
Guest editorial: Reexamining the police culture

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Background

From the early scholarly writings on policing (e.g. [Skolnick, 1966](#); [Westley, 1970](#)), academic explorations of various dimensions of police culture have been a consistent staple in policing research (e.g. [Chan, 1996, 1997](#); [Cockcroft, 2012](#); [Crank, 2014](#); [Ingram *et al.*, 2018](#); [Loftus, 2009](#); [Paoline, 2001, 2003, 2004](#); [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#); [Reuss-Ianni, 1983](#); [Terrill *et al.*, 2003](#)). Police culture has traditionally been defined from an occupational perspective “as a collective bond and professional world-view that arises among police officers as a result of the common strains encountered on the job” ([Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#), p. 6).

Research on police culture has outlined external and internal police environments in which police officers work and explored issues such as the “us vs. them” attitudes; secrecy, group solidarity and the code of silence; potential danger; crime-fighter role orientation; and the legitimate right to use coercive force (e.g. [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#); [Skolnick, 1966](#); [Walker and Katz, 2018](#); [Westley, 1970](#)). Unlike the occupational view of police culture, the organizational approach assumes that police culture is not monolithic, allowing it to vary not only across police agencies and communities, but also within subunits of the same agency (e.g. [Klinger, 1997](#); [Klockars *et al.*, 2000, 2004](#); [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#); [Wilson, 1968](#)). The conceptualization of police culture is enriched with the addition of the rank-and-file perspective, that is, the understanding that police culture could also vary across different layers of police hierarchy and that “street cops,” middle managers, and top administrators could develop and participate in quite different police cultures (e.g. [Manning, 1995](#); [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#); [Reuss-Ianni, 1983](#); [Walker and Katz, 2018](#)). Finally, the understanding of cultural norms and values could diverge across individual police officers. In response to their occupational and organizational environments, police officers could adopt a variety of policing styles (e.g. [Brown, 1988](#); [Paoline, 2001, 2003](#); [White, 1972](#)), resulting in “individual-level nuances of cultural variations among police officers” ([Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#), p. 21). Indeed, the increased inclusion of female, minority and educated police officers over the last several decades shaped police culture (e.g. [Haar, 1997](#); [Westmarland, 2017](#)).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, several developments shook the policing to its core, particularly in the USA, and had a potential to affect the police culture severely. The widespread use of novel technologies, particularly the body-worn cameras, pushed the issues of officer safety, citizen complaints and agency accountability to the forefront (e.g. [Lum *et al.*, 2019](#); [National Institute of Justice, 2022](#)). Despite mixed findings of extent research about the effects of body-worn cameras (e.g. [Lum *et al.*, 2019](#); [National Institute of Justice, 2022](#)), a 2020 Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research public opinion poll (2020) revealed that nine out of ten surveyed adults—regardless of their race—somewhat or strongly favored that police officers be required to wear body-worn cameras during their interactions with the public.

The high-profile deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd—among many others—coupled with the related Department of Justice investigations (e.g. [U.S. Department of Justice, 2015, 2016, 2021a, b](#)), which documented evidence of severe police misconduct and racially biased policing (e.g. [U.S. Department of Justice, 2015, 2016](#)), and the related federal oversight in the police departments in Ferguson, Louisville, Baltimore and Minneapolis ([Vasilogambros, 2021](#)), lead toward the Black Lives Matter protests in a number of countries, resulted in a crisis of police legitimacy (e.g. [Cobbina, 2019](#); [Kochel, 2019](#); [Weitzer, 2015](#)) and yielded requests for an extensive police



reform (e.g. [Cullors, 2020](#); [M4BL, 2021](#); [Yancey-Brag, 2021](#)). In the weeks after the video of Mr. Floyd's brutal murder was broadcast, protests against police violence and calls for defunding the police sprang up in 140 cities throughout the USA and at least 40 countries worldwide ([Smith et al., 2020](#)). The murder of Mr. Floyd and the subsequent investigation and criminal trial of the officer convicted of murdering him brought the topic of police culture back to the forefront of the public dialogue in the USA (e.g. [Arango, 2022](#); [Cooper and Moselle, 2021](#); [Harris, 2022](#)).

In response to the rapidly deteriorating relationships between the police and the communities in the USA in the aftermath of such high-profile deaths, former President Obama established the Task Force on 21st Century Policing ([2015](#)) that issued a set of recommendations focusing on building trust and legitimacy, providing policy and oversight, utilizing technology and social media, developing community policing and crime reduction, providing training and education and facilitating officer wellness and safety. One of the unanticipated consequences of all of these events is the potential "Ferguson effect"—the notion that "officers have become more distrustful of civilians, fearful of scandal, and are de-policing" ([Nix and Pickett, 2017](#), p. 24)—on police officer attitudes and behavior.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, added another layer of complexity to the context—both external and internal—in which police officers operate (e.g. [Lum et al., 2020a, b](#); [Maskály et al., 2021](#)). At a turning-point in the history of police-community relationships in the last several decades, the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions implied that "regularly scheduled activities where the police and the community would interact . . . are not occurring" (Jennings cited in [Montgomery, 2020](#), p. 1). To the contrary, police officers have often been asked to enforce the COVID-19 restrictions, be it by issuing fixed-penalty tickets, making arrests, or dealing with anti-lockdown protests (e.g. [Wikipedia, 2021](#)). As [Amnesty International \(2020\)](#), p. 4 emphasized, "[t]ime and again police forces have used excessive and unnecessary force in the enforcement of COVID-19 lockdowns and curfews, clamped down on peaceful protests and suppressed dissent."

In this issue

Such a dire state of police-community relations, the related calls for police reform, a rapid development of modern technology, and the COVID-19 pandemic are the context in which this special issue reexamines police culture. The first group of papers explores how these changes in the environment affect police culture. Papers in the second group focus on a traditional staple in police culture—the code of silence and compliance with the official rules. The third group of papers studies underlying attitudes and values of police culture as they apply to peers, supervisors, civilians and even their own authority. Finally, papers in this special issue connect the cultural attitudes and officer well-being.

Changes in the external environment and police culture

Three papers in this special issue directly address changes in the environment. [Frantz et al. \(2023\)](#) investigate whether two simultaneous crisis—the legitimacy crisis and the opioid crisis—influenced the key tenets of police culture. Based on the interviews with police officers from a specialized unit conducted in 2021–2022, [Frantz et al. \(2023\)](#) concluded that some traditional themes of police culture (e.g. "us vs. them," emphasis on danger, machismo, conservatism and social isolation) did not even appear in the interviews, while others (e.g. group solidarity, mission/action orientation) were discussed extensively. The interviews also contained the evidence of the presence of technology (e.g. social media, cell phones) in the work on modern police detectives and their frustration in dealing with it.

On the topic of technology, another paper in this special issue by [Cochran and Worden \(2023\)](#) examines the degree to which police officers' attitudes changed after the body-worn cameras were introduced in a US police agency. At the time at which about one-half of the state and local police agencies in the USA already have body-worn cameras ([Heyland, 2018](#)) and the evidence on their effectiveness is mixed (e.g. [National Institute of Justice, 2022](#)), learning about the factors influencing officer receptivity to their deployment is critical. The results of the Cochran and Worden's study ([2023](#)) indicate that the introduction of body-worn cameras did not seriously affect police officers' occupational attitudes (e.g. department fairness, job satisfaction). At the same time, the documented variation in the attitudes across the police hierarchy and types of assignments ([Cochran and Worden, 2023](#)) reaffirms the argument that police culture is not monolithic (e.g. [Manning, 1995](#); [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#); [Reuss-Ianni, 1983](#); [Walker and Katz, 2018](#)).

Finally, [Nalla et al. \(2023\)](#) focus on the COVID-19 pandemic in India, a country in which [Human Rights Watch \(2020\)](#) documented numerous instances of COVID-19 related governmental violence and arbitrary arrests. [Nalla et al. \(2023\)](#) report that officers' self-legitimacy—police officers' confidence in their own authority—is positively associated with a greater severity of COVID-19 punishments. Like [Cochran and Worden \(2023\)](#), [Nalla et al. \(2023\)](#) find that the police officers' attitudes, in this case about punishment severity, varied by their assignment type. In sync with the COVID-19 extant literature ([Kutnjak Ivković et al., 2022](#)), the analyses in the paper by [Nalla et al. \(2023\)](#) reveal that the concern for family members' health has a stronger influence on their attitudes than the concern for their own health.

The code of silence, tolerance of police misconduct and compliance with the official rules

The code of silence has traditionally been associated with police culture (e.g. [Crank, 2014](#); [Kutnjak Ivković et al., 2022](#); [Paoline, 2003](#)) and several papers in this special issue focus on the code of silence. The first paper in this group by [Donner and Maskály \(2023\)](#) begins the exploration of the acceptance of the code of silence at the earliest possible moment in police officers' careers—at the time at which they enroll into police academies and socialization into police culture commences. The comparison of the attitudes at the beginning and at the end of police academy training ([Donner and Maskály, 2023](#)) vividly demonstrates the effects of socialization at work; as they gain more experience in police culture, recruits become less willing to say that they would break the code of silence and report police misconduct. By comparing the views of recruits across five police academies, [Donner and Maskály \(2023\)](#) also provide evidence of the organizational factors that shape police officers' adherence to the code of silence.

The exploration of the police code of silence continues with Wu's paper ([2022](#)). The Chinese centralized police system, in which the same official rules are applicable across the country, allowed [Wu \(2023\)](#) to engage in an exploration of the degree of (dis)similarity with which the violations of these same rules would be reported across Chinese communities. The results demonstrate that the external environment matters ([Wu, 2023](#)); more closely-knit communities, such as rural police agencies, exhibit a stronger code of silence than urban police agencies. Although the effect was not as consistent, the study also pointed out that the specific assignment or type of police agency (e.g. criminal investigation, public order) matters in shaping the code of silence. These results are in sync with prior research on police culture (e.g. [Klinger, 1997](#); [Klockars et al., 2000, 2004](#); [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#)).

[Amagnya \(2023\)](#) steps away from the broad concept of the code of silence as tolerance of any police misconduct and zooms in on the tolerance for a specific form of police misconduct—police corruption. The study shows how the normalization of deviance ([Vaughan, 2016](#))—the notion that misconduct is so common that it no longer feels wrong—shapes police officer views about the acceptance of corruption. Furthermore, just like

Wu (2023) documented that Chinese police officers from rural police agencies were more tolerant of misconduct in general. Amagnya (2023) reports that police officers from rural police agencies in Ghana were more supportive of police corruption.

Nam (2023) analyzes another aspect of police attitudes toward police misconduct—their evaluations of misconduct seriousness (e.g. Kutnjak Ivković, 2005)—among Korean police officers. While the connection between the lack of certainty/severity of expected sanctions and attitudes supportive of police misconduct was noted in prior studies (e.g. Fridell *et al.*, 2021), Nam (2023) expands this approach by discovering that the relationship between the fear of formal sanctions and the attitudes supportive of police misconduct is at least partly mediated by the fear of extralegal or informal sanctions (e.g. guilt, shame, embarrassment). As further evidence that the police culture is not the same across the rank-and-file (e.g. Paoline and Terrill, 2014; Reuss-Ianni, 1983), Nam (2023) documents that the effect is fully mediated for supervisors, but not for line officers.

A lack of compliance with organizational rules—that is, a rule-violating behavior that constitutes police misconduct—is one of the three policing outcomes assessed in the study by Peacock *et al.* (2023a). In this research project, Peacock *et al.* (2023a) explore the potential effects of a peer culture and a supervisory culture on the views of Croatian police officers. A relatively surprising conclusion, keeping in mind a long line of research demonstrating that perceptions of peers' views are critical for the police officers' own attitudes toward police integrity (e.g. Klockars *et al.*, 2006), is that, unlike perceptions of supervisory trustworthiness, perceptions of specific peer procedural justice were not associated with the police officers' own willingness to comply with the official rules.

Views about peers, supervisors, civilians and own authority

The police officers' attitudes toward their peers, supervisors and civilians are explored in several other papers in this special issue. Wu *et al.* (2023) embark on the study of whether the society at large influences the relationship between supervisor and peer evaluations on the police officers' attitudes. While China and Taiwan share many social and cultural aspects rooted in their common history (e.g. official language, tradition of Confucianism), their developments over the course of the last 70 years indicate dramatically different routes, as indicated, for example, by the quality of governance indicators (World Bank, 2022). The results of the study by Wu *et al.* (2023) partly reflect these differences; while the country is not a determining factor in police officers' perceptions of their peer support, it is highly relevant for the police officers' perceptions of trustworthiness of both citizens and supervisors.

The role of the society at large on shaping police officers' attitudes is further explored in the study by Peacock *et al.* (2023b). Selecting Croatia and Taiwan, two countries whose cultures are characterized with different individualism/collectivism social values—Croatia and Taiwan, Peacock *et al.* (2023b) analyze the effect of these differential value systems on police officer compliance with police agency rules. In sync with other studies emphasizing the link between supervisory procedural justice and police officers' willingness to adhere to the official agency rules (e.g. Donner *et al.*, 2015), the results confirmed that perceptions of supervisory procedural justice and officers' expressed compliance with the official rules are related, but that, at the same time, the specific mechanisms through which this is achieved differed across the two countries.

While the focus on Hacin and Mesko's study (2022) was on police officers' self-legitimacy and its relationship with pro-organizational behavior, perceptions of supervisory procedural justice, quality of relations with the peers and organizational commitment were also a part of the exploration. Self-legitimacy—police officers' confidence in their own authority as police officers—can be shaped and molded by reflections from peers, supervisors and citizens (e.g. Tankebe, 2019). As the results of Hacin and Mesko's paper of self-legitimacy in Slovenia

(2022) illustrate, perceptions of their peers (e.g. perceived quality of their relations with colleagues), organizational commitment and external legitimacy turned out to be more consistent and stronger predictors of their self-legitimacy than the perceptions of their supervisors (e.g. supervisor procedural justice).

Views about supervisors and fairness of their treatment are also some of the key themes in the paper by [Orosco and Gaub \(2023\)](#). In a study on a rarely explored topic, [Orosco and Gaub \(2023\)](#) adopt the underlying assumption that organizational culture could differ across organizational units and assignments within a police agency (e.g. [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#); [Reuss-Ianni, 1983](#)) and proceed to compare the contours of organizational cultures of police officers and civilian dispatch staff in a US police agency. Their results reveal that some of the basic elements of police culture could be applied to the dispatch culture. Despite the valuable service they provide, the dispatch staff's sense of social isolation, as the authors point out ([Orosco and Gaub, 2023](#)), is a consequence of both police officers' and police supervisors' attitudes toward them.

Police culture and police officer well-being

The last two papers in this special issue focus on the relationship between the adherence to the police cultural attitudes and police officer wellbeing. While two separate bodies of literature exist—one exploring the police culture and the other exploring officer stress and well-being—they are rarely connected in a systematic way. In the first paper in this section, [Patterson and King \(2023\)](#) study the effects of several dimensions of police culture on the indicators of police officer well-being (e.g. organizational commitment, job satisfaction, burnout and disengagement). The results indicate that, out of all measures of police culture, views about the police administrators (but not police supervisors) and perceived citizen attitudes toward the police exhibit the most consistent effect on officer wellness.

[Paoline and Gau \(2023\)](#) provide an in-depth analysis of one aspect of officer wellness—stress—based on the survey of police officers in a municipal US police agency. The data collection for the study by [Paoline and Gau \(2023\)](#) was completed post-Ferguson and literally days before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March of 2020. The findings confirm that attitudes about the external work environment—perceptions of danger, distrust of citizens, cynicism toward citizen complaints—are the dominant causes of police officer stress ([Paoline and Gau, 2023](#)). The study shows that the attitudes about the internal work environment matter as well; specifically, while perceptions of the police supervisors' support (or the lack thereof) have a direct effect on the level of officers' stress, perceptions of police administrators' support were not directly related to stress.

Concluding thoughts

The papers in this special issue focus on the police culture, a well-known and extensively studied phenomenon in policing research, and provide novel and complex explorations of the old concept in new environments, conditions, or perspectives. They teach us that recent events could have an effect on police officers (e.g. [Frantz et al., 2023](#); [Nalla et al., 2023](#)), that socialization into police culture starts very early (e.g. [Donner and Maskály, 2023](#)), that the internal environment matters (e.g. [Cochran and Worden, 2023](#); [Hacin and Meško, 2022](#); [Nam, 2023](#); [Orosco and Gaub, 2023](#); [Paoline and Gau, 2023](#); [Patterson and King, 2023](#); [Peacock et al., 2023a](#); [Wu et al., 2023](#)), and that external environments matter as well (e.g. [Amagnya, 2023](#); [Peacock et al., 2023b](#); [Wu, 2023](#); [Wu et al., 2023](#)). These papers reaffirm some previously established notions—that the police culture could vary across police agencies, units and assignments (e.g. [Klinger, 1997](#); [Klockars et al., 2000, 2004](#); [Paoline and Terrill, 2014](#))—while also opening new avenues of research in previously rarely explored domains.

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