The Notions Of Police Culture

The notions of police culture, in simple terms refers to the ‘values shared by colleagues in an organisation, which becomes apparent through the occupational practices within that environment.’ This is surrounded by morals, attitudes, and beliefs, encouraging certain ways in which they behave within the police force. Many academics, determined that this is based on situational, psychological and organisational factors, which all play a role within the police culture. Along with this, being shaped by the public, and pressures, both internally and externally within the workplace. However, with different attitudes and commitments, arguably, police officers can break this barrier of cultures and carry out meaningful reforms. This essay is going to examine the extent of notions of police cultures, which creates a barrier to achieving meaningful reform in the way police conduct their duties.

Within most organisations, culture tends to exist influencing behaviours, like in the military. Some cultures will consist of a constructive influence, carrying solidity and understanding to the organisation and the people in it. However, to a certain extent the police culture has been associated as ‘deterministic… all-powerful, homogenous… insulated from the external environment leaving little scope for change.’ It is defined by academics in various ways, including Reiner who positions it as, ‘the values, norms, perspectives and craft rules which inform police conduct’. However, Manning has provided one of the most inclusive definitions, ‘accepted practices, rules, and principles of conduct that are situationally applied, and generalised rationales and beliefs.’ In differentiating both definitions, there is a visible discrepancy made. Manning accentuates that these principles of demeanour are essentially situationally applied. This idealizes that police culture is not always necessarily influential to an officer’s actions when conducting their duties.

Nevertheless, Reiner’s definition underlines that police culture stays with the officer when carrying out duties, then enforces established ideas with their fellow colleagues, depicting that all police officers act in harmonization to the police culture. This highlights that there a set of standards and values within police forces that is shared amongst them, which could potentially affect how they operate in an intense working environment. Police culture is not just one culture, there are many. Though, having such a mindset may hinder the chance of reformation, creating a challenging barrier in this sector.

The notion of police occupational culture has been a foundation of academic interest and discussion since the study into policing began in 1960s. Police culture reform has been an unavoidable, and persistent recurring theme, being key point of literature. One of the fundamental elements is the blame culture and the negativity of policing laid by the public. The idea of a blame culture is characterised by scepticism and a fear of caution that prevents officers from acknowledging failure. This is a sequence of organisational standards and attitudes epitomised by a hesitancy to take risk or recognize faults. Waddington portrays that police culture has become a convenient way of blaming the police for injustices. This therefore remains an underlying tension within the workforce. Evidently, it is important that the blame culture reduces to one that values questioning, learning and improvement instead. This is because when an officer misuses their power, it is often the police culture itself that gets blamed. Police work is bounded by tension, having pressure placed within expectations of what

police work consist of and its daily realism and this is all within the culture itself. This can impact their actions of everyday duties.

Furthermore, conditions posed by policing could have negative impacts on the public. This may include vagueness and uncertainty of law and rule and its implementation and discretion, which may become all too challenging and undesirable. This is because of the nature of the job, and perceptibly becomes a barrier in order to reform. Even with urgency and desire, many tend to fail because of the inconsistencies dealing with unpredictable situations. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that conclusions drawn by officers, whilst on duty have immediate and lifelong impacts with the public. Inaccurate decisions can impact relationships of the public and police, losing trust, admiration, and rationality within the community and lay a foundation of negative conflicts. The relationship between the police and the public is therefore imperative to have an effective system in place.

By contrast, Chan proposes that focusing on new culpability, reinforcing conditions, performance and violent demands, may intensify cultural resistance. So, ‘officers will suffer more bureaucracy, exploit their decision inappropriately and remain to alienate the public.’ This ultimately becomes a barrier to achieving a meaningful reform in the way police conduct their duties. This is to say that there needs to be a fair balance that holds into account within this.

Policing is a unique job, providing a visible representation of the law in everyday society. They are normal individuals, given discretionary powers to arrest, search and detain members of the public, in order to enact their duties. Ultimately they are ‘key decision makers’ in the interaction course between the public and the criminal justice system. This altogether can put huge amounts of pressure within the officers making the correct choices in every situation, which may be impossible, leaving small room for meaningful reform. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that despite police culture is often described to have negative impacts; some researchers have specified that police culture can have a positive purpose in terms of reformation. The notions resulting from the culture displayed by colleagues can aid and provide guidance, with the interaction of the public.

Similarly, Waddington rejects the notion that police culture exists to encourage actions. He suggests instead it ‘gives meaning to experience and sustains occupational self-esteem’. Having this viewpoint for officers about police culture is important, to the possible positive impacts and ‘not merely used a scapegoat for a range of negative attitudes associated with policing.’ This is supported by Goldsmith, ‘In an environment perceived as hostile and unpredictable the culture offers its members reassurance that the other officers will defend, back up and assist their colleagues when confronted.’ Although many have been persuaded within the ‘blame’ culture, it is essential to consider it as a learning response to criticism. This is because the propensity to find errors with individuals mirrored a reluctancy to challenge the need for a more problematic, organisational transformation and hence becoming a barrier to achieve meaningful reform.

One of Peel’s Principles of Law Enforcement 1829 is that ‘the police at all times should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police…’ essentially, the public has a duty to follow and to enforce societal rules. However, what contradicts this is another notion of police culture, known as ‘The Blue Code of Silence,’ influencing an ‘us against them’ mentality. This involves commitment to the Blue code, where such system is implemented making police culture like a

sort of family structure. Members within this system will be supported by the other officers.

There seems to be a fear of misconduct within the policing industry, questioning what the public would think, if they have misused their powers, within such a key decision-making atmosphere. As a result, it can emphasise this idea of a closed culture. These have endured because the unique pressures of the role have remained the same, and thus being reluctant to reform. Instead, they have this code of silence, having other officers for emotional and physical support as they can relate to the degree of intensity and challenging barriers they face daily.

Another key thing to remember is the intense nature of the job, officers are encouraged to bond strongly and they tend to learn to rely on one another, and as such, develop the ‘us against them’ attitude, lacking coherence in the public and police relationship. According to Loftus, ideas of self-detachment in officers were evident, believing that the public did not appreciate the role carried out in society or associate them with positivity. Moreover, having a strong sense of depersonalization experienced by officers, often where the public fail to recognise officers as individuals. Consequently, this makes Peels principle an issue. It may be tough for policing to reform, when officers do not feel unified with the communities they serve and therefore they’re more reluctant to change, remaining in this culture. It is apparent that this in turn, can be one of the ways that a barrier to achieving meaningful reform in the way police conduct their duties is formed.

According to Alderson, policing requires an alteration in the way they operate, towards a more practical police work that involves the whole community. The observation that mistakes will be disciplined constraints modernization and trialing, whilst also increasing bureaucracy and mistrust, having officers become more cautious with what they do. This attitude should not be the case, which ultimately leads to a cultural barrier in policing to reform in a meaningful way. It is because of this culture fear that limits, with their self-identity from their occupation, which can make police organisations resistant to reform. A leadership review affirmed, ‘negative aspects of policing culture may impede change, prevent internal challenge, restrict innovation and at worst, damage individual and institutional legitimacy.’ The nature of policing, including the existence of personal risk, can encourage a tendency for officers to help each other when faced with threats and at worst, result in narrow-minded attitudes that inhibit change. This ultimately portrays that the ‘us against them’ mentality, along with fear of misconduct consists of a barrier to achieving meaningful reform in the way police conduct their duties.

According to Reiner, police culture has many characteristics but one of them that circulates often is ‘suspicion’. This is an absolute necessity, as it is suspicion that helps the police prevent crimes from occurring and therefore experiences encourage officers to generalise people into particular labels, regardless if this is an authentic way to suspect possible offenders. This idea is found in Peel’s Principles of Law enforcement 1829, ‘the basic mission for which police exist is to prevent crime and disorder.’ In this industry of policing, it is challenging to prevent crimes, however, suspicion can aid in many ways. Nevertheless, officers don’t need to follow cultural attitudes, for example, Cosgrove expresses; ‘Officers construct cultural attitudes, and accepted behaviour depending upon individual experience.’

Yet, unfortunately, there is a strong link between suspicion and ethnicity, with ethnic minorities suspected to engage in criminal activity more than people of white ethnic origin. For instance, this is manifested from Lincolnshire’s Police’s stop and Search Statistics Under PACE; in 2018/19, black people were stopped and searched at just about seven and a half times the rate

of white people across Lincolnshire. Chan portrays that, ‘while the culture may be powerful, it is nevertheless up to individuals to accommodate or resist its influence.’ This ultimately results in the risk with the public’s trust and confidence decreasing, continuing in this way, lacking cooperation and making it a harder job for officers in the future.

Moreover, racist cultures may affect and hinder achieving a meaning reform. To illustrate, the Macpherson Report concluded that the investigation into the killing of Stephen Lawrence had been ‘marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership.’ Further stating, ‘institutional racism’ consists of the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin.’ A year after Macpherson, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act placed a legal obligation on public bodies to encourage good relations, whilst shielding any victims they may discriminate against. This depicts that although the notions of police culture are arguably still in place to an extent, issues have been acknowledged, having the possibility to achieve a meaningful reform. Smith and Grey supports this, identifying ‘Police culture need not translate into behaviour.’ So, it is important that officers take into account and make decisions not based on the individual but their actions itself.

Within the police force, white males tend to dominate in this role. Despite provisions set out to try and evade the recurrence of racial controversy, evidence indicates that minority ethnic recruitment is still low, and this is noticeably still an occurring issue. Many find it challenging to gain acceptance, which leads to an unrepresented workforce and consequently, restricts a diverse policing environment. For example, they may feel like an ‘outsider’ achieving solidarity, or fearing racism in the ranks and community stigma about joining a seemingly ‘oppressive’ organisation.

A change to this barrier is the UK government report, ‘Diversity Matters’, where it supported changes to the occupational cultures of policing through an encouragement within policing to accept and appreciate officers from different backgrounds. It is vital to have a diversity within the police force, allowing individuals from different cultures and backgrounds have different demeanors, reflecting the communities they serve are crucial to tackling crime in a modern diverse society. More than ever, diversity is an important part of operational effectiveness. This ensures they come together in terms of understanding and allowing to achieve a meaningful workforce within how the police conduct their duties within this reform.

Another subculture within the police industry is gender. Policing tends to be dominated by masculine values, leaving female officers finding themselves in a ‘man’s world’, in which they struggle to be accepted and female officers either embrace male culture or fulfil traditional expectations of them. To a certain extent, there may be effects on citizens, including ‘interrogations’ of rape victims and domestic violence regarded as ‘rubbish work’. Many women recounted their experiences of police investigations negatively and reported feeling disbelieved and unsupported by the police. Jordan depicts that ‘while there is much that reflects traditional even hostile attitudes towards women victims, it is possible for some victims at least to be treated supportively and with compassion.’

Police culture decision making continues to occur profoundly influenced by traditional patriarchal thinking. However, individual officers and their leaders together can make a difference in the ways they respond to, behave towards and communicate. Nevertheless, a continental shift in thinking is required to have an effective system. Like Reiner states, Police occupational culture

is not ‘monolithic, universal nor unchanging.’ These are barriers that have formed within notions of police cultures, to achieve a meaningful reform in the way police conduct their duties.

Furthermore, for new officers there seems to be a ‘took kit’ that is passed on. This is not the notion of new recruits being passive receivers of a structured ‘cop code’, but instead, stories are used by new officers, which they will employ on situational basis, where appropriate. This allows guidance on actions and practice, and an area for justifying their choices, but still allows for individual interpretation and initiative, since the nature of the job is unpredictable and challenging. Foster supports this, arguing ‘new recruits do not exhibit a distinct police personality.’ It is their own experience that results in how they act, therefore the notions of police culture should not become a barrier in achieving an effective way in which police conduct their duties.

The significance of police culture is the recognition of ‘habitus’ and field’. Bourdieu’s theories of this within the police culture is used to differentiate the typical recognised and rule-bounded nature that is often discovered by officers themselves. Here, the field is established by objective historical and social elements, e.g. relationships between police and the public. Habitus is wherever the cultural knowledge of the police will be placed. Essentially, it is because of the nature of the workforce, the need to be accepted and thought of as ‘a legitimate member of the team’ can somewhat influence the development of cultural temperaments. These are imparted perception, followed in working structures. It is because of this, that countless attempts to implement seemingly promising reforms have been tried and abandoned. In effect, Walker discovered that, ‘the history of police reform is filled with stories of highly publicised changes that promised much but evaporated over the long run with only minimal impact.’

To have a meaningful reform in the future challenges, police leaders are a main way achieving this. They need to build better organisational agility in order to protect the susceptible and maintain validity policing as a provider of public security. Developing a culture that values reflexivity and adaptability, trust, embraces mistakes and encourages learning is vital. The relationship between leadership and culture was recognised by a chief officer; ‘when leadership and culture come together, they deliver performance.’ Regardless of the idea that self-reform is challenging in an environment constrained by a fear of failure.

The Policing Vision 2025 highlights a need to define ‘a better balance between personal accountability and a bureaucratic fear of making mistakes.’ It is significant to consider for officers that, it is not to understand what police do or think, but to change them. It is about reform. The key aspect is that the literature on police culture tells individuals, what is wrong with the police culture from the perspective of the observer of the culture. It does not tell us anything about culture from the perspective of its officers themselves, in the way it creates an image of the police throughout society. Acknowledge of this culture having hidden and unpleasant characteristics is present in media construction and academics, but most importantly, it is the officers who can break this barrier of cultural notions and have meaningful reform.