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Summary

Most people agree that the stress connected with police work affects the way police officers relate to the people they contact and serve. While many assume the primary source of stress on police officers lies in factors related to police job activities, the author argues that the primary factors creating stress for police officers are related to traditional police organizational and management philosophy and related practices.

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John E. Angell

Most people agree that the stress connected with police work affects the way police officers relate to the people they contact and serve. Many assume the primary source of stress on police officers lies in factors related to police job activities - such factors as the risks to police officers, conflicts in which officers must become involved, and tensions stemming from the weight of difficult decisions. In reality, the primary factors creating stress for police officers are related to traditional police organizational and management philosophy and related practices.

Max Weber, the father of bureaucratic philosophy, frequently expressed apprehensions about the ultimate impact of his organizational brain child on the people so organized. German Politics; London: Faber and Faber, 1943, pp. 127-28). One source quotes him as reflecting

It is horrible [reflects Weber] to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones. It is as if. . . we were deliberately to become men who need "order" and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if this order waivers, and helpless. [when] torn away from total incorporation in it.

It seems to me Weber's worst fears have materialized in

American police agencies. Goals for police organizations are established independently of considerations of strategies for their achievement or the human beings who will be used to achieve them. Police managers have been taught and have learned well the assumed value of orderly machine efficiency for constructing organizations that should logically maximize goal accomplishment. We generally view subordinates as instrumentalities to be arranged, controlled and manipulated to accomplish organizational ends. Police agencies thus created are devoid of considerations of the people of whom they are constructed.

Our commitment to this approach has produced a myopia to the consequences. Efforts to standardize the human cogs in the police machine have resulted in the arbitrary exclusion of short people, fat people, and in some cases, educated people, from the police ranks. The degradation inherent in behavioral control policies, such as one I recently reviewed which required officers to hang their firearms in their lockers prior to seating themselves on a toilet in the police locker room, surely affect officers' self-concepts and behavior. Monthly, and in some instances weekly, rotation of officers from shift to shift and neighborhood to neighborhood without a second thought has substantial physiological and psychological impacts on the police officers.

Although few systematic assessments of the impact of bureaucratically created stresses on police officers have been made, it is reasonable to assume that many of the abnormally high medical and mental afflictions that affect police officers

have roots in the stress created. Such conditions include alcoholism, suicide, high blood pressure, heart trouble and divorces. It is fair to say that many police agencies are human wastelands of employees.

Police officer abilities to successfully handle many of the crisis situations they must confront are related to their organizational situations. The adequacy of police in handling interpersonal and community conflict is in my judgment directly and indirectly related to the organizational philosophy and practices that create tension and stress on the police officers.

Consideration of any number of the specific, tension-creating bureaucratic strategies used in police administration might prove to be productive in improving police crisis intervention efforts. However, such a piecemeal approach has been characteristic of past efforts to upgrade the police and it has failed to produce any substantial improvements in policing over the past 40 years. The most significant improvement in policing, the Peelian reform of the early 1800's, was based on extensive modification of the philosophical basis underlying policing methods of the period, and I believe an equally rational and daring approach beginning with the present fundamental philosophical basis of policing is needed today.

Several categories of philosophy seem to me to merit discussion. Primary among these issues should be the well-worn issue of whether police should continue to focus their major efforts on the suppression of deviancy through identification

of law violations, apprehension of perpetrators, and participation in specific deterrence methods involving conviction and punishment, or should police efforts be focused on general and specific prevention strategies such as comes from service and public education programs. The present extreme emphasis on punishing fellow citizens not only takes a psychological toll, it is also less productive than prevention and helping strategies.

I recall arguing with a well-known official of IACP for the latter approach nearly a decade ago on this very campus. Our debate was over the value of capital punishment as a method for deterring murder. Although at the time I lost in my contention that police would realize the greatest productivity by concentrating on prevention of homicide through extensive crisis intervention and conflict management programs rather than wasting resources on the advocacy and support of capital punishment, probably few of the participants recognized the implication when a few weeks later this basically honorable official shot and killed his wife prior to committing suicide. I would again repeat my contention that in the long run police efforts based on a humanitarian philosophy of prevention and preventive services rather than apprehension and retribution will achieve the greatest good.

Second, we should reassess the value of relying on bureaucratic philosophy or organizing police officers in an authoritarian, hierarchical arrangement where the authority for decision is allocated to a chief executive who is expected to completely dominate and control officers under his or her command. An alternative would involve decentralizing decision- and policy-

making authority to officers and citizens at the neighborhood or community level, and limiting central authority to evaluation and coordination functions. Under the community oriented approach, police officers would be able to gear their efforts to the unique situations, problems and needs of local communities rather than adhering to the impersonal dictates of a central authority and universalistic policies for an entire jurisdiction. The control of officer conduct under this system would be dependent upon community and peer influences and relations rather than management threats and punishments.

Third, we should reject the philosophy of specialization in policing that defines police officers as replaceable cogs in the police organization. This approach creates attention to the accomplishment of narrowly defined tasks without regard to the contribution to the broader, fundamental purposes of police. Officers are encouraged to limit their concerns to the ritualistic performance of immediate job responsibilities with little regard for broader purposes or desirable goals. Such a practice creates conflict between specialities and dysfunctionalities in the total police effort. It results in a commitment to procedures rather than social goals. Such a situation is not in the best interest of good community relations nor the ultimate good of a heterogeneous democratic society.

An alternative approach would involve the creation of a generalist professional organization where police officers have

responsibility for working with citizens to develop broad and extensive responsibilities for the definition and performance of police duties.

These three proposals at first blush may not seem complicated or controversial. Some may not consider them to be substantially related to the quality of police officer efforts in the area of crisis intervention. Such is not in my estimation the case; they involve complex, hotly debated issues which are at the foundation of ultimate police effectiveness in performing crisis intervention and conflict management activities. They must be considered if the full police potential in these important areas is ever to be realized.