

Commentary on: “A grounded Action Study on the Role of the Police” (Martina Eberharter)

BALISSA GREENE

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

A Grounded Action Study on the Role of the Police (Eberharter, 2009) provides a focus on membership of the executive force (Police and Gendarmerie) and how norms within this group are formed and sustained. Whilst a grounded theory approach is used by the author to develop research questions about the formation of organisational attitudes, values and norms, there is an opportunity to apply a robust theoretical framework to underpin the results of this study. This commentary seeks to use social identity theory as an explanation for how police trainees learn about their role as members of the police force.

Social psychological theory such as Social Identity Theory can more complexly address the key issues raised in this paper surrounding values and maintaining social order within the police force. One of the key tenets of this theory is that individuals derive part of their self concept from being able to identify with others (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). van Knippenberg and van Schie (2000) have identified that “this conception of the self as a group member provides a basis for the perceptual, attitudinal and behavioural effects of group membership.” Central to the functioning of the police force is the ability of officers to identify with the organisation and its values and beliefs. Identification with the organisational beliefs enables officers to carry out their daily duties which involve the enforcement of the law and protection of the public (which may be dangerous and difficult at times). There is therefore a need for a consistent understanding and training of what it means to be a police officer, which can explain the lengthy and explicit training programme. This is very unlike any other organisation, with the exception of the armed forces.

By its very nature, the police have a very distinct identity to any other organisation. It is rank oriented, and each rank has a particular role and responsibility. van Knippenberg and van Schie (2000) have highlighted the importance of distinctiveness to developing a strong identity with a group. They have posited that individuals tend to want to associate with a distinctive group, and it is this distinctiveness that gives a strong sense of esteem. It can be hypothesised, that as a group of employees, the police will identify strongly with the organisation, their rank and their role, due to the fact that it stands out in society as being a specialised occupation. van Knippenberg and van Schie (2000) discuss police officers as being seen not as individuals, but as members of this distinctive group.

Initial police training relies on inducting new recruits into the organisational culture. At this early stage, induction as part of a large, but distinctive group helps new members to identify with the values and norms associated with that group. The relevance of Social Identity Theory in seeking to understand organisational dynamics has been raised by

researchers such as van Knippenberg (2000), Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer (2007), La Tendresse (2000), Haslam (2004), Ashforth and Mael (1989), and Ravasi and Schultz (2006). These researchers have identified that organisations are made up of groups of people who share power within contested spaces. As a result, the formation of groups with varying levels of power and privilege contributes to how individuals within the organisation identify with the organisation.

An organisation with a rank structure such as the police enables officers to belong to multiple groups. As identified above, certain groups hold more power than others at various levels. And each of these groups has distinct practices and procedures, attitudes and behaviours. The author discusses the police as a generic entity without discussing the complexity and the distinctiveness of the functioning of the organisation. Whilst there has been some reference to social competition on the same level, an examination of behaviours and values across levels or across ranks will enhance the reader's understanding of how social codes in the police are maintained.

Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (2002) argue that:

"...when collective identities are concerned, the level of commitment to a particular group or category determines how group characteristics, norms or outcomes will influence the perceptual, affective and behavioural responses of individuals belonging to that group."

The importance of the collective identity has been stressed. However, it is noteworthy that the author has not addressed the issues directly in explaining the maintenance of social order in the police. The author discusses the physical elements of group membership (uniforms, training centres) where 'you get to habituate these models of behaviour.' There is also some mention of officers 'growing into their role' as a result of training. This is indicative of a social learning approach where learning is cascaded from one more powerful group to another less powerful group. However, it does not explicitly account for development of organisational values. By sharing a powerful organisational identity there is a strong organisational based self esteem (a positive regard for each other in the organisation), shared values and a desire to maintain the organisational culture. This culture provides a context for in-group behaviour. A consideration of organisational culture, identity and values can only serve to make the findings of the author richer and more integrative.

Derks, van Laar and Ellemers (2007) have suggested that depending on how important the group is for an individual's self definition and how contextually salient that identity is, being in an employment setting in which this group is devalued or stigmatised negatively affects one's social identity and self concept. In a group such as the executive force the converse is true. The author's work suggests that there are positive identities within this group and positive outcomes associated with membership. An understanding of group process and intergroup relations is critical to understanding the experiences of different groups within an organisation (Haslam 2004). Abrams and Hogg (1999) reiterate conclusions of earlier social identity studies which highlighted that people have a need for and are motivated to maintain a favourable self image. And one of the ways of sustaining this favourable self image is by drawing intergroup comparisons that favour one's own group over other groups. The research by Eberharter (2009) shows that the Police and Gendarmerie as the executive force is a distinct, altogether powerful group

with levels of complexity that allows its group members to draw a positive self image within and outside of the organisation.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Balissa Greene is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist. She has worked as a psychologist within the police service for a number of years and her PhD thesis is an exploration of the impact of gender and ethnic identity management within this organisation. Balissa's research interests include organisational identity and its impact, intersectionality in employment and organisational justice. Motivated by a keen interest in how organisations could perform better through their staff, Balissa earned her undergraduate degree in Psychology from Goldsmiths College in London. She then moved to the now Manchester Business School for her postgraduate degree in Organisational Psychology. She is presently a PhD candidate at the Institute of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Email b.p.greene@lse.ac.uk