the LAPD police officer were reflected in "the department's 1990 coveted position report confirmed that minorities and females are underrepresented in these desirable assignments" (Christopher, 1991, p. 83). It is important to note, regardless of race, police officers all held the general attitude that female police officers were inferior to male officers (Christopher, 1991).

Subculture – Rampart Commission

The events which triggered the Rampart crisis as detailed in the Commission report point to a general culture of excessive force and loyalty within the department. But, much more so than any of the other reports, the Commission reports a tight, secretive, highly organized structure within Rampart CRASH itself, reflecting intense separation from the LAPD (Droooyan, 2000). This detachment from the parent organization is typical of police subunits (Katz & Maguire, 2002; Orton & Weick, 1990). While this tight boning within the CRASH unit was somewhat unique, it exemplified the code of silence characteristic of all of the commission reports. The Commission reported, “While officers believe that they recognize "real" misconduct when they confront it, the sheer number of acts of misconduct occurring in the Rampart Area by Officer Perez himself strongly suggests that some form of code of silence existed” (Droooyan, 2000, p. 100). This detachment from the parent organization is typical of police subunits (Katz & Maguire, 2002; Orton & Weick, 1990). The code of silence itself existed not only as a barrier to disciplinary action, but also because departmental members feared retaliation on part of the LAPD management. This was apparent in the following statements coded into “subculture:”

the absence of voluntary statements by LAPD officers in part reflects the distrust that pervades relations between the Department’s management and its rank and file officers, and the usually combative stance of the League – matters we address elsewhere in this report (Droooyan, 2000, p. 113).

Sometimes petty complaints will be filed against officers who violate the code of silence and substantial Department resources will be utilized to investigate the complaints, which are often kept open for lengthy periods (Droooyan, 2000, p. 102).

Unlike the other Commissions analyzed in this study, the Rampart Commission found the group separation within the department was not limited to officers, but also extended to civilians working within the LAPD. The Commission found: “Unfortunately, civilianization has also resulted in what civilian employees perceive to be a two-class system: including one “higher” class of sworn officers and a second “lower” class of “mere civilians,” who are referred to officially as “non-sworn employees” (Droooyan, 2000, p. 63). This reinforced the siege mentality “us vs. them” but also further alienates
officers and causes sworn departmental employees to continue perceiving two groups: “blue and everyone else” (Christopher, 1994, p. 100).

Conclusion

This intent of this article is not to diminish the role of individual responsibility for actions resulting in catastrophic organizational failure. Police officers are and should be held to a higher standard of behavior than others. It is a requirement of police officers and police organizational managers to reject human impulse and perform in a calculated, professional manner (Bittner, 1970). As Harris (2010, p. 3) explains, “[a]cting on impulse forfeits the claim of practicing a profession, since at that moment police officers are acting no different than anyone else, ultimately degrading the occupation.” Police organizations should be selective in their establishment of hiring standards. While personnel shortages may facilitate the lowering of standards, all attempts should be made to ensure selection of individuals who demonstrate the character and ability to meet the strict demands of the profession (Krauss, 1994).

Additionally, training should work more aggressively to establish not only individual controls against deviance, but an understanding of the police organization as a whole and its potential role in catastrophic failures. By making organizational members aware of such precursors, potential for failure may be identified and, subsequently, the failure prevented. This training and education should focus on a top-down approach, where management is trained to recognize these issues and, in turn, allow that knowledge to filter down through the ranks. Because of the martialistic structure of police departments, allowing the strict command structure to deliver the information to the street-level personnel may increase the receptiveness of the personnel to the training (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997; Williamson, Baker, Jenkins, & Cluse-Tolar, 2007). If the management and supervisors on the parent organization can facilitate this training, it would strengthen the loosely-coupled bonds (which are healthy for a police organization) between the street-level personnel and the parent organization without being too restrictive and creating a tightly-coupled link. The natural “unquestioned discipline” (Jermier & Berkes, 1979, p. 2) of the militaristic model facilitates a top-down approach to training and policy changes.

Further, the stigma attached with police misconduct makes it unpopular with the public and reduces the willingness of police managers to reveal misconduct. Police are “permitted only a margin of error in judgment” (Alpert & Smith, 1994, p. 481). The unwillingness to address deviance misconduct, or “willful blindness” as discussed in the Mollen Commission (Mollen, 1994, p. 49) constitutes a separation or decoupling in itself initiated by police management. This intentional decoupling is an attempt to distance units engaging in deviant behavior and the parent organization as a whole (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Whether because of the stigma attached to misconduct, fear of a public outcry, or cognitive dissonance, the failure to address problems, or recognize potential problems, leads to decoupling. Police supervisors and managers should be more aware of the potential effect of not actively seeking out or of ignoring such behavior. Inaction, such as supervisor or manager complicity and ignoring deviant or out-of-policy behaviors are just as large a contributing factor to catastrophic failures as the actions of deviant officers. To this end, organizational managers should actively seek such precursors as identified in this article, even if the event does not seem important at the time. Such precursors may signal a greater organizational problem.
Finally, further investigation into the characteristics of specific police cultures, and the causes of deviant subcultures should be explored. As technology and media, especially social media, advances, research into the chain of information provided by individual officers in such instances of social media should be highlighted. It may then be possible to see the actions and beliefs of such subcultures.

References


