

An Exploration of European Police Identification in COMPOSITE Countries

Summary of WP6.1 Results (Identification), 2013

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Professional identification is a 'sense of belongingness' that occurs when an individual perceives that their relationship with their profession is critical to their self-definition. Workers' identification with their profession is important because it shapes their attitudes and behaviors, including their levels of motivation, task performance, information sharing, job satisfaction and wellbeing.

In the first study in WP6 we investigated officers' identification (both positive and negative) with their profession. In particular, we explored why officers join the police, the factors that motivate them and uphold them during times of challenge and upheaval and the factors that lead to disenchantment and potential turnover. In addition, we investigated sources of identity conflict and threat, emanating from within police forces and outside. In particular we considered the external (political, economic, societal, technological and legal) factors and internal (procedures, practices and infrastructure) aspects that threaten officers' workplace identities and attachments to their profession.

Methods

Our report was based on interviews with 150 police officers in the 10 COMPOSITE countries. The aim of these interviews was to capture officers' professional life stories, including their reasons for joining the profession, their moments of pride and shame during their career and their potential reasons for leaving their profession.

Main results

Reasons for joining and positive attachments

Officers' reasons for joining the police shared many common characteristics across European countries. We identified eight primary motivations for entering the police, ranging from perceptions of job prospects (needing a job, job stability, benefits and pay) to the fulfillment of a childhood dream. Public service and ideological motivations were the most commonly reported reason for joining. Officers emphasised a

central desire to 'help people', 'provide justice' and 'contribute to society'. In addition, officers drew attention to the importance of having a stable and well-paid job, with good prospects for development and promotion in the future. The attractiveness of police tasks were also mentioned, including the diversity and variation in tasks, the ability to work outside and to work with people.

There was evidence of strong identification within the police profession, across countries, divisions and ranks. Officers talked of their profession as a 'calling' and a 'vocation....in the truest sense of the word'. A number of officers spoke of their long-standing desire to become a police officer, explaining that this stretched back to their childhood or as long as they could remember. The profession was also described as a source of excitement and adventure, an 'addictive' profession and one that allows for many possibilities and opportunities.

Identity threat and negative attachments

Yet, although the overwhelming majority of officers strongly identified with their profession, our findings also revealed that negative patterns of identification, as well as identity threat and conflict are widespread within European policing and that in many cases these threats are seen to be increasing. Officers' spoke of the many (and growing) challenges to their professional identity caused by the financial crisis, technological and political developments and increasingly critical societies. Similarly identity conflicts were perceived to be rife and often detrimental to officers' commitment and attachments to their profession. A clear example can be seen in the European-wide austerity measures, which have fundamentally shaped policing policies in the last few years. Economic factors threaten officers' professional identity in a number of ways, affecting their training and development, their professional tasks and resources, and even their fundamental commitments to public service.

While it is easy to brush off these challenges as a mere symptom of the times, we find that identity conflicts and threats can have profound consequences for individual officers, undermining their belief in their profession, and in the worst cases, leading to intentions to leave. As COMPOSITE's Work Package 2 highlighted, the police's greatest resource lies in its personnel. Officers' dedication, skills and wellbeing are essential to police organisations and as such, threats to this aspect must be taken seriously.

Our analysis also explored the different reconciliation strategies that may be used to tackle identity threats and conflicts, before motivation is compromised and turnover occurs. This analysis drew attention to a range of cognitive, behavioral and organisational strategies that may be used to preempt and prevent negative employee outcomes. In particular, it stressed the importance of building a learning organization and confronting negative trends in order to promote organizational change.