

 Open access • Journal Article • DOI:10.2307/1142281

## **The Police Personality: Fact or Fiction? — Source link**

Robert W. Balch

**Published on:** 01 Mar 1972

**Topics:** Personality

Related papers:

- [Police Personality: Fact or Fiction, The](#)
- [Psychological Attributes of Policemen: A Review of Research and Opinion](#)
- [Justice without Trial: Law Enforcement in Democratic Society](#)
- [The Value Gap between Police and Policed](#)
- [Violence and the Police](#)

Share this paper:    


View more about this paper here: <https://typeset.io/papers/the-police-personality-fact-or-fiction-ekfpcuxurg>

1972

## Police Personality: Fact or Fiction, The

Robert W. Balch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Robert W. Balch, Police Personality: Fact or Fiction, The, 63 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 106 (1972)

This Criminology is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

## THE POLICE PERSONALITY: FACT OR FICTION?\*

ROBERT W. BALCH

Robert W. Balch is Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Montana, Missoula. Much of the work on his present paper was prepared while he was a graduate student at the University of Oregon.

In the last few years a great deal has been written about the police mentality. If we can believe everything we read in magazines, journals, and sociology books, the typical policeman is cynical, suspicious, conservative, and thoroughly bigoted. This is not a flattering picture to be sure, but it recurs again and again in the popular and "scientific" literature on the police. Perhaps there is something about the police system itself that generates a suspicious, conservative world-view. Or perhaps certain personality types are inadvertently recruited for police work. Either explanation is plausible, and both may be correct. Unfortunately only a few writers have bothered with the most basic question of all: Is there really a modal police personality? At one time most white Americans thought blacks were superstitious tap dancers who preferred watermelon to work. Could it be that we have stereotyped policemen in the same way? The following pages will examine the controversy over the police mentality and suggest a sociological alternative to current speculation about the nature of police personalities.

### THE POLICE PERSONALITY AS IT APPEARS IN THE LITERATURE

Although authors vary in emphasis, there is remarkable agreement on the characteristics believed to make up the police mentality. The cluster of traits that consistently emerges includes suspicion, conventionality, cynicism, prejudice, and distrust of the unusual. The traits are poorly defined and the names vary, but the syndrome is always the same.

Policemen are supposed to be very suspicious characters. A good policeman is always on the lookout for the unusual: persons visibly rattled in the presence of policemen, people wearing coats on hot days, cars with mismatched hubcaps, and

\* I would like to thank Fredrick B. Lindstrom, Marvin J. Cummins, and Richard D. Vandiver for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

so on.<sup>1</sup> A good policeman presumably suspects evil wherever he goes. As Buckner put it, "Once the commonplace is suspect, no aspect of interaction is safe, on or off duty."<sup>2</sup>

According to Colin MacInness, suspicion is simply a manifestation of deep-seated political and emotional conservatism.

The true copper's dominant characteristic, if the truth be known, is neither those daring nor vicious qualities that are sometimes attributed to him by friend or enemy, but an ingrained conservatism, an almost desperate love of the conventional. It is untidiness, disorder, the unusual, that a copper disapproves of most of all: far more, even than of crime which is merely a professional matter. Hence his profound dislike of people loitering in streets, dressing extravagantly, speaking with exotic accents, being strange, weak, eccentric, or simply any rare minority—of their doing, in fact, anything that cannot be safely predicted.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, policemen supposedly have no faith in their fellow man. Most are firmly convinced that only the police stand between a tenuous social order and utter chaos.

The people I see in the streets and in trouble are the same people who just a little while before that were in their nice homes and not involved in trouble. You can't fool me. I see people in the raw, the way they really are. Underneath their fine, civilized manners and clothes they're animals.<sup>4</sup>

If people in general are no good, then "coons" and "spics" are worse. All they like to do is drink, make love, and collect their welfare checks:

<sup>1</sup> Adams, *Field Interrogation*, POLICE 28 (Mar.-Apr. 1963).

<sup>2</sup> H. T. Buckner, *The Police: The Culture of a Social Control Agency*, 1967, at 190 (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. SKOLNICK, *JUSTICE WITHOUT TRIAL: LAW ENFORCEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY* 48 (1967).

<sup>4</sup> A. BLACK, *THE PEOPLE AND THE POLICE* 6-7 (1968).

"These scum aren't people; they're animals in a jungle . . . Hitler had the right idea."<sup>5</sup> Even many black officers share this outlook:

There have always been jobs for Negroes, but the f— people are too stupid to go out and get an education. They all want the easy way out. Civil Rights has gotten them nothin' they didn't have before.<sup>6</sup>

Several other traits are frequently but less consistently used to describe the typical policeman. Police officers supposedly distrust ivory-tower intellectuals and bleeding-heart humanitarians. A good policeman is a realist who learns by experience and not by reading books. He respects authority and knows how to take orders. He likes to give orders too, and he demands respect from juveniles, criminals, and minorities. If necessary he will use force to see that he gets it. Brutality is perhaps the most infamous feature of the policeman's reputation:

A common thread of inhumanity runs through policemen in every city across the land. The potential for brutality is always there. Some psychologists say that this is the character trait that draws them to police work in the first place. . . . In too many cops the beast still slumbers, ready to enjoy another bout of sadism. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly enough, the cluster of traits that apparently make up the police personality also defines authoritarianism.<sup>8</sup> Consider the parallels between the so-called police mentality and the following dimensions of the F-Scale:

- a. Conventionalism: rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values.
- b. Authoritarian Submission: submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup.
- c. Authoritarian Aggression: tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values.
- d. Anti-intraception: opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded.

<sup>5</sup> Black & Reiss, *Patterns of Behavior in Police and Citizen Transactions*, in 2 STUDIES OF CRIME AND LAW ENFORCEMENT IN MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS 113 (1967).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 137.

<sup>7</sup> J. W. Sterling, Changes in Role Concepts of Police Officers During Recruit Training: A Progress Report, 1969, at 31 (mimeographed), quoting Harriet Van Horne.

<sup>8</sup> J. ADORNO, E. FRENKEL-BRUNSWICH, D. LEVENSON & R. SANFORD, THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY 255-57 (1955).

- e. Superstition and Stereotypy: the belief in mystical determinants of the individual's fate; the disposition to think in rigid categories.
- f. Power and "toughness": preoccupation with the dominance-submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension; identification with power figures; overemphasis upon the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness.
- g. Destructiveness and Cynicism: generalized hostility, vilification of the human.
- h. Projectivity: The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses.
- i. Sex: Exaggerated concern with sexual "goings-on."

Only superstition, apparently, has never been used to describe policemen. Otherwise the dimensions of authoritarianism seem to describe police officers very well. In fact, the typical policeman, as he is portrayed in the literature, is almost a classic example of the authoritarian personality.

#### IS THERE REALLY A POLICE PERSONALITY?

While many writers assume as a matter of course that there is a police personality, the empirical evidence is less than convincing. Unfortunately good data are hard to come by. In one study the authors compared the authoritarianism of policemen with a partially matched sample of nonpolice students.<sup>9</sup> Both police and nonpolice subjects were attending the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the time. Using Rokeach and Piven scales, they found the policemen were considerably *less* authoritarian than the other students. At a glance these results cast doubt on the so-called police personality, but in fact they cannot be interpreted so easily. In the first place, the nonpolice students cannot be equated with the general population because as many as 25 percent of them said they were "completely committed" to a career in police work. Second, the non-police students were still less authoritarian than a sample of noncollege policemen in a previous study by the same authors.<sup>10</sup>

The preliminary results of a recent study<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Smith, Locke, & Walker, *Authoritarianism in Police College Students and Non-Police College Students*, J. CRIM. L.C. & P.S. 440 (1968).

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Locke, & Walker, *Authoritarianism in College and Non-College Oriented Students*, 58 J. CRIM. L.C. & P.S. 128 (1967).

<sup>11</sup> Sterling, *supra* note 7.

using the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule indicate there are significant differences between police recruits and nonpolice college students, but the differences are not necessarily consistent with the authoritarian stereotype of policemen. The recruits were more likely to believe in the value of punishment, and they received significantly higher scores on the dimensions of deference and orderliness. They also appeared to be far less independent than the college students, and they were less likely to prefer new experiences. On the other hand, the recruits did not differ from the college students on three dimensions which are closely related to authoritarianism: aggression, nurturance, and intraception. The recruits also scored lower on the dimension of heterosexuality which belies Niederhoffer's claim that policemen are preoccupied with sexual matters.<sup>12</sup>

Another study undertook extensive psychiatric assessment of 116 applicants for the Portland Police Department.<sup>13</sup> All the applicants had passed their mental and physical exams, so, before the program of psychological testing began, they would have become officers as vacancies occurred. The authors administered a variety of psychological tests including the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule, Strong Vocational Interest Blank, and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. They concluded that the typical police applicant was very similar to the average male college student. Of course it is entirely possible that a unique police personality develops *after* recruits have spent some time on the job. Unfortunately there has been no follow-up study of the Portland recruits.

There are studies of experienced policemen in other cities, but they have not used the same personality scales. Bayley and Mendelsohn,<sup>14</sup> for example, administered an extensive questionnaire to a sample of Denver policemen. The questionnaire included items designed to measure anomia, authoritarianism, prejudice, and social distance. Using Srole's five-item F-Scale as their measure of authoritarianism, they found that Denver policemen scored lower than control populations sampled in previous studies. Their conclu-

sion is worth repeating. Since their sample consisted of experienced policemen, the evidence also does not support the belief that a particular personality develops after joining the force.

In a study of the New York Police Department, McNamara used the original F-Scale to measure the authoritarianism of recruits in the police academy.<sup>15</sup> The recruits' mean F-score was virtually the same as the mean for working-class males found by Adorno and his colleagues. If we define "working class" as skilled, semi-skilled, and service work, then between 60 and 70 percent of the recruits in the New York Police Department come from working-class homes.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, McNamara's findings suggests that police recruits are typical of the class from which they are drawn. But since socio-economic status is inversely related to authoritarianism,<sup>17</sup> it is also true that working-class men, and therefore policemen, are more authoritarian than most. The McNamara study has to be taken with a grain of salt, however, because McNamara did not compare his recruits with a contemporary sample of working-class men in New York. Not only had many years elapsed since Adorno and his colleagues completed their study, but their working-class sample was selected on the West Coast.

McNamara also found evidence of increasing authoritarianism over time. He re-tested the recruits at the end of their first year and discovered a slight increase in their mean F-score. He also compared the recruits with men who had served on the force for two years. The more experienced policemen had the highest authoritarianism scores of all. A very liberal interpretation of McNamara's data suggests the following conclusion: Police departments do not attract particular personalities, but instead tend to recruit members from a relatively authoritarian class of people. Furthermore, the police experience itself intensifies authoritarianism. It must be emphasized, however, that this conclusion is tenuous, and certainly is not consistent with Bayley and Mendelsohn's findings.

Although not concerned with personality *per se*, a study by Toch and Schulte suggests that policemen may perceive violence more readily than

<sup>12</sup> A. NIEDERHOFFER, *BEHIND THE SHIELD: The POLICE IN URBAN SOCIETY* (1967).

<sup>13</sup> Matarazzo, Allen, Saslow & Wiens, *Characteristics of Successful Policemen and Firemen Applicants*, 48 J. APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY 123 (1964).

<sup>14</sup> D. BAYLEY & H. MENDELSON, *MINORITIES AND THE POLICE* (1969).

<sup>15</sup> McNamara, *Uncertainties in Police Work: The Relevance of Police Recruits' Backgrounds and Training*, in *THE POLICE: SIX SOCIOLOGICAL ESSAYS* 163 (D. Bordua ed. 1967).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*; NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12.

<sup>17</sup> R. BROWN, *SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY* (1965).

others.<sup>18</sup> They compared a group of advanced police administration students with two control groups—one consisting of introductory psychology students and the other of first year police administration students. All subjects were shown nine stereograms for a half second each. One figure in each stereogram depicted an act of violence or crime, while the other, matched in size and outline, showed some nonviolent "neutral" activity. The average number of violent percepts was the same for the two control groups, but the advanced police administration students perceived roughly twice as many violent scenes. Because the first year police administration students did not differ significantly from the psychology students, the authors concluded that police training increases one's readiness to perceive violence.

It is widely believed that policemen are prejudiced against minority groups. For example, Black and Reiss concluded<sup>19</sup> that 72 percent of the policemen they observed in Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D. C., were prejudiced against Negroes. Observers rode or walked with officers for eight hours a day, six days a week, for seven weeks in 1966. Officers were classified as "highly prejudiced" when they "referred to Negroes as sub-human, suggested an extreme solution to the 'Negro problem,' expressed dislike to the point of hatred, or used very pejorative nicknames when speaking of Negroes."<sup>20</sup> Officers were classified as "prejudiced" if they "simply showed general dislike for Negroes as a group." On the other hand, Black and Reiss did not find that verbal expressions of prejudice were translated into discriminatory behavior. Police behavior was "obviously prejudiced" in only 2 percent of the cases and showed "some signs" of prejudice in only 6 percent. Moreover, whites were targets of police discrimination more often than blacks. Apparently, aggressive discriminatory police behavior was a response to the citizen's demeanor rather than his race. Skolnick<sup>21</sup> came to a similar conclusion when he observed the behavior of warrant officers on the Oakland police force.

The Black and Reiss data are not easy to interpret, however. Their "highly prejudiced" category could have been inflated by including officers who

<sup>18</sup> Toch & Schulte, *Readiness to Perceive Violence as a Result of Police Training*, 52 BR. J. PSYCHOLOGY 389 (1961).

<sup>19</sup> Black & Reiss, *supra* note 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 133.

<sup>21</sup> SKOLNICK, *supra* note 3.

used "pejorative nicknames." As Skolnick points out, many officers use derogatory nicknames even when they are not extremely prejudiced:

The policeman's culture is that of the masculine workingman. It is of the docks, the barracks, the ballfield—Joe Di Maggio was a helluva good 'wop' centerfielder, not an athlete of 'Italian extraction,' and similarly, the black man is a 'nigger,' not a member of an 'underprivileged minority.'<sup>22</sup>

Black and Reiss also failed to employ a control group, so there is no way of assessing what their percentages mean. Skolnick, for instance, admits that policemen are prejudiced, but he does not believe they are any more so than the average white workingman.

In their study of the Denver Police Department, Bayley and Mendelsohn<sup>23</sup> also concluded that policemen simply share the prejudices of the community as a whole. Responses to simple prejudice and social distance scales were not greatly different from those given by a sample of white Denver citizens. In fact, neither the police nor the citizens scored highly on either scale. Similarly, Preiss and Ehrlich<sup>24</sup> found that 71 percent of their respondents in a Midwestern state police department were unprejudiced and tolerant on Srole's "anti-minorities" scale. However, there was no control group in their study.

The picture that emerges from these studies is not easy to interpret. Portland police applicants are like ordinary college males. Recruits in New York are somewhat authoritarian, but not as much as experienced policemen. Denver police are less authoritarian than the general public. In Boston, Chicago, and Washington police are prejudiced against Negroes, but their prejudice is not reflected in their behavior. In Denver and a Midwestern department, the police do not even appear to be prejudiced.

The picture is further complicated by methodological problems. The studies have been conducted in different cities in different parts of the country. What is true of Portland need not be true of New York, and what holds for a big-city force like Chicago's need not hold for a state or rural department. Even within departments there can be a tremendous amount of variation. Preiss and Ehr-

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 82.

<sup>23</sup> BAYLEY & MENDELSON, *supra* note 14.

<sup>24</sup> J. PREISS & H. EHRlich, *AN EXAMINATION OF ROLE THEORY: THE CASE OF THE STATE POLICE* (1966).

lich, for example, found that policies, standards, and procedures varied considerably from one post to the next in the state department they studied.

Only a few studies used adequate control groups and some did not use a control group at all. While it is very impressive to learn that 72 percent of the policemen in one study were prejudiced—or that 71 percent were unprejudiced in another—these figures are meaningless until we know how they compare to some nonpolice control group.

In addition, the methods of study and measuring instruments may not be comparable. In the studies mentioned above, three different measures of authoritarianism were employed. Prejudice has been “measured” by the subjective accounts of participant observers as well as by paper-and-pencil tests. These divergent methods may account for some of the apparently inconsistent results.

Finally, most of the results are subject to a “social desirability” interpretation. Niederhoffer<sup>25</sup> has commented on the policeman’s transition “from station house to glass house.” In other words, policemen are being watched and studied as never before. Liberals, minorities, and intellectuals are clamoring for greater civilian control over the police. The public has been sensitized to police brutality and prejudice, and police administrators are desperately trying to upgrade the quality of men in their departments. Furthermore, many policemen have had a smattering of social sciences somewhere along the line, so it is not surprising that they should know how to respond to an “anti-minorities” or authoritarianism scale in order to present themselves in the most favorable light.

In short, the evidence—by its very inconsistency, if nothing else—does not indicate the existence of a police personality, authoritarian or otherwise. With approximately 40,000 police departments in the United States, the chances of finding a single dominant personality type appear to be slim, to put it mildly. Obviously, however, none of the evidence so far is good enough to draw any firm conclusions. Writers who believe in a police mentality may not have a strong case, but they have yet to be disproved. Therefore it may be worthwhile to review some of the current hypotheses about the origin of police authoritarianism. Popular explanations generally fall into two broad categories. Some writers believe that police work itself develops an authoritarian world-view, while others

believe that authoritarian personalities are selected for police work in the first place.

#### THE CONSEQUENCES OF POLICE WORK

According to the first point of view, authoritarianism is an unavoidable by-product of police work, *i.e.*, the formal responsibilities, informal expectations, and everyday experiences of police patrolmen. The word “patrolmen” is used deliberately. The police mentality, as described in the literature, does not develop at the top of the police hierarchy and filter down to the underlings. Instead it develops at the bottom of the ladder as men patrol their beats and is carried to the top as they work their way up. Since virtually all police administrators begin their careers as patrolmen, it would not be surprising to find symptoms of the police mentality throughout the organization.<sup>26</sup> Most writers only deal with patrolmen, however, and so will this writer.

*Suspiciousness.* Danger is a recurrent theme in police work. Stories are told of policemen shot and killed while trying to settle a family dispute or write a simple speeding ticket. Danger is part of the folklore to be sure, but even the most bizarre legends may have some basis in fact. Statistically speaking, police work is one of the most dangerous jobs in the country,<sup>27</sup> and policemen are aware of that fact. Sterling<sup>28</sup> found that policemen were more likely to perceive danger in 20 different situations the longer they had served on the force. No one can deny the widespread and often violent hostility policemen encounter in minority-group neighborhoods. At Christmastime the Black Panthers even sell greeting cards featuring uniformed pigs with knives in their bellies. Skolnick coined the term “symbolic assailant” to describe the policeman’s psychological response to the continual threat of violence.

The policeman, because his work requires him to be occupied continually with potential violence, develops a perceptual shorthand to identify certain kinds of people as symbolic assailants, that is, as persons who use gesture, language, and attire that

<sup>25</sup> Significantly, the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice recommends increasing the amount of lateral entry into police administrative positions. PRESIDENT’S COMMISSION ON LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE, TASK FORCE REPORT: THE POLICE (1967).

<sup>27</sup> W. Wirtz, quoted in *Copsules*, THE POLICE CHIEF (January 1969).

<sup>28</sup> Sterling, *supra* note 7.

<sup>26</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12.

the policeman has come to recognize as a prelude to violence.<sup>29</sup>

Although many policemen try to minimize the dangerous aspects of their work, Skolnick believes their "strategies of denial" are defense mechanisms that enable them to perform their job effectively. He concludes that the "unambiguous" consequence of danger in police work is a suspicious outlook on life.

Policemen are also *trained* to be suspicious. According to Skolnick, a good policeman has an intuitive ability to sense the unusual. He pays close attention to normal everyday routines so he can spot anything out of the ordinary. He notices when stores open and close, which houses are vacant, which lights are left on. He has to be suspicious or he will overlook tell-tale signs of criminal activity. Toch and Schulte's<sup>30</sup> study of the perception of violence indicates that police training has a very significant effect on one's perceptual processes. Suspicion, therefore, may be an occupational requirement. Unsuspecting cops do not make "good pinches."

Unfortunately most writers have not distinguished between suspiciousness as a specific or generic trait. While many of them imply that suspiciousness pervades all aspects of the policeman's life, it may well be confined to his working hours, and even then to only certain aspects of his job. Because black ghettos are high-risk areas where crime and delinquency are commonplace, the men who patrol the ghettos are understandably suspicious of the local residents. But will their suspiciousness carry over during their off-duty hours? Will they be equally suspicious when they patrol "respectable" middle-class neighborhoods? If not, we ought to be cautious about treating suspiciousness as if it were a pervasive feature of the policeman's personality. In all fairness it should be added that Skolnick may have coined the term "working personality" to avoid treating suspiciousness as a generic trait. Nevertheless, other writers have not been so careful, and even Skolnick refuses to rule out the possibility that policemen are authoritarian personalities in the generic sense of the term.

*Cynicism.* One of the outstanding features of the police mentality is supposed to be cynicism—a deep-seated distrust of basic human goodness. The

policeman's subjective world is full of savagery and hypocrisy: police officers are assaulted every day; respectable housewives try to fix their traffic tickets; and businessmen uphold the law only when it is in their interest to do so. Everyone, it seems, is "on the take" in one way or another.

One of the most common explanations for police cynicism is public antipathy toward the police. Westley found that 73 percent of the policemen he interviewed believed the average citizen dislikes police officers.<sup>31</sup> As Westley points out, the policeman's image of the public is shaped by the people he deals with every day on the job. To many, perhaps most of these people, the policeman is an intruder. Nowhere is the policeman's status as an outsider better illustrated than in the case of the family quarrel. The police officer is most apt to be called to settle a family dispute in a low-income neighborhood, the very place he is most likely to be defined as an outsider. Even if he has been called by one of the parties to the dispute, there is a good chance that everyone will turn on him before he leaves. The following comment by a police officer illustrates the policeman's predicament:

Her husband was drunk and ugly when we got there . . . I started to grab him and struggled with him and the first thing I know I felt an aluminum pan pounding on my head and there is the little woman who ten seconds ago was standing there trembling at what the husband would do when we left, beating me on the head with an aluminum pan and saying, "You are not supposed to hurt him. Let him alone."<sup>32</sup>

The policeman's social identity as a law enforcement officer, and therefore as an intruder, is a "master status." It overrides all other aspects of his public identity. Whatever else the policeman may be, he is still a cop who can arrest you if he sees fit. The exclamation, "Better watch out, he's a cop," underscores the policeman's marginal identity. Presumably the policeman withdraws into his own circle of friends and defines the public in deviant terms just as he is so defined by them.

Public hostility toward the police takes many forms, some direct, others not. One kind of hostility is the abuse the policeman absorbs day after day as he patrols his beat. Another takes the form of biased reporting and editorial attacks in the newspapers. Niederhoffer found that 72 percent of a

<sup>31</sup> W. WESTLEY, *VIOLENCE AND THE POLICE* (1970).

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 61.

<sup>29</sup> SKOLNICK, *supra* note 3.

<sup>30</sup> Toch & Schulte, *supra* note 18.



large sample of New York police officers believed that news papers "seem to enjoy giving an unfavorable slant to the news concerning the police . . ." <sup>33</sup> In a less direct way, public hostility is reflected in the low prestige of his police work generally. The police officer's pariah feelings are intensified by his low occupational status. McNamara found <sup>34</sup> that 75 percent of the experienced policemen he studied in the New York Police Department believed that police work should be ranked as high as medicine and law. Yet he and Reiss have found that policemen believe their prestige has actually been declining in recent years. <sup>35</sup> Skolnick discovered that 70 percent of the officers in a large Western city ranked the prestige of police work as "only fair or poor," while Westley found that 70 percent of the policemen he interviewed in an Eastern department said they would not want their sons to become police officers. According to Watson and Sterling,

[I]t appears that many of these officers exhibit characteristics similar to those shown by a persecuted minority. They are very sensitive about criticism. They seem to fear that everyone is against them including their own commanding officers. They are hypersensitive and touchy about their status and their prerogatives. <sup>36</sup>

As usual, however, the evidence is not completely consistent. Bayley and Mendelsohn found that Denver policemen believed they had higher-than-average respect in the eyes of the public. <sup>37</sup> Preiss and Ehrlich found that the state police department they studied also enjoyed relatively high prestige. <sup>38</sup> In a nationwide survey of police opinions, <sup>39</sup> only 50 percent of the experienced officers believed that "public support for the police seems to be growing." But surprisingly the more experience an officer had, the more likely he was to endorse this statement. Furthermore, only three percent of the officers said the "gradual drifting away of non-police friends" was the most important personal problem they faced as policemen. <sup>40</sup> The Denver

police also displayed little evidence of social isolation. Only 12 percent said they had difficulty making friends with nonpolice families, and less than 25 percent complained of difficulties in their social relationships because of their job. As many as 68 percent even said they associated primarily with nonpolice people. Banton has also criticized the assumption that American policemen are isolated from the public. <sup>41</sup> He contends that American policeman, unlike their British counterparts, are able to segregate police work from the rest of their lives. In fact many of his American respondents ridiculed those who played the policeman's role in their off-duty hours. Banton found that 67 percent of his Scottish respondents said their job affected their private lives. This is considerably higher than the 40 percent found in three Illinois cities by Clark who asked the very same question. <sup>42</sup> Yet 40 percent is still a sizeable figure and is difficult to interpret—fully 40 percent or only 40 percent? Banton himself adds in passing that relative to other *American* occupations, policemen in this country really can be considered socially isolated.

Of course police isolation may be myth created by policemen themselves in order to make their job easier. Ronald Tauber agrees with Banton that American policemen are not as isolated as many have claimed. <sup>43</sup> However, he says that policemen *need* a sense of isolation if they are going to function effectively. The greater the social distance between the policeman and the public, the less cognitive strain there is in enforcing the law. According to Niederhoffer, the most successful policemen are the most cynical. <sup>44</sup>

Another commonly mentioned source of police cynicism is the judicial system. Policemen believe they have been hamstrung by the courts. The police officer is not just paid to enforce the law—the public *demand*s that he do so. The blame for rising crime rates invariably falls on the police department, yet policemen are frustrated at every turn in their efforts to win convictions.

Because of the defense attorney's interrogations, [the police officer] often feels that he is being tried rather than the culprit. He is made to play the part

<sup>33</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12 at 234.

<sup>34</sup> McNamara, *supra* note 15.

<sup>35</sup> Reiss, *Career Orientations, Job Satisfaction, and the Assessment of Law Enforcement Problems by Police Officers*, in 2 STUDIES OF CRIME AND LAW ENFORCEMENT IN MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS (1967).

<sup>36</sup> N. WATSON & J. STERLING, POLICE AND THEIR OPINIONS 9 (1969).

<sup>37</sup> BAYLEY & MENDELSON, *supra* note 14.

<sup>38</sup> PREISS & EHRLICH, *supra* note 24.

<sup>39</sup> WATSON & STERLING, *supra* note 36, at 55.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 101.

<sup>41</sup> M. BANTON, THE POLICEMAN IN THE COMMUNITY (1964).

<sup>42</sup> Clark, *Isolation of the Police: A Comparison of the British and American Situations*, 56 J. CRIM. L.C. & P.S., 307 (1965).

<sup>43</sup> Tauber, *Danger and the Police: A Theoretical Analysis*, in 3 ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGY 69 (1967).

<sup>44</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12, at 76.

of the fool. He is often frustrated in his attempt to make a pinch stick by the political machinations of the courts and the existence of the fix. He tends to lose faith in the course of justice and in obtaining the support of the courts for his judgments. He may feel that the only way in which the guilty are going to be punished is by the police. He has anxieties about the results of court action, for if the prisoner is declared innocent, he, the policeman, may be subject to a suit for false arrest.<sup>45</sup>

As this quotation illustrates, police officers are not just frustrated by fast-talking attorneys and bleeding-hearts on the bench. They are frustrated by the "fix," the back-stage deals against which they are helpless. Not even the courtroom is immune to the corruption which the policemen believes pervades our society.

A persistent theme in discussions of police cynicism is the police officer's continual exposure to the very worst in life.<sup>46</sup> While it is true that policemen spend more time rescuing cats and giving directions than they do fighting crime, one could argue that they still have more contact with the seamy side of life than most people. The very nature of their position makes them constant targets for bribes and payoffs by "respectable" and disreputable citizens alike. Of course policemen are not the only ones who see the "dark side" of human nature. Ghetto dwellers see crime and violence every day. But the policeman sees these things from a unique point of view. As a law enforcement officer the fact of *deviance* is foremost in his mind. Not surprisingly, Niederhoffer found that cynicism in the New York Police Department was directly related to the length of time an officer spent on the force.

*Bigotry.* Police cynicism supposedly finds its strongest expression in racial prejudice. Prejudice, after all, is really a kind of "directed cynicism." There is some indirect evidence that anti-minority sentiment among policemen is directly related to the amount of contact with members of minority groups. Black and Reiss found that a larger proportion of officers made "highly prejudiced" statements in Negro precincts than they did in racially mixed or white areas.<sup>47</sup> Of course the crime rate is higher in black neighborhoods; the poverty is greater; and the values are different. According to Johnson,<sup>48</sup> many policemen suffer from cultural

shock in the ghettos, so it would not be surprising to find a high degree of prejudice among them. Kephart found a similar relationship between the arrest rate in black neighborhoods and the negative attitudes of white policemen who patrolled there.<sup>49</sup> The high crime rate might have contributed to the officers' prejudice, but the causal arrow could point the other way as well. The officers could have arrested more blacks because they were prejudiced in the first place. Not only that, but Kephart failed to find any relationship between anti-Negro feelings and length of service on the police force. As Skolnick points out, it is wise to keep police prejudice in the proper perspective: "the policeman may not get on well with anybody regardless (to use the hackneyed phrase) of race, creed, or national origin."<sup>50</sup>

*Anti-Intracception.* Policemen have been accused of anti-intracception. They are supposedly opposed to tender-minded, sympathetic visionaries who insist on complicating "reality" with unworkable idealism.

Police tend to be pragmatists, a characteristic related, no doubt, to the exigencies of their calling. Much of a policeman's work calls for action—now. He frequently handles emergencies in which time is precious. He has to make decisions in situations where facts are hard to come by and guidelines are uncertain. Small wonder, then, that he values 'common sense' more than theory, successes more than ideals.<sup>51</sup>

According to Watson and Sterling,<sup>52</sup> the policeman's hard-bitten pragmatism is closely tied to his cynical outlook on life. Deterministic theories which, from the policeman's point of view, excuse the criminal from responsibility for his actions are inconsistent with a cynical, misanthropic worldview. Nevertheless, Watson and Sterling found that most officers *disagreed* with the view that social science is unrelated to the "everyday realities" of police work.

*Violence.* Critics also accuse the police of being overly fond of violence as a problem-solving technique. Police cynicism supposedly forms a background against which police brutality is under-

---

*and Defense Mechanisms*, in 4 ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGY 69 (1968).

<sup>45</sup> W. KEPHART, RACIAL FACTORS AND URBAN LAW ENFORCEMENT (1957).

<sup>46</sup> SKOLNICK, *supra* note 3 at 49-50.

<sup>47</sup> BLACK & REISS, *supra* note 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

<sup>50</sup> WATSON & STERLING, *supra* note 36, at 6.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> WESTLEY, *supra* note 31, at 82.

<sup>46</sup> BLACK, *supra* note 4; NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12; WESTLEY, *supra* note 31.

<sup>47</sup> Black & Reiss, *supra* note 5.

<sup>48</sup> Johnson, *Police Community Relations: Attitudes*

standable: Policemen need not have compunctions about splitting the heads of vile degenerate men. The police officer's reaction to the sex offender is a prime example: "If I saw a guy beat up a sex criminal I'd figure the guy had a good reason for it. If the guy is no Goddam good . . . I think it's all right to rough him up."<sup>53</sup>

Westley<sup>54</sup> believes that the root of police brutality is the public's definition of the police officer as a pariah. Policemen simply spend too much time dealing with the public to escape its opinions. They are ambivalent about their status. On the one hand, they regard themselves as competent craftsmen performing a vital task; yet on the other, they are condemned and degraded by the very people they have sworn to protect. Because their status is insecure, because they are not even sure if they respect themselves, policemen feel compelled to demand respect from the public. Significantly, Westley found that disrespect for the police was the greatest single reason officers gave for "roughing a man up." Likewise Black and Reiss concluded that a "disproportionate part of 'unprofessional' or negative police conduct is oriented toward citizens who extend no deference to them."<sup>55</sup>

According to Banton<sup>56</sup> and Tauber,<sup>57</sup> American policemen cannot rely on the authority vested in their uniform to gain compliance. Instead they feel compelled to assert their *personal* authority. The citizen may take offense at the policeman's intimidating manner, and the stage is set for a violent confrontation in which each party is struggling to maintain his self-respect in the face of a perceived threat by the other. Westley adds that the lower the status of the citizen, the greater the threat he poses to the officer's uncertain self-esteem. In this context police brutality is indeed understandable.

*Conventionalism.* One of the policeman's outstanding characteristics, we are told, is his rigid adherence to middle-class values. By and large, policemen are recruited from the working class, but they are required to display middle-class values. Mustaches and long side-burns are prohibited, and hair must be trimmed in a conservative style.<sup>58</sup> In their study of a Midwestern police department, Preiss and Ehrlich found<sup>59</sup> that over a ten-year period most of the cases to come before the depart-

ment's trial board were for social offenses—intoxication, sexual promiscuity, financial negligence, and so on. A police department is a paramilitary organization. Strict discipline is required at all times, and conformity to the rules can become an end in itself. When in doubt, the safest course of action is to follow the rules, even if it means ineffective law enforcement.<sup>60</sup> The policemen's suspiciousness could also contribute to his conventionality. Things out of the ordinary indicate criminal activity.

In addition policemen are politically conservative and seem to be heavily represented in the John Birch Society.<sup>61</sup> In the 1964 Presidential election, Denver policemen not only voted for Goldwater in far greater proportion than the general public, but in greater proportion than white Denver citizens with the same educational and economic backgrounds as policemen. Watson and Sterling found that respondents in a nation-wide survey of police opinions tended to "side with" a sample of "civilian conservatives" more often than a sample of "civilian liberals."<sup>62</sup> The conservatives included several Klansmen and members of the John Birch Society. However, the police officers were not as extreme in their views as the conservatives, and Watson and Sterling caution us against "the mistaken impression that the police are 'all of a mind'—that they are a monolithic group so far as their views, opinions, and attitudes are concerned. This is definitely not the case. . . ."

Skolnick has suggested that Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance may explain why policemen are conservative and support the laws they enforce. Unless they were tough law-and-order conservatives when they joined the force, they are apt to experience some cognitive strain since they are required to enforce the law whether they believe in it or not. Their dissonance can be reduced in one of two ways. They can either modify their behavior—and risk losing their job—or they can decide that the laws are pretty good after all.

Policemen, then, seem to have good reason to be suspicious, cynical, conventional, and so on. There seem to be powerful forces at work in the policeman's role that could generate an authoritarian outlook on life. Recall that McNamara<sup>63</sup> found that more experienced policemen were more

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in WESTLEY, *supra* note 31, at 135.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> Black & Reiss, *supra* note 5, at 37.

<sup>56</sup> BANTON, *supra* note 41.

<sup>57</sup> Tauber, *supra* note 43.

<sup>58</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12.

<sup>59</sup> PREISS & EHRLICH, *supra* note 24.

<sup>60</sup> McNamara, *supra* note 15.

<sup>61</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12.

<sup>62</sup> WATSON & STERLING, *supra* note 36.

<sup>63</sup> McNamara, *supra* note 15.

authoritarian than recruits in the police academy. However, policemen do not confront their problems alone. They are submerged in a subculture which provides a ready-made set of solutions. When police recruits leave their sheltered academies, experienced patrolmen begin to re-socialize them. Preiss and Ehrlich<sup>64</sup> found that police supervisors took special delight in debunking what rookies had learned in school—in fact, they considered it an important part of their job. Authoritarianism may not be an individual reaction which, incidentally, happens to be shared by others. It may be an attitude that is conveyed from one generation of policemen to the next. Niederhoffer is quite explicit about the system's ability to create authoritarian personalities. He goes so far as to say the system is a failure if it does *not* develop authoritarianism.

#### THE SELECTION OF AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITIES

An alternative explanation of police authoritarianism is that authoritarian individuals are recruited for police work in the first place. Three kinds of selection are possible: 1) self-selection, 2) the weeding-out of "liberals," and 3) recruitment from an authoritarian class of people.

*Self-Selection.* Authoritarian individuals may deliberately choose police work because it is compatible with their personality needs. It is easy to see how an authoritarian might be drawn to police work. The police are a paramilitary organization whose job is to uncover suspicious activities and protect conventional moral standards. McNamara<sup>65a</sup> found that police recruits did not object to the rigorous discipline of the police academy. He points out that this is what we should expect, given their relatively high F-scores. However, even if high F-scores are compatible with a militaristic organization, we cannot conclude that members have been self-selected. McNamara also believed that his recruits were no more authoritarian than the average working-class male. Similarly the authors of the Portland study of police applicants concluded that their subjects were very much like the typical male college students.<sup>65</sup> Bayley and Mendelsohn also concluded that policemen were "absolutely average people."<sup>66</sup>

The evidence that particular personalities are

selected for different occupations is not at all clear. According to Donald Super,<sup>67</sup> the more narrowly and specifically defined the occupation, the better the chance certain personalities will be attracted. But the problem with police work is that it defies easy description. The average policeman is a social worker, watchman, detective, guide, and so on.

*The Elimination of "Liberal" Recruits.* Even if authoritarian personalities do not deliberately seek out police work, a second selective factor may be operating. Liberals simply may not apply for police work. This is a much more parsimonious explanation of police conservatism than the theory of cognitive dissonance. Bayley and Mendelsohn not only found that Denver policemen were considerably more conservative than the general public, but that age was unrelated to political beliefs. If police work really develops a conservative outlook, then the older, more experienced policemen should have been more conservative than the younger ones. Of course, police selection procedures are geared to weed out unconventional applicants if they do apply. Applicants are subjected to rigorous character investigations, and any tinge of radicalism in one's background may be grounds for disqualification.<sup>68</sup>

Even when liberals do become policemen, they are not apt to last on the job.<sup>69</sup> The police force is already a conservative organization when the liberal arrives—he will not find much social support there for his beliefs. Even if he is not ostracized by other policemen, the job itself may be antithetical to his values. The police organization is a paramilitary bureaucracy which rewards conformity and discourages innovation. The liberal will have to enforce many laws he finds personally objectionable, and law itself may be subordinated to order-maintenance. The liberal has three alternatives. He can develop an "underlife" by seeking alternative sources of support for his values and self-esteem. He might, for instance, find a compatible niche in the community relations division. He could also change his belief system, and this is what we might predict from dissonance theory. But if the change is too radical and would require a complete realignment of the self-concept, it may be easier to opt for the third alternative and drop out of the system altogether. It seems

<sup>64</sup> PREISS & EHRlich, *supra* note 24.

<sup>65a</sup> McNAMARA, *supra* note 15

<sup>66</sup> Matarazzo, *et al.*, *supra* note 13.

<sup>66</sup> BAYLEY & MENDELSON, *supra* note 14.

<sup>67</sup> D. SUPER, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CAREERS* (1957).

<sup>68</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12.

<sup>69</sup> Vego, *The Liberal Policeman: A Contradiction in Terms?*, in 4 *ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGY* 15 (1968).

reasonable to assume, then, that liberals are unlikely to apply for police work, and, even if they do, they are unlikely to survive.

*Working-Class Authoritarianism.*<sup>70</sup> The third kind of selection has already been mentioned: The police recruit their members from a relatively authoritarian segment of the population.<sup>71</sup> It does not follow, however, that policemen themselves are authoritarian. The working class, the family background of many police officers, comprises a large portion of our population, and within that class there is room for a tremendous range of variation. While the mean level of authoritarianism may be very high, policemen could be selected from the lower end of the distribution. Bayley and Mendelsohn<sup>72</sup> found that Denver policemen were *less* authoritarian than their non-police control populations. On the other hand, McNamara's finding that police recruits scored as high on the F-Scale as Adorno's working-class sample does not support this interpretation.<sup>73</sup> In other respects policemen seem to be very much like the general public, which, unfortunately is never well defined. One study found substantial agreement between the police and the general public when they were asked to judge the rightness or wrongness of various actions.<sup>74</sup> Matarazzo, *et al.*,<sup>75</sup> and Bayley and Mendelsohn also found strong similarities between policemen and the public. One more the same inconsistencies prevent us from drawing any firm conclusions.

Many writers believe that police work is a "natural" choice for working-class men. It offers reasonably good pay, security, and adventure for young men without a college education or any special training.<sup>76</sup> For many, securing a job

<sup>70</sup> WATSON & STERLING, *supra* note 36, have challenged the assumption that most policemen come from lower middle- and working-class families. However, their data seem to support the very assumption they wish to challenge:

[T]oday's police officers have come from the families of craftsmen and foremen, and service workers (including police) in larger proportion than is true for the general adult work force. Conversely, the data shows [*sic*] that proportionately fewer police officers than other adults are children of professional, technical and managerial workers; clerical and sales workers; operatives; farmers; and laborers. (119).

<sup>71</sup> J. WILSON, *VARIETIES OF POLICE BEHAVIOR: The MANAGEMENT OF LAW AND ORDER IN EIGHT COMMUNITIES* (1970).

<sup>72</sup> BAYLEY & MENDELSON, *supra* note 14.

<sup>73</sup> McNamara, *supra* note 15.

<sup>74</sup> Clark, *supra* note 42.

<sup>75</sup> Matarazzo, *et al.*, *supra* note 13.

<sup>76</sup> Although the President's Commission on Law

on the force represents an advance in social status. Studies show that Denver policemen and recruits at the New York Police Academy are upwardly mobile in relation to their fathers.<sup>77</sup>

Although most policemen come from working-class homes, they share typical middle-class values such as "looking toward the future and getting ahead, owning a home and a new car, being on time, and assuming responsibility."<sup>78</sup> Many, however, feel insecure precisely because they are new to the middle class. In a sense they are marginal men and seem to have profound doubts about their social standing.<sup>79</sup> In the absence of tangible social rewards like high pay and prestige, they cling to respectability to verify their middle-class status. As Chwast put it, the "police are more middle-classy than the average. . . ." <sup>80</sup> It may be significant that 52 percent of the police applicants in the Portland study arrived for their interviews wearing a suit and tie.<sup>81</sup> The researchers were also interviewing potential firemen, but only 15 percent of them wore ties to their interviews. Yet all the applicants had working-class backgrounds. Perhaps the policeman's upward mobility accounts for his authoritarian predilections.

The police officer of lower class background may be insecure in his new status position and consequently may cling tenaciously to middle-class values while suppressing all traces of his previous class identification. To him, 'lower-classness' in others may be intolerable.<sup>82</sup>

The policeman's uncertainty is aggravated by his ambiguous standing in the eyes of the public. Many policemen believe they are not given the recognition or prestige they deserve. Some even believe the prestige of police work has been declining. Policemen also believe they are being "handcuffed" by the courts, civil right groups, and local government. Not only is their social standing marginal, but their effectiveness as a law enforcement agency is being threatened.

Enforcement and the Administration of Justice has recommended that police officers have at least two years of college, very few departments require any amount of college preparation. *See* note 26 *supra*.

<sup>77</sup> BAYLEY & MENDELSON, *supra* note 14; McNamara, *supra* note 15.

<sup>78</sup> Chwast, *Value Conflicts in Law Enforcement, in CRIME AND DELINQUENCY* 151, 154 (1965).

<sup>79</sup> BAYLEY & MENDELSON, *supra* note 14.

<sup>80</sup> Chwast, *supra* note 78, at 154.

<sup>81</sup> Matarazzo, *et al.*, *supra* note 13.

<sup>82</sup> WATSON & STERLING, *supra* note 36, at 121.

Studies indicate that a large proportion of police officers join the force in search of job security.<sup>83</sup> For these men especially, the uncertain status of police work must be very hard to bear.

Declining status and influence have been implicated in the growth of fascism.<sup>84</sup> The Nazi Party was supported initially and primarily by small business and property owners who were being squeezed out of existence by labor unions and big business. They felt powerless to cope with the changes occurring in Germany and seized on Nazism to restore their former social and economic security. Although the word fascism has been over-used and misused, and parallels should not be drawn too closely, a similar status-anxiety explanation might explain the policeman's apparent authoritarianism, especially his conventionality and conservatism.

In spite of the uncertainties inherent in police work, status-anxiety may characterize lower middle- and working-class people in general. There is some evidence that today's "silent majority" shares the policeman's feelings of insecurity. A recent Gallup Poll of the "forgotten man," the white middle-class American, reveals that middle-class whites are increasingly pessimistic about America's future.<sup>85</sup> Almost 50 percent believe that the United States has changed for the worse in the last ten years, and a majority believe things are going to get even worse in the next ten. They decry the decline of community spirit and religious and moral standards. They worry about runaway crime rates and believe the world is becoming a dangerous place. What we need, they say, is to take the handcuffs off the police: "To most people, the possibility of added police power offers no conceivable threat to anyone but wrongdoers. 'Behave yourself and there's no problem.'" <sup>86</sup> The forgotten Americans are also feeling the economic squeeze. Blacks are unfairly getting the biggest slice of the pie—they should have to work for what they get like everyone else.

Apparently the frustration and resentment are greatest in the working class—"families whose breadwinners have at most a high-school education, hold blue-collar jobs and bring home incomes of \$5000 to \$10,000 a year."<sup>87</sup> They too worry

<sup>83</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12; PREISS & EHRLICH, *supra* note 24; REISS, *supra* note 35.

<sup>84</sup> S. LIPSET, *POLITICAL MAN: THE SOCIAL BASES OF POLITICS* (1960)

<sup>85</sup> NEWSWEEK 46 (Oct. 6, 1969).

<sup>86</sup> *Id.*

<sup>87</sup> *Id.*

about crime, racial violence, rising prices, and crumbling values, but they worry more and their opinions are more extreme. Marginal socioeconomic status becomes intolerable in an age of affluence.

What has been described is the white middle- and working-class American, but one could easily substitute the word "policeman" in all the appropriate places and still be reasonably correct. Members of the "silent majority" are certainly not fascists, any more than policemen are, but they seem to have many authoritarian characteristics: conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, stereotypy, cynicism, and projectivity. From this point of view, policemen appear to be good representatives of white middle- or working-class America.

#### TOWARD A SOCIOLOGICAL MODEL OF POLICE BEHAVIOR

Unfortunately, only one firm conclusion can be drawn from this review: The evidence is inconclusive. We began with the assumption that policemen are very unusual people, set apart from the rest of the population by virtue of their authoritarian mentality. Now it looks like policemen may be rather ordinary people, not greatly unlike other Middle-Americans. We cannot even be sure there is such a thing as a police personality, however loosely we define it.

According to Howard Becker,<sup>88</sup> everyone has deviant impulses and practically everyone violates social norms at one time or another. Yet only a few are publicly labeled deviant. The same reasoning may apply to the police. Authoritarianism, as a personality syndrome, is widespread in this country, and policemen may not be any more authoritarian than other people from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Bigotry is hardly unusual in the United States. Nor is conservatism, cynicism, or any other authoritarian trait. From a sociological point of view, the important question is not, "Why are policemen authoritarian?" but "Why are they singled out for special attention?"

The police might have escaped the authoritarian label if they were not so visible. If the average workingman is bigoted, that is his business, but if a policeman's bigoted, that is everyone's business. Policemen may simply be very ordinary people who happen to be extraordinarily visible.

<sup>88</sup> H. BECKER, *OUTSIDERS: STUDIES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF DEVIANCE* (1963).

Police behavior is public behavior, not just because police work involves members of the public, or because it often occurs in public places, but because the police are being subjected to public scrutiny as never before—in news stories, editorial columns, scholarly journals, radical tirades, and everyday conversation.

However, not all aspects of police behavior are equally visible to the public. A great deal of police work is only peripherally related to law enforcement. Patrolmen spend most of their time giving directions, writing reports, breaking up family quarrels, and the like, but we hardly notice these activities because they do not conform to our popular cops-and-robbers stereotype of police work. On the other hand, we are outraged by police brutality and discrimination. We pay attention when innocent citizens are stopped and frisked, when blacks are harassed and demonstrators beaten. Law enforcement may be only a small part of police work, but it is certainly the part that attracts the most attention and criticism. Police behavior often *appears* to be authoritarian simply because the public only pays attention to certain aspects of the policeman's job.

Cummins<sup>89</sup> has drawn some interesting parallels between the study of the police and early attempts by social scientists to come to grips with the problem of criminality. At one time most American criminologists were preoccupied with the nature of the "criminal mind." Cummins suspects that these early criminologists were driven by an "ideological need" to separate criminals from noncriminals. Today the evidence indicates that the personality characteristics of criminals are not appreciably different from those of people generally. But as the attention of criminologists has shifted away from criminals to the agents of social control, the need to psychologize and dichotomize has reasserted itself.

Even though the earlier researches on criminality had wandered unsatisfactorily through the thicket of psychological distinctiveness, the same basic elements of the old framework cropped up again when the sociologists turned to analyzing the police side of deviance. True to form, the sociological studies emphasize the importance of some distinguishing psychological trait structure of police officers, particularly some undesirable feature. Perhaps once again, the ideological need for separation underlies the analyses.<sup>90</sup>

As Cummins points out, discussions of the police mentality have strong moral overtones. The use of labels like "cynical" and "suspicious" is "implicitly unfavorable, for it is, after all, a long stretch of the imagination to portray suspiciousness as a virtue."<sup>91</sup> He adds that more positive adjectives like "realistic" or "analytical" might be equally appropriate. While none of the authors cited in this paper have been openly hostile to the police, their studies provide ammunition for those who are. One of the favorite means of discrediting an undesirable character is to pin a psychiatric label on him. Authoritarianism, like mental illness or any number of more specific terms, is one of those convenient labels that allows us to make sense of police behavior and to discredit it at the same time.

Perhaps, considering the unproductiveness of the personality model, we need an alternative approach to the study of police behavior. An undue emphasis on personality diverts our attention from a far more important issue: the structure of police work itself. In his remarks about the suspiciousness of policemen, Cummins points out that our concern with the police mentality overlooks the sociological aspects of police work.<sup>92</sup>

Police brutality in minority-group neighborhoods is often cited as evidence of authoritarianism, reflecting bigotry and authoritarian aggression. As we have seen, there are many explanations for police violence, but the most parsimonious comes from the police themselves. They will tell you that they have to be tough, especially in the ghettos, or they will lose control of difficult situations.<sup>93</sup> As James Baldwin put it, ". . . the only way to police a ghetto is to be oppressive."<sup>94</sup> In this sense, being tough is a matter of survival. Bayley and Mendelsohn<sup>95</sup> found that 98 percent of their police respondents claimed to have been physically or verbally abused. Under these circumstances policemen become alert to cues signaling criminal activity and trouble—the symbolic assailant. The greater their anxiety, the less likely they are to take chances and the quicker they are to try to forestall injury to themselves. Policemen are most anxious in minority-group neighborhoods, and it is there that most police brutality is said to occur. In white middle-class neighborhoods

<sup>91</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>92</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>93</sup> NIEDERHOFFER, *supra* note 12; SKOLNICK, *supra* note 3; McNamara, *supra* note 15.

<sup>94</sup> J. BALDWIN, *NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME* 61 (1962).

<sup>95</sup> BAYLEY & MENDELSON, *supra* note 14.

<sup>89</sup> M. J. Cummins, *The Problem of Police Minds*, undated (unpublished).

<sup>90</sup> *Id.* at 3.

the police are less apt to worry about their well-being, and therefore they can be more relaxed in their encounters with citizens. Force, then, is not just an expression of personal prejudice or a fondness for violence. It may simply be a way of forestalling injury to oneself. Likewise, if policemen stop Negroes for suspicious activities more often than whites, it does not necessarily mean they are prejudiced. Rather the officers have learned that Negroes belong to a high-risk category and are more likely to have committed a crime.<sup>96</sup>

A great deal of significant police behavior can be explained solely in terms of the organizational characteristics of police departments. Wilson's study of the effect of professionalization on juvenile arrests is an excellent example.<sup>97</sup> When Wilson compared delinquency rates in two cities, he discovered that the city with the "professionalized" police force had a much higher juvenile arrest rate than the city with a nonprofessional force. Yet the rates of juvenile offenses known to the police in the two cities were remarkably similar. He attributed the differences to the organizational characteristics of the two departments. In the "professional" department precincts had been eliminated and the force had been centralized. Because the department had been plagued by scandals in the past, new regulations had been introduced, old ones had been made more stringent, and supervision had been tightened. Officers believed their behavior was constantly being monitored and their productivity measured. In order to "play it safe" they began to treat juveniles in strict accordance with the rules, without regard to personal characteristics or extenuating circumstances. On the other hand, the non-professional department was decentralized and run at the precinct level. Regulations were few, supervision lax, and individual officers had broad discretionary powers in juvenile matters. In cases where the "professional" officer would be likely to arrest, the officer in the nonprofessional department might simply give the juvenile a "kick in the pants" and send him home. In this case, police behavior can be explained without recourse to the psychological characteristics of individual policemen.

These remarks are not intended to deny the

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, *The Police and Their Problems: A Theory*, 12 *PUB. POLICY* 189 (1963).

<sup>97</sup> WILSON, *The Police and the Delinquent in Two Cities*, in *CONTROLLING DELINQUENTS* 9 (S. Wheeler ed. 1968).

validity or usefulness of personality as an explanatory construct. Instead, they are meant to keep personality in the proper perspective. Personality and social structure *interact* with each other. For example, Watson and Sterling have argued persuasively that personality patterns acquired in childhood have varying degrees of influence on police behavior *depending on the nature of departmental organization*.

If a police department is loosely organized, if the men get little in the way of training, if leadership is nonexistent, if supervision is lax, if there are few rules and regulations, which actually govern the conduct of the men, if the men don't see themselves as part of the law enforcement profession, if they think of their job as just another job, and if they don't feel a sense of dedication to their work, then the social class values of their childhood will probably come into play in their occupational role. To the contrary, if a department is well organized, if the men are thoroughly trained in all aspects of their work, if those in command of the department show strong leadership and direction, if supervision is constant and effective, if rules and regulations are both known and followed by the men, and if the men feel they are strongly dedicated to the law enforcement profession, then there will probably be little relationship between social class upbringing and adult occupational performance. For example, the patrolman from a working-class background would not be inclined to use rough language or show a gruff manner in the latter kind of department.<sup>98</sup>

Presumably the effects of social class background would be minimal in a highly professionalized police force.

#### CONCLUSION

The controversy over the police mentality will probably persist for some time to come. There is simply not enough good evidence to support or refute any side of the controversy. Even the existence of modal personality characteristics among policemen is open to serious question. The devotion of social scientists to the personality model has obscured the important role that organizational factors play in shaping police behavior. Attracting better people to the same old job is not necessarily an improvement. In the case of police work, it may simply mean that college graduates will be "busting heads" instead of high school drop-outs.

<sup>98</sup> WATSON & STERLING, *supra* note 36, at 109.