

## Management Issues in Police and Social Worker Alliances: Using the Lens of Occupational Culture

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Events, often (but not always; NBC News, 2022) involving members of minority groups, have caused members of the public to question the motives and methods of the police. In these events, police have either reacted to a mis-perceived threat or misunderstood the situation and responded incorrectly. To prevent future events, some observers have called for an alliance between police and social workers in responding to specific events within the community. Some cases may cause a need for resources that are not within the police domain. In the heat of the moment, determining the best way to deal with emotionally charged situations can require complex decision making. For instance, when police respond to reports of domestic violence, both parties may forget about their own differences and turn on the police. Negative experiences may cause police to respond based on previous experiences, rather than the current situation. This paper examines significant differences in the occupational cultures of social workers and police that may affect how the two units interact and respond to events. Our findings explicate the influence of cultural issues on the effectiveness of the proposed alliance. This paper does not discuss incidents where the groups are working well together, but only those where there may be occupational cultural differences that cause problems.

*What was different about the death of Floyd was that the graphic manner of its unfolding was captured on film: the slow act of wilful suffocation (8 minutes and 46 seconds), and how the entire world was seemingly invited to witness the torment and the execution of this man, in broad daylight, even as he cried “I can’t breathe.” (Apata, 2020, p. 241)*

Deadly events have caused members of the public to question the motives and methods of the police. In most of these cases, police have either reacted to a mis-perceived threat or misunderstood the situation and responded inappropriately. These concerns have given rise to a move toward defunding police. For some people, this involves reducing the budgets of local law enforcement and reallocating the funds to agencies that may be better prepared to work with minority communities and the mentally ill. Some argue that the functions of agencies involved in public safety must be reconsidered (El-Sabawi & Carroll, in press). However, most people are now interpreting this as a call to extend additional resources solely used by the police to support other resources, in terms of mental health issues and social assistance (Cohen, 2017; Kaba, 2020; Weichselbaum & Lewis, 2020).

Police often deal with situations that they were never intended to handle — those that fall outside the general domain of policing. Police feel they are often asked to be psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, which conflicts with their role in policing (Carr, Napolitano, &

Keating, 2007; Pickett & Nix, 2019; Paoline, 2003). One specific suggestion currently under consideration is to integrate police and social workers so they can jointly respond to calls involving domestic disputes, abuse, mental health issues, or similar situations where there may be a need for both types of expertise. Some police organizations support the idea of working with social workers (Vermeer, Woods, & Jackson, 2020), and it has sparked much public interest (Ayers et al. 2020). However, recognizing the differences between the two occupational cultures will help reduce friction between the two professional groups and encourage effective cooperation.

The two professions have different goals but have been successful in working together in various situations in other countries, i.e., South Africa, Hong Kong, Israel, and Britain (Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2008; Chun, Chui, Chan, & Cheng, 2010; Jeyasingham, 2017; Masson, 2019). Policing is necessary to provide adherence to concepts that society considered important enough to legislate into laws. They promote public safety, enforce laws, attempt to protect the public from dangerous criminals, arrest criminals, investigate crimes, maintain law and order, and deter crime (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2020). Social worker is designed to help those who are defenceless, demoralized, and impoverished (NASW, 2020). What might be the best way to manage police and social worker alliances?

Occupational culture clashes are quite common in an interdependent world. Such cultural clashes between po-

lice and social workers in a joint response could create problems resulting in loss of life and property, and potential injury to responders. This paper explores the occupational cultures of the two distinct professions to suggest causes of some potential conflict and ways to avoid them. We explore and analyze the professional (occupational) culture of each profession. In the discussion and conclusion, we identify areas where there might be conflict and suggest ways to overcome them. This paper does not discuss incidents where the groups are working well together, but only those where there may be occupational differences that may cause problems.

### **Occupational Culture**

Culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 4). It is the shared belief system, including processes, traditions, and acceptable behaviors (Calori & Samin, 1991; Schein, 2010). It evolves as people share knowledge and adapt to their physical and social environments, which is why cultures differ globally and within each organization and occupation (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Schein, 2010).

Culture is usually determined first by those in leadership roles (Schein, 2010). Police usually work with other police and are typically managed by professional police. In contrast, social workers may work with other disciplines in the same organization but be managed by someone from a different profession. Therefore, the occupational and organizational cultures of police may be more homogeneous than that of social workers.

Occupational or professional culture reflects processes in an occupational context, based on the occupation that the organizational member has chosen. Occupational culture defines the work environment and helps make sense of the profession (group of people) and its expectations. Hall and Hall (1987) stated that culture programs the actions and responses of each person within the culture. It is socially constructed and individuals are often unaware of the effect that it has on the decisions that they make or the behaviors that they exhibit (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000; Bate, 1984; Beyer & Trice, 1987; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Meyer, 1995; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 2009).

Culture is transmitted through socialization. Bandura (1977) and Schein (2010) provide an excellent review of socialization processes. Newcomers observe others in their profession to determine how they should act and react (Bandura, 1977; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008). Socialization theory (Bandura, 1977) explains how, if members of the occupation see that something are tolerated within the profession, it is likely that they will tolerate and enact it, reinforcing these behaviors within the occupational culture (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008).

Occupational culture comprises values, norms, and symbols, and arises from shared education and/or experiences of people in the same profession (Brief & Nord,

1990; Greenwood, 1957). Sometimes occupational cultures conflict with societal and organizational cultures because values and norms often conflict (Trice, 1993). For example, society values protests, where police may find them problematic because of possible associated violence by inside or outside groups. Some cultures are tight and require exact adherence to conventions, like police; others are loose or flexible and deal better with ambiguity, such as social worker culture (Triandis, 2004). In his book, *Outliers*, Gladwell (2008) gives an excellent example of a tight culture: In Korean Air accidents, the fundamental problem was the hierarchical social culture that prevented a co-pilot from questioning the pilot to prevent an accident. A more recent example is in the George Floyd case, where a new police officer questioned the senior’s action of putting a knee on a suspect’s neck but was ignored (Associated Press, 2020; Collman, 2020).

In general, new members will react as they see senior members react. These senior members may unwittingly convey implicit support for dysfunctional behavior because these patterns are established over many years (Halbesleben, 2009; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008). For example, both social workers and police are more likely to share the same values, norms, attitudes, and interests as others within their specific occupations. The sections below discuss the basic occupational cultures of police and social workers.

### **Police Culture**

Police departments enforce the laws; they prevent, detect, and investigate crime (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2020). They appear as the line that prevents anarchy by some but are feared by others (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). With the amount of power that they possess, it takes only a few members exhibiting deviant abusive behaviors to create the fear that some members of society feel (Meeks, 2005). In examining police culture, Sierra-Arevalo (2021) suggested that deviations from policy damage police.

The culture in most police departments is based on hierarchical structures and has an authoritarian overlay, like the military (Paoline, 2003). Hierarchical cultures mainly focus on structure, control, coordination, efficiency, and stability (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Carr et al. (2007) and Wagner (2009) stated that police power has no bounds and acts against threats to public safety, at least in the view of some segments of society. Skogan and Frydl (2004) defined police culture as “a set of widely shared outlooks that are formed as adaptations to a working environment characterised by uncertainty, danger, and coercive authority and that serves to manage the strains that originate in this work environment” (p. 131). Preoccupation with potential death from a suspect is another salient feature of police culture (Sierra-Arevalo, 2019), which is not present in most occupational cultures. This “danger imperative... [creates] a cultural frame that emphasizes danger and the need for officer safety” (Sierra-Arevalo, 2021, p. 70). It has made police culture development unique.

Considered a mostly homogeneous culture (Paoline & Gau, 2018), the focus of police culture is stability and control, as well as the external environment and the tasks involved in policing. Police are organized along the lines of a military hierarchy, often producing a “macho, action-oriented culture and a paramilitary command style management that stifles consultation, evaluation, and creative problem solving” (Prenzler, 1997, p. 48). However, police culture varies somewhat in different settings, e.g., between a large urban centre and a small town. Paoline (2003) and Paoline and Gau (2018) suggested that the norms, values, and beliefs of the culture come from the police management group. It varies in different organizational settings, such as settings where leadership is by political actors versus career officers (Campeau, 2015).

However, many features remain consistent (Loftus, 2010). For example, police departments are mostly bureaucratic and hierarchical (Verma, 1999). Its operationalization and institutionalization within police departments results from the local current political climate (Finnane, 1994; Reiner, 1992, 1998). Such constraints are often overlooked by the public (Crank & Longworthy, 1992; Katz, 2001). The authoritarian and, sometimes cynical, attitudes within this occupational culture allow police members to cope with the stresses in their work life (Paoline, 2003; Skolnick, 2011). Front-line police officers may receive mixed messages from senior officers, and front-line officers may feel that performance outcomes are difficult to agree upon and measure (Reiner, 1998). Conflict between front-line officers and their supervisors is a part of the culture, resulting from distrust (Crank, 1997, 1998; Crank & Caldero, 1991; Waddington, 1999). Officers may demonstrate productivity by focusing on felonies and avoiding arrests for crimes that are less serious or are ambiguous (Black, 1980), reflected in the cultural emphasis on police evaluation systems using crime clearance rates (Paoline, 2003; Perrot & Taylor, 1995).

Literature suggests that there is a tight group culture within most police departments, called the ‘code of silence’ and ‘the thin blue line’ (Crank, 2003; Knapp Commission, 1986; Wood, 1997). Those with less seniority may be hesitant to question actions in the field (Associated Press, 2020; Collman, 2020). Ralston and Chadwick (2010) considered the police solidarity to be based on their close contact and reliance on each other in the often-hostile environment that they face and their preoccupation with death. Loyalty is paramount in this culture (Brown, 1988), because of this generally hostile work environment (Skolnick, 1994). Most officers simply want to do a good job, and front-line officers generally trust each other (Crank, 2003; Knapp Commission, 1986).

Police culture is highly verbal (Fletcher, 1999), and “this oral culture can serve as a sanity-preserver, social glue, or a type of survival handbook” (p. 47). It is a suitable method of socialization (Bandura, 1977) and for passing advice and information (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Police colleagues report the details that they find on the job, and they use it for therapy and for warning

others of dangers (Fletcher, 1999). For example, Fletcher recounts a story from a visit to a police station: “The only Americans who have ever accepted the metric system are the dope dealers. Here are guys who probably couldn’t get a D in grade school math and they’re converting grams to ounces to kilos in the blink of an eye” (p. 49). Fletcher’s (1999) study indicates how police base perceptions of different communities on the incidents that they choose to relate in their stories. Those she relates in the paper are all negative, giving an indication of police view of life—which is reasonable; we only call police when there are problems.

Police culture is often accused of reinforcing institutional racism (Chan, 1997; El-Sabawi & Carroll, in press), and cultural change is difficult in any organization. The strict hierarchy of the policing structure and the complex nature of policing increases the difficulty, but it is not an impossible challenge (Schein, 2009; Skogan, 2008). A segment of police believes in aggressive policing as a style and rejects civilian input (Paoline, 2003; Skolnick, 2011). Recent press may seem to indicate that this is a majority, but that is untrue (Marenin, 2016). Disrespect or ‘contempt of cop’ occurs frequently, and some research has showed that civilian demeanour impacts police beliefs and encounters (Dunham & Alpert, 2009; Engel, Tillyer, Klahm, & Frank, 2012; Pickett & Nix, 2019).

Police worry about losing funding and other resources in the current political environment (Berman & Jackman, 2021). Recent events include President Biden’s executive order stopping purchases of surplus US military equipment by police departments, which had been a President Obama-era rule rolled back in the following Republican presidency (Goldman, 2017; Lynch, 2021). Having others involved in evaluating behavior is a concern for police, who often feel misunderstood by the public (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017). One consequence of this might be a retrenchment of the police in terms of public access to the actions they take. Resource loss will take a toll on police morale and, consequently, on their ability to cooperate with other entities. However, it is essential that the role of the police be clarified, as discussed in the article, “I’m a police officer, not a social worker or mental health nurse” (Lane, 2019, p. 439).

### **Social Work Culture**

There is little literature on social work culture, but the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2020) states that social work exists to “enhance human well-being and help meet basic and complex needs of all people, with a particular focus on those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (para. 1). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2020) states that social workers “aims to maximise the development of human potential and the fulfilment of human needs” by “achieving the best possible levels of personal and social well-being,” and “working to achieve social justice” (para. 4). These goals may be diametrically opposed to public order and safety goals enforced by the police.

Social work is a hybrid profession because of the multiple contexts in which it must operate (Noordegraff, 2007), but generally its culture is classified as a clan culture, with a focus on focus on relationships, mentoring, nurturing, and participation (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Social work culture is flexible and adapts to change well, but unlike the police, the focus is on the individual and their social problems, such as access to food, housing, and work. Like police, they deal with people who need help but, unlike the police, they think of the people they serve as clients. In social work, an ongoing relationship with the client is essential to the people that they serve, while police usually have one-time encounters with perpetrators and/or victims. Social worker flexibility in dealing with ambiguity and complexity makes them valuable assets in following the situation (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). Confidentiality is a hallmark of social work professional culture, so social workers are less likely to be verbal about problems they encounter, unless it is with other social workers dealing with similar problems (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016).

However, social work is not without difficulties when dealing with complexity, particularly when entwined with racial and cultural issues. Sometimes, clients may be dangerous, but social workers undergo training to help them deal with these instances; however, it is different than training of police. Cultural factors, especially one's own, interfere in cross-cultural exchanges (Yan & Wong, 2005), because one cannot escape from one's own framing within situations. Therefore, it is possible that social workers may have the same biases as the police officers that they work with, creating a positive situation or in one perpetuating the problem that the interprofessional work was designed to overcome.

### **Potential Cultural Clashes**

The cultures of these responder groups will tend to clash, because the effort depends on the collective actions of the responders, who are members of unique occupational cultures that have dissimilar priorities, needs, values, and rewards. Therefore, the quality of the response effort depends upon how these cultural differences are managed (McHugh, 1995). Problems often arise from misunderstandings of each occupation's structure and function (Perry, 1995), as well as from failing to understand which occupation is best for any given task (Lutz & Lindell, 2008). There are good reasons to use occupational culture as a lens to view the differences in these groups that may lead to difficulties. Difficulties may also arise if there is an overarching coordination body, whether it is a police person, social worker, or other professional as manager.

Police usually deal with a short-term problem: Stop the violence or crime or preserve life and property. They need to control the situation long enough to discover if an individual is an immediate threat to him/herself or to others. Police are not responsible for the welfare of the person after they turn them over to the legal system. On the other hand, social workers deal with relationships over the longer term, trying to figure out the process most effective

for the individual and the local society. Social workers have follow-up and certain routines that they follow, which may be counter to police procedures. Police are trained to be more objective, while social workers are trained to be more subjective. Each occupation has specific processes to deal with the individuals that they encounter.

Both occupations could mitigate threats to life and/or property, which creates empowerment (Thompson & Bono, 1993). Social workers act more as a coach, while the police are more of a personal shield. This can be a powerful focus to override occupational culture problems that may result. It is also possible to find and leverage similarities between their groups, such as the support that each occupation finds within teams and the pride in the successful fulfilment of their assignments. Both professions face high caseloads and issues of safety (Social Work Policy Institute, 2010; Justice Technology Information Center, 2017).

Power dynamics will play a role in this integration. The social worker could be viewed as an adjunct, instead of a central figure in the situation, which has significant consequences if the police try to override social work decisions (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). Social workers might get dismissed or 'talked over' by police, as the police may see themselves in charge of the situation. Flat organizational structures work best to solve these issues (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016), but it might be difficult, as the police culture is one with strict hierarchy. The occupational culture generally forms the organizational structure, particularly in professional work (Kvarnstrom, 2008). Collaboration and communication are best when individuals occupy the same physical spaces (Goldman et al., 2010; Kates et al., 2011). But the management structure of a police and social worker integration is unclear, and this may create struggles over power and resources, with no one the winner.

### **Discussion**

Certain issues might spark cultural clashes, and some are listed in the Table. Certain words or phrases might set cultural clashes in motion, and these will usually arise from misperceptions and misunderstandings. Police and social workers have different jargon and ways of expressing emotion. Perception due to training might make one party or the other to question the use (or lack of use) of force. For example, social workers are alert to potential dangers arising from mental illness through their training. Therefore, a social worker might recommend a person be taken into mental health care, even to the extent of using a straitjacket, while the police might not view the person as dangerous. In other instances, social workers might object to police use of force in a particular situation if the social worker identifies more positive alternatives.

Many police question their roles within society, particularly after the officer-involved deaths of those in their control viewed by the public from police camera video and bystander video. Police state that they do not want to be psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, as it conflicts with their role in policing (Carr, Napolitano, &

**Table***Salient issue differences between police and social work cultures*

| <b>Issue</b>                   | <b>Police</b>   | <b>Social Workers</b>  | <b>Potential Conflicts</b>   |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Teamwork                       | Tight bonds with inner circle because of the range of experiences on the job; often work independently or in teams of 2 | Social workers work independently  | Working in teams with different occupations may be difficult.<br><br>Trust between occupations may be difficult to develop   |
| Relationships with Clients     | Distant, impersonal   | Personal, persistent over time (if workload permits)   | Deciding which approach is necessary given the situation may be problematic and power-based rather than situational-based.   |
| Relationships with Supervisors | Professional, but police do not share too much information for fear that they will misinterpret it                      | Task-oriented (heavy workload)   | Differing relationships could lead to fear of sharing by police and lack of attention by social workers.   |
| Motivation                     | To protect and defend people; challenging work  | Desire to help people improve their lives  | Police aim to protect and defend in the short-term and social workers focus on changing lives.   |
| Scope of job                   | Wide area of law, safety-related behavior, operational procedures, physical and self-defense skills                     | Interpret and administer laws concerning parents, children, financial support, mental and social health issues | With differing scopes, power may determine which view overrides the other.   |
| Legal Authority                | Broad during the situation  | Limited in some situations, but broad in others  | Differing views of a situation can create argument over which has legal authority.   |
| Oversight                      | Everything they do is subject to review   | Everything they do is subject to review  | If there are differing opinions on actions taken at the scene (second-guessing) then each may be subject to more scrutiny. Conflicting perceptions may be due to cultural clashes. |
| Overall culture                | Hierarchical*—focus on structure, control, coordination, efficiency, and stability                                      | Clan*—focus on relationships, mentoring, nurturing, and participation  | Strict hierarchy may necessitate constant reports to supervisors; in a clan culture, professionalism allows for more independent thought   |
| Gender                         | Police are mostly men, still.   | Social workers are still mostly women.   | Women going into policing may be expected to assume masculine values and ‘tough it out.’ Men going into social work may be stigmatized as being effeminate.                        |

*Note.* Based on research by Cameron and Quinn (2011)

Keating, 2007; Lane, 2019; Pickett & Nix, 2019). Loftus (2010) suggests that the culture will not change until the assumed roles of the police change.

The idea of combining social workers and police for certain situations is being examined in the US and is operationalized in some parts of the UK and South Africa, among other locales. In our view, society will be best served with both professions responding to most police calls. Social work plays an important part in society, as does policing, and they have many of the same overarching principles regarding addressing society's needs. Including social work as a component in policing could be an asset because social work addresses ambiguity and complexity much better than the current system. In Britain, Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs place social workers alongside police, working to help deter child abuse (Jeyasingham, 2017). Jeyasingham (2017) found that each profession brought significant values and imagination to addressing child abuse. So, we ask: What might be the best way to manage police and social worker alliances?

This paper does not discuss incidents where the groups are working well together. Sometimes this has happened in trials with multi-professional coordination. However, it is essential that we recognize that there are likely to be potential problems when combining two professions with distinct cultures created from their different goals and resource needs, as briefly outlined in the Table. There are obvious differences in cultures. Critics might say that police react too quickly or are conditioned to draw their guns immediately. Social work critics might say that social workers are too lenient in taking a long-term perspective. In crisis situations, if the professionals do not get it right, people may die. However, this is happening under the present system.

Many believe that it is in the best interests of society that this combination work. Therefore, to ensure that integration has the best chance to succeed, members of each occupation needs to understand their differences and decide how best to work together. The social worker's role of advocate may be diametrically opposed to the goals of policing, creating tension between the two professions. If this divergence in their cultures and goals is not considered, it could doom this combination to failure.

Cultural clashes can create problems that result in loss of life and property, as well as potential injury or death for the responders. Therefore, understanding the clashes in these conditions requires that those managing these units understand the occupational cultures of the various responder groups and their effects on the response effort, as outlined in the Table. Melding two cultures into a useful unit can have unique difficulties in this case because of the opposing perceptions. This does not mean that one cannot try it. One profession or the other may have to give up some practices that are core to the culture. For example, police may have to reconsider the time to give to a situation to allow it to cool or to allow social workers to intervene safely. Social workers may have to consider that use of force may be optimal, based on previous instances

where police have dealt with the suspect. Both perceptions have merit, but it will be necessary to share power between the two professions, which might be the primary difficulty.

The other source of problems might be in gender differences. Many social workers are women, while many police are men. Society may consider men in social work more feminine and women in policing more masculine. We should not overlook these potential gendered work perspectives.

### Practical Implications

Buchbinder and Eisikovits (2008) identified issues in clashes, which create the following questions for future research and practice: (1) Who takes credit for problems and solutions? (2) Where are the boundaries between social work and policing? (3) What do we do about hostility from the other profession? (4) How do we maintain collaboration on both the institutional and interpersonal levels? The literature suggests that there is not one solution for solving cultural clashes, because solutions are usually situationally dependent, making it difficult to give prescriptions (Avruch, 2013; Tidwell, 2004). Behavior is easier to change than culture (Naevestad, 2009) and, over time, collective behavior changes will change the values and norms that sustain a particular culture (Zimbardo, 2008). Oney-Yazici et al., (2007) found that measurement of cultures is difficult, primarily because of the difficulty to identify boundaries between groups within an organization. Studies of occupational culture can only strengthen the field, as we discover the nuances of behaviors within and commonalities between occupations. In the social work profession, there is scant research on their culture, possibly because it is hybrid – it morphs to fit into the context where the members work. This would be an interesting and useful area to explore, particularly considering the enormous assistance that social workers could provide to policing.

Close monitoring of the situations where police and social workers interact will be essential because of the potential differences in complex decision making between the groups. Training with each other can help elevate problems before they occur, but some differences will occur. Training in dealing with professional differences can help police and social workers make decisions about how they cope with them in real time, on the scene. In turn, managers will need to understand the differences in decision making processes to determine which profession will overrule the other in any given case. Mistakes will be made, but there will likely be fewer than there are now.

The safety of both police and social workers should be high on the list of training efforts. Social workers may be injured in this integration, but police may also be injured if the action of the social worker puts either in danger. Police will feel that it is their responsibility to protect the social works, perhaps when the social worker does not need protection. Social workers may feel responsible for protecting the perpetrator/client, even when that is un-

wise. Masson (2019) found that social workers may be subjected to vicarious trauma in collaborating with police, which might influence their needs for increased coping and responding skills.

There are various issues that, if examined thoroughly, can make this interaction a major success for both professions.

### Future Research Directions

In future, we believe that the inclusion of interviews from police chiefs and social worker supervisors would almost certainly yield rich, practical information that would support these main contentions and add a potent, practical element to the discussion surrounding such an integration. Implementation processes can be assisted by research from various aspects of both professions, as well as management, psychology, sociology, and public health. All of these areas should examine where potential problems will arise and what methods could help with integrating these two professions. There seems to be a great deal of scope for future research in this area.

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