

# Police Culture and the Learning Organisation: A Relationship?

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## ABSTRACT

Both police culture and learning organisations are amorphous concepts. This paper examines the basic elements of police culture and the learning organisation and looks at their relationship in the context of the South Australia Police. The question is raised, does the culture of SAPOL affect its ability to evolve into a learning organisation? If there is a relationship between the two, is police culture an impediment or advantage to the evolutionary process.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper forms the foundation for my research, which is a collaborative effort between the University of South Australia and the South Australia Police (SAPOL). The project commenced in July 1997 and its general intent was to explore the relationship between police culture and learning. In order to do this I have examined the concepts of both police culture and the learning organisation. Using these concepts as my foundation I commenced my research using the resources of the 3,600 strong South Australia Police to explore my thesis that there was a relationship between police culture and learning on the way to becoming a learning organisation.

Briefly, my methodology consisted of a quantitative survey of 10% of the organisation, stratified across rank, gender and location. The return rate for this survey was 55%. The results of this quantitative survey were analysed with the use of the SPSS program. Results that showed statistical significance and significance in their description of SAPOL's culture and learning were then further analysed in order to determine if they showed any common cultural themes. I then conducted 12 in depth interviews which lasted for an average of about 1 hour, in order to further explore the quantitative results that had undergone my subjective analysis.

In order to simplify my analysis, I have broken down both the police culture and the learning organisation literature into useable elements so that any links may be easier to both establish and box. My model of the learning organisation is described in this paper, as are what I consider to be the most important generic elements of police culture. Analysis of the results of this research is not yet complete and this paper serves as the foundation upon which my thesis, exploring police culture and its influence on SAPOL as a learning organisation, is based.

## ELEMENTS OF POLICE CULTURE

Brown (1995:26) describes culture as being a product of 'historical process'. In a general way his book describes and categorises all manner of organisational cultures for the purpose of analysing and gaining a deeper understanding of the influences of organisational cultures. He also talks about the fluidity of organisational culture when he says;

Organisational cultures are rarely completely static over long periods of time. Rather, they are subject to continuous processes of development and change due to organisational learning which occurs as employees seek answers to problems of external adaptation and internal integration. In fact different elements of a culture are likely to be differentially resistant to change, with basic assumptions being the least likely to alter radically and artefacts being the most prone to evolutionary processes. (Brown 1995:33).

In Brown's passing reference to police culture (1995:70), he put it into the category of the tough guy macho culture. He did not describe it as a culture more closely aligned with the civil service, which he described as a 'process culture' characterised by strict hierarchical structures (Brown 1995:71). Brown has described police culture in terms of operational police reacting quickly to crime on the street, not as a bureaucratic organisation that has operational policing as an arm of its service. This description of police culture as being something that described operational police is a theme of all academic literature on the occupational culture of policing. Police culture is described as something that exists

from the perspective of the police officer who frequently deals with both criminals and the public as a part of his or her occupation.

As well as this almost assumed theme that police culture be analysed and situated in the light of operational policing, there have been a number of other elements of police culture high on the agenda for analysis. Some assumptions in the literature are that police culture has intrinsically negative connotations (Skolnick 1966, Manning 1977, Fitzgerald 1989, Reiner 1992, Skolnick & Fyfe 1993, Chan 1997, Prenzler 1997, Wood 1997). That negative part of police culture which has traditionally been discussed concerns unpalatable conduct or behaviour which leads to unacceptable deviance or criminal behaviour. Skolnick (1966) attributed this behaviour to the police perception that they are in constant danger while working, as well as their need to be suspicious in order to properly carry out their role as protectors. This view of their position is coupled with the authority to use force to achieve the ends expected by society. All of these factors combine to create an environment where behaviour that may be seen as deviant is accepted by the police as a necessary norm, and thus internalised and rationalised. Skolnick (1966) further contends that these attitudes are passed on to all the new recruits and are promoted as necessary attributes to be had to be successful at the policing craft. An agreement among police of the need for this process in order to provide what they consider to be the best policing service, necessarily promotes an atmosphere of secrecy, or as Wood (1997) would put it, 'brotherhood'. This socialisation in order to promote a culture implies that there is a wide gap between formal rules and informal practice (Prenzler 1997). In the highly publicised Wood Royal Commission, Commissioner Wood describes some of the elements of police culture in this way;

It is apparent that there is an inimical feature of the NSW Police culture, and its significance has not been sufficiently recognised by those responsible for the management of the Police Service. ... This aspect of the police culture is the enemy within. It is virulent and perverts the oath of office. It thrives on greed, prizing loyalty to one's corrupt colleague above loyalty to the Police service. Its weapons are those of the standover merchant and it depends on group loyalty, a tradition of mateship and peer group pressure. Those who subscribe to it hold little fear of being exposed. (Wood 1996:45).

Prenzler (1997:48) in his summing up of the literature, distils elements of police culture into 4 categories. Firstly he says that police culture has a "Disregard and disdain for rules and procedures ... especially in the treatment of suspects". Secondly he says that police culture has a "Disregard for due process ... as an outcome of a dominant crime control model of policing". Thirdly he says that police culture is characterised by "Cynicism, isolation and intolerance". Fourthly he talks of the "solidarity" of police culture being an offshoot of isolation and cynicism.

The literature is consistent in offering generalisations of police culture. Reiner (1992:112) talks about the strength of the culture being based on a foundation that police work is a mission - it is "a worthwhile enterprise, not just another job." and therefore anything done in pursuit of this mission is serving a greater cause, not the individual. It is this foundation that makes police culture so hard to reform. He uses Skolnick's (1966) analysis of police culture as a foundation for his understanding of the culture and he identifies of the following 6 common elements of police culture or 'cop culture' as he describes it:

*Suspicion*: he describes as a product of the need to watch for signs of trouble, danger and clues. Suspicion in this sense requires the police officer to have a well defined cognitive map of the world in order to determine those things that don't fit easily into that map.

*Isolation/solidarity* is an attribute he suggests that implies a degree of siege mentality. He suggests that police see themselves as making up the us component of us and them. As a result of this, police tend to befriend and rely upon other police who understand their view of the world.

*Conservatism*: Reiner concluded that police were generally conservative and that police do not easily suffer divergence from the norm. Left wingers, greenies and other 'troublemakers' do not sit comfortably with the police cultural view of an ordered society.

*Machismo* he says is evidenced by the typical profile of a police organisation that is still very much dominated by the white Anglo-Saxon male (also see Heidensohn 1996). Organisations such as these create a haven for sexism, homophobia and the actual enjoyment of, as well as the anticipation of the risks associated with the occupation. He suggests that police exist in an environment where most think that it is fun to play 'cops and robbers'.

*Racial prejudice* is described as part of the culture, however, police are said to be only slightly more prejudiced than the community as a whole (see also Wortley 1992, Chan 1997). He contends that this prejudice exhibited by police is in fact a reflection of the dominant attitudes of the majority of people towards minorities.

*Pragmatism* in the police cultural sense, Reiner describes as 'conceptual conservatism'. He asserts that police are reluctant to contemplate innovation, experimentation or research.

Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) have added another generalisation to this list of cultural mores, apparently in response to the 1991 beating in Los Angeles of Rodney King. They suggest that there is a culture of violence and that this deviant behaviour is exacerbated by police culture. They suggest that the police use of violence is in response to their mandate to use lawful coercive force and is in keeping with Reiner's (1992) machismo. These analyses are obviously drawing on research undertaken in the United States of America. They emphasise both police training in unarmed self-defence and use of firearms, conducted under the umbrella of their lawful powers of coercion. The literature on police culture which emanates from the United Kingdom and Australia does not place the same emphasis on this issue. In the light of the above generalisations the 'entity' known as police culture has according to James and Warren (1994:3) been "treated synonymously as the cause and effect of police misbehaviour".

Janet Chan (1997) has undertaken probably the most detailed Australian study of police culture. Her particular focus was on racism in the New South Wales Police Service and the relationship between the police and Australia's multicultural society. As a result of her research she was able to review the literature that related to the police occupational culture and challenge most popularly held notions as to the nature of police culture. She argued that there were four major problems with current theories explaining police culture. She suggests that the theories do not account for differences in culture, that they neglect the role played by police officers themselves in perpetuating and transforming the culture, that the theories fail to situate police culture within a social and political context and that the theories do not talk about the scope and possibility for cultural change (Chan 1997:13). Through her use of a questionnaire survey and interviews with both police and non-police sources, she was able to expose the thesis that police culture is not all embracing and created through uniform socialisation, nor is it one where officers blindly follow the role set down by those experienced workplace heroes who have 'been there and done that'. She concluded that the combination of police culture and police work created an environment (Schein 1992, Gee 1996) where police have a very different view of the 'real world'. This view of the 'real world' invited an 'us and them' mentality (Reiner 1992). She then proceeded to re-conceptualise the construction of police culture and used the notions of Bourdieu's 'field' and 'habitus' in her analysis. Through the use of the theories of Bourdieu, she was able to address the concerns she raised about other theoretical models of police culture and ensure that both internal and external factors are taken into account in her construction of the culture.

Chan (1997) agreed that police culture was as a result of history (Manning 1977) and learned dispositions (Schein 1992). She then moved on to say that police work was dictated by the officer's perception of what constitutes suspicious activities (Chan 1997:21). The implication here is that this perception has been moulded both by history and socialisation. To this she emphasised the value of experiences and it is upon this foundation that she built her theory using Bourdieu's habitus and field. She used the 'habitus' to describe the experiences that formed the police view of common sense. Her concept of 'field' situated this common sense within the historical and socialised relationships - in particular the relationships with ethnic groups that were not Anglo in origin. The relationship between cultural knowledge (habitus) and the structural conditions of police work (field) is said to have been developed as a way of coping with the unpredictable nature of police work. The point of this construction was to emphasise that "structural conditions do not completely determine cultural knowledge, and cultural knowledge does not totally dictate practice" (Chan 1997:73).

Chan identified that there were three major assumptions made in the majority of academic discussions of police culture (Chan 1997:44). Firstly it was assumed that the demands of police work were linked to the culture. Secondly it was assumed that the culture was relatively stable over time and space and thirdly it was assumed that the culture had a negative impact on police practice. Chan covered the first two of these assumptions by asserting that they were simplistic and did not take account of social influences as well as individual acquiescence to the culture, internal differentiation and jurisdictional differences (Chan 1997:65). In analysis of the third assumption that police culture had a negative impact on police practice she commented that in a general sense the culture was positive, only for the fact that it is functional to the survival and security of police officers working in a dangerous, unpredictable and alienating occupation (Chan 1997:45). In any further analysis she was

strangely silent to the point of conceding the truth of that assumption. To be fair, the focus of her research was the examination of the New South Wales police and their relationship with ethnic minorities. The results of her research certainly imparted a negative flavour to that relationship, but it still left begging the question as to whether there were any positive aspects of police culture. In leaving this assumption untested, Chan fell back into the pack of academic commentators who concentrated on police culture in the light of it being an almost wholly negative concept (Skolnick 1966, Westley 1970, Manning 1977, Fitzgerald 1989, Bolen 1990, Reiner 1992, Skolnick & Fyfe 1993, Prenzler 1997, Wood 1997). In the academic discussion, positive aspects of police culture were not denied, rather they were ignored or just not identified.

Moir & Moir (1992:220) identify another assumption associated with police culture in quoting Beyer (1991). They suggest that police culture has at its core a philosophy as to how the community should be policed, as a result of the interpretation they have of themselves as crime fighters. This interpretation is pervasive and infiltrates decisions and actions, regardless of other possible community interpretations of the policing role.

A common feature of all the authors cited is that they agreed that many police officers do not fit the cultural paradigm as they portrayed it. In my analysis of the literature that deals with police culture I have categorised elements under the following headings.

### **Culture placed in the context of operational policing**

All of the literature on police culture places it firmly within the operational sphere. Skolnick (1966) calls it the policeman's (sic) 'working personality'. Reuss-Ianni (1983) also talks of culture in terms of 'street cop' work, although she did say there was a clear distinction between 'street cops' and 'management cops'. She talks of the anxiety associated with policing associated with the constant threat of danger (1983:20). Affirmation of this assumption continued with Reiner (1992), Brown (1995) and Chan (1997).

### **Police culture - working class**

This cultural element has been identified by Bradley (1992), Bolen (1992) and Wells (1997) who talk about the origins of policing and the tradition of its members coming from working class backgrounds and who may suffer from low self esteem. This brings with it the implication of a distrust of intellectuals, and generally people who are not of a working class background.

### **Them and us - loyalty**

Loyalty has been identified as being a common feature in all of the literary discourse in relation to police culture. In looking at the concept of loyalty in the context of policing in the negative sense, it is said to breed solidarity, secrecy and corruption (Manning 1977, Reiner 1992, Fitzgerald 1989, Wood 1997). In its most positive interpretation, loyalty is said to provide support and be nurturing through membership of the police family (Macdonald 1995, Nixon and Reynolds 1996).

### **Untrusting**

The issue of trust has been identified as a crucial aspect of the police occupational culture (Skolnick 1966, Manning 1977, Reuss-Ianni 1983). In describing trust with its negative connotations, it is said that police culture, or socialisation, breeds a lack of trust leading to suspicion, unhealthy cynicism, or what Reiner (1992) refers to as the 'siege mentality'. In a positive sense it has been said that a lack of trust could be seen as a necessary weapon in the police armoury in order to properly protect the community from criminals (Skolnick 1966, Edwards 1999).

### **Service - 'Getting the job done'**

The idea of policing being a 'mission' and being more than a job (Reiner 1992) indicates the service commitment inherent in police culture. This commitment could be translated in the negative sense into getting the job done at the expense of justice and the rule of law (Skolnick 1966, Manning 1977, Reiner 1992, Chan 1997, Prenzler 1997). In the positive sense, getting the job done could be interpreted as being just that. Despite constant scrutiny and adversity, police culture still is able to maintain an ethos of helping and serving the community (Palmer 1992, Etter 1995).

## MY LEARNING ORGANISATION MODEL

It can be argued that all organizations learn, or they would not survive, but learning organizations demand proactive interventions to generate, capture, store, share and use learning at the systems level in order to create innovative products and services. The pressure to learn increases proportionately to the extent that the environment, in which the system exists, is changing; and therefore, the extent to which the system must keep in touch with, and adapt to, these changes (Marsick 1997:2).

Learning organisation literature is vast and still evolving, which is probably reflective of the dynamic and constantly changing work environment which characterised the late 1990's. The nature of work and learning has changed from the Fordian machine metaphor which existed at the start of the century into the organic metaphor (Pedler 1995). Zuboff (1988) talked of the fundamental changes that the smart machine is having on work in the last part of this century and it seems now that the ability of an organisation to get smart and learn is a concept taking shape in the contemporary literature. Through the conceptualisation that an organisation is something alive and able to learn, imparts a positive sense of purpose on the membership of that organisation and implies an ability for the organisation, as a living entity, to improve. But, is it right to conceptualise an organisation as a kind of living entity? Garavan (1997:18) talks of the literature on the learning organisation being broken into two categories in its conceptualisation as an entity. On the one hand there are those that treat the learning organisation as a variable that can be designed in such a way that it will have an influence on organisational outcomes (Mumford 1995, Jones & Hendry 1994, Gault and Jaccaci 1996). On the other hand there are those who conceptualise the learning organisation as a *metaphor* where the organisation is seen as a culture, and the learning organisation is seen as a variant of that culture, or even a version of that culture (Senge 1990, Burgoyne 1995, Jones 1996, Addleson 1996). Indeed, Sofo (1993:26) sums up this view when he says;

The metaphor of the learning organisation is a powerful one which treats organisations as personified organisms with the ability to continually adapt to changing environments.

In either conceptualisation is the important underlying assumption that a change in thinking, practice and eventually culture, will improve the ability of an organisation to work within, and adapt to, a changing work environment. Franklin, Hodgkinson and Stewart (1998:237) even argue that the learning organisation idea represents a contemporary and perhaps the 'ultimate articulation of the aims and values of organisational development'.

With the major contributions coming from Senge (1990), Watkins & Marsick (1993) and Marquardt (1996), I have distilled from the literature the following 7 elements I see as being essential ingredients to the learning organisation.

### Systems thinking

This is the linchpin of Senge's ideal of the learning organisation. It is within the context of systems thinking that his other four elements live. Systems thinking involves the ability to look at a problem as part of an interrelated system. After seeing the problem in this light, systems thinking allows the problem to be solved through modification of the entire system. It is the ability to view things holistically that ensures a solution will not just be a quick fix, but a more permanent solution. Importantly systems thinking insists on having an appreciation of the interconnectedness of the organisation. An understanding of this interconnectedness contextualises each individual position and operation in the organisation. Systems thinking also requires an understanding of the connection between the organisation and the outside world. Watkins and Marsick (1992:122) agree with Senge (1990) when they describe systems thinking as the "... glue that holds the others [disciplines] together".

### Personal mastery

Personal mastery is used in the sense of attaining a certain level of proficiency. It requires that a personal vision be articulated and then pursued. This desired level of proficiency is constantly maintained and built upon and is an indicator of a commitment to lifelong learning. In a learning organisation an environment must exist that allows employees the ability to strive continually towards personal mastery. Senge sees this as a spiritual foundation of the learning organisation.

## **Mental models**

Mental models are described as deeply held assumptions or generalisations that influence both our understanding of our environment and the way we act in that environment. Mental models are insidious and will only surface and be recognised by the holder of the mental model through open questioning of one's own assumptions and listening to and discussing the views of others with an open mind. Only through this process is it likely that a person's deeply held view may change. Mental models are powerful in their effect on what people do because they directly effect what people see (Senge 1990:165). Watkins and Marsick (1992:120) identify mental models as the most import of hurdles in the change arena.

## **Building shared vision**

Senge describes his idea of shared vision as a genuine vision. It is a vision accompanied by commitment to its implementation and goals. Shared vision is a necessary component of organisational evolution towards a learning organisation and must be real enough so that the vision of the individual can be translated into the vision of the organisation. It cannot be a vision thrust upon its members, the members of the organisation must have ownership of their vision. Marquardt (1996:46) says of this, "when there is a truly shared, genuine vision, people tend to excel and learn". Garavan (1997) talks of the idea that shared vision is an enabler that allows the creation of a learning organisation culture.

## **Team learning**

"Teams, not individuals are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations" (Senge 1990:10). The essence of team learning is founded on the concept of true dialogue. This true dialogue is one that encourages the team to think together so as to achieve results not achievable by individuals. This type of learning he describes as being the 'free flowing of meaning' through the collective creation of knowledge (Senge 1990:10). This analyses of team learning is opposed to the concept of team building, which encouraged open personal communication and building spirit. Senge's idea of team learning it is a concept where a discourse is created that facilitates the necessary open inquiry and dialogue. Team learning does not necessarily require a team to be free of conflict, it requires the team to share and appreciate the views, as well as recognise the talents or failings of other team members. If one was to look at an achievement based analogy, one could describe the performances of an orchestra or sporting team as being more than just the sum of individual performances (Sofa 1993:25). Senge (1990) sees the role of the manager in all of this to be one of steward or designer, as opposed to being a charismatic hero who makes the key decisions. Team learning under astute stewardship, and involving a cross-section of the organisation from the top to the bottom working together, gives a sense of the potent energy that could be spread throughout the organisation.

## **Dialogue**

Dialogue is a central component of the learning organisation model developed by Michael Marquardt (1996). It is described as communication of the highest quality, comprised of listening to and sharing information on order to create collective thinking (as an adjunct to team learning) and be used as an aid to identifying mental models that may stifle organisational learning. Dialogue is seen as "...the critical medium for connecting, inventing, and coordinating learning and action in the workplace (Marquardt 1996:46).

## **Leadership**

Marsick and Watkins (1996) described the element of leadership as being essential for the building of a learning organisation. This leadership is different to the stewardship as described by Senge (1990) in the context of team learning. In the view of Marsick and Watkins (1996) leaders must model learning. In this way the leader connects the organisation to the environment which in turn leads people to being empowered and capable of moving toward a collective vision. Leaders are also required to be able to establish systems to capture and share learning, encourage collaboration and team learning, promote inquiry and dialogue and create continuous learning opportunities. Leadership must be present in order to bring all of the learning organisation elements together into a cohesive whole. Richardson (1995) discusses the importance of leadership in the formation of a learning organisation and distinguishes between 'hard' leaders who take a prescriptive approach to learning and 'soft' leaders who rely on networks of people to self-organise.

## WHAT THE POLICE SAY ABOUT THEIR CULTURE

In the field, officers are endlessly brave, pragmatic and wise. Return them to their stations and the old culture seems to squeeze out the bravery and the creativity from them, leaving for managers a difficult mix of dry wit, scepticism and a cramped silence (Wells 1997:197).

This observation of Wells (1997) seems to be validated by the research of Skolnick & Fyfe (1993) where they question the value of the para-military model of policing where police at the bottom of the hierarchy have the largest discretionary powers on the street and yet they are stifled in the organisational context by a strict hierarchical system. Woodcock (1991:175) takes the issue one step further by saying that police organisations have been adept at creating hierarchical structures that protect rather than explain and seek scapegoats rather than admit mistakes.

Hierarchical structures, rank structures, trust, loyalty, caring, cynicism - all are elements that must be examined in the light of learning organisation theory. Do the police see themselves differently from those academic authors who scrutinise them looking from the outside in?

The articulation of South Australia Police culture is yet to be added to this paper. It is anticipated they will have a lot to say about their culture and their ideas about learning in the organisation and the concept of evolving into a learning organisation. It is within the model of the learning organisation that I have described that I will situate the SAPOL cultural mores. Through using this structure I hope to be able to find some clear links between SAPOL culture and the effectiveness of the aspiring SAPOL learning organisation.

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