

An Exploration of European Police Professional Identities in COMPOSITE Countries

Summary of WP6.1 Results (Professional Identities), 2013

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Deep down 'police officers are the same everywhere' – or so at least is an often voiced opinion also by police officers themselves. A shared understanding of the profession (i.e., a 'shared professional identity') allows officers to rely on implicit assumptions when collaborating with direct colleagues or other forces. Often it is assumed that basic values can be taken for granted even across forces and countries. Yet, a closer look at how police forces internationally operate and shape their relationships with society already illustrates that the assumption of a shared professional identity may be an overly simplistic representation of reality. Differences exist in a wide range of topics from discussions of whether guns are a necessary part of police equipment to the adoption of community policing or the usage of social media. These differences are not surprising, as perceptions of the own profession are shaped by an individual's position or status within the organisation, but also the context in which the organisation operates. Given the often considerable differences in the environment among national police forces and the political, economic, social, technological and legal conditions for forces across countries, it can hardly surprise that police officers develop varying perspectives on what it means to be a police professional.

In the second part of WP6.1 we explored the questions whether police professional identities differ across countries and if so, in what way?

Methodological approach

We approached the topic of police professional identities in an exploratory manner using the card-sort technique Q methodology. This methodology is used to identify disparate perspectives on an issue. It is an exploratory method that does not require a-priori assumptions about the possible number of perspectives or the attributes that differentiate between views; nor does it make assumptions about the possible direction or type of differences between views. The 45 items used in the Q sort were created based on 3.441 identity statements from 166 police officers in Action Line I. In each of our ten countries, 15 Q sort sessions were conducted leading to a full set of 150 sorts. Participants were asked to sort the 45 identity features in a forced distribution ranging from 1 (least important) to 11 (most important).

Main results

Based on our data we identified four disparate perspectives on the police profession:

Perspective 1: Impartial preventers.

Officers in this group considered their main task to be crime prevention. For this purpose they state a need for authority for the use of force against the public and a repressive stance when dealing with people or groups outside the police. At the same time the police profession should provide excitement and adventure.

Perspective 2: Hands-on integrators.

This group considered being pragmatic, hands-on and tolerant towards disparate cultural practices, expectations and beliefs as the most important aspects of being a police officer. For this not only good equipment, but also good knowledge of foreign languages were rated a relevant resource. In the same regard, helping citizens or working preventively were considered of low importance.

Perspective 3: Instrumental helpers.

Instrumental helpers focused primarily on the resources required to do their job. Information and intelligence, good equipment, and the need to wear a uniform were rated as the most relevant aspects. In contrast, communication skills or sustaining a caring relationship with the public were considered as unimportant. Helping citizens was seen as the main task of a police officer.

Perspective 4: State crime fighters.

For the fourth group, restoring justice and acting as representative of the state were the most important aspects of the police profession. In this, officers should act as crime-fighters as well as problem-solvers for citizens. In contrast, helping citizens and communication skills were considered as least important.

Two aspects did not differentiate between profiles: being creative and job security. The ability to be creative was consistently ranked on a mid-level, while job security was consistently rated among the least important features. Interestingly, profiles were not clearly linked with differences in terms of countries or rank levels, although profile 1 had a strong contribution of Dutch and British officers.

Discussion

Despite the seemingly wide-spread assumption that police officers 'are the same everywhere' our analysis illustrates clear differences in views. Our findings indicate that common elements undoubtedly exist. Still, we also found clear disparities in the basic understanding of 'what it means to be a police officer'. These disparities are of practical relevance in as far as they are linked to consequences in actual behaviors. The knowledge about disparate identities and their identification can thus become important, for instance, in the collaboration between groups or the implementation of change projects. As our study focused on the identification of profiles and not on the observation of behavioral consequences we currently cannot

provide answers to the link between profiles and behavioral consequences. Subsequent studies will thus explore the link between police professional identities and the behavior of individual officers.