

Exploring the Implicit Police Work Environment

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Presented at the annual IPMAAC conference, June 21, 2004

There is a paucity of useful information of how the police work environment affects officer behavior. When environmental forces are invoked to explain police behavior the discussion invariably focuses on the negative culture of the police work environment. Terms like “The Blue Wall of Silence,” and other similar pejorative phrases are often invoked after the fact to explain why officers have behaved in a certain way. These explanations are typically judgmental and constitute a weak, unscientific, and generally meaningless explanation of officer behavior. This approach is not just the one taken by the popular press: Mention police culture to police administrators and the discussion invariably turns to police misbehavior.

Our approach to understanding the police work environment differs from most approaches in two major ways. First, we are studying environmental forces that underlie all types of police behavior, not just problem behaviors. Secondly, the approach is empirical and measures certain environmental forces that influence officer behavior. Measurement allows for the study of environment in a systematic and, in our opinion, a more useful manner.

There are two major dimensions that make up the Police Work Environment:

1. **Salient Dimension:** Creates a clear set of performance demands, called Salient Environmental Task Demands (SETDs). Tasks such as writing tickets, making arrests, interviewing people, patrolling streets are examples of Salient Tasks, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities underlying these tasks are involved in the salient task demands.
2. **Implicit Dimension:** Creates a set of subtle demands that are less observable, called Implicit Environmental Task Demands (IETDs). The subtle performance demands to respond to implicit environmental forces such as power, achievement, coworker and subordinate/superior relationships, and personal development are examples of IETDs.

We explored two aspects of the **Implicit** dimension of the Police Work Environment:

1. **Organizational Culture:** The relative strength of four culture types was studied following a model developed by Harrison, and his colleague (Harrison & Stokes, 1992)
 - a. **Power:** Based on inequality of access to resources where those in power can limit and control the way resources are meted out to others.

- b. Role: A system of structures and procedures designed to protect subordinates and provide stability to the organization.
- c. Achievement: A task oriented organization where rewards are intrinsic and individuals work together to achieve worthwhile goals.
- d. Support: An organizational culture that is based on mutual trust between the individual and the organization, and top value is placed on the human being.

2. **Social Climate**: The strength of three dimensions of the social climate was studied (Moos, 1994):

Relationship:

- 1. Involvement: the extent to which employees are concerned about and committed to their jobs
- 2. Coworker Cohesion: how much employees are friendly and supportive of each other
- 3. Supervisor Support: the extent to which management is supportive of employees and encourages employees to be supportive of one another

Personal Growth:

- 1. Autonomy: how much employees are encouraged to be self-sufficient and make their own decisions
- 2. Task Orientation: the emphasis on good planning, efficiency, and getting the job done
- 3. Work Pressure: the degree to which high work demands and time pressure dominate the job milieu

System Maintenance & Change:

- 1. Clarity: whether employees know what to expect in their daily routine and the explicitness of rules and policies
- 2. Managerial Control: how much management uses rules and procedures to keep employees under control
- 3. Innovation: the emphasis on variety, change, and new approaches
- 4. Physical Comfort: the extent to which the physical surroundings contribute to a pleasant work environment

We administered questionnaires measuring organizational culture and social climate to 52 police officers from the Euclid, Ohio Police Department and 43 from the Cleveland Metroparks Ranger Department, the major park system of Cleveland, Ohio. The questionnaires measured **existing culture, preferred culture and existing social climate**.

We present the results of the study in terms of the comparisons of organizational culture and social climate between the two departments and across ranks and units, along with a number of IETD hypotheses and observations based on our findings. In our discussion we attempt to clarify the different culture and climate demands, and how they might be used to characterize the two departments, as well as how different IETDs might be

related to successful progression in rank and performance in different units. We also suggest ways that findings might be used in organizational and staff development, and for training, counseling, and evaluating officers.

Summary of Findings

Organizational Culture (Existing & Preferred):

Between Departments:

1. Euclid has a higher **existing Role** culture
2. No departmental differences on **preferred** cultures
3. **Power** is the highest **existing**, but lowest **preferred** culture
4. **Power & Role** are highest **existing** cultures
5. **Achievement is highest preferred culture in both departments**

Across Ranks:

1. No differences across rank on **preferred** cultures. **Achievement** culture is most preferred, **Power** the least preferred
2. Administrators (Lieutenant and above) rated **existing Power** lower than officers & sergeants
3. Administrators rated **existing Support** and **Achievement** higher than officers & sergeants

Across Units:

The differences across units and ranks are identical, with only differences between administrators and sergeant/officers

Culture IETD hypotheses and discussion:

Between Departments (existing role difference):

Euclid PD has a stronger set of IETDs arising from Role Culture than Metroparks rangers. Euclid exerts greater pressure to adapt to a system where roles, rules, clear objectives, job descriptions, and procedures guide behavior. Different personality traits may be more adaptive for each department. The ability to tolerate role ambiguity may be more adaptive for the Metroparks than for the Euclid officer, while the ability to meet the IETDs for structured roles may be more adaptive in Euclid.

Across Ranks (existing power, role, achievement):

Administrators experience different existing Power, Support, and Achievement cultures than officers and sergeants.

Implications of culture findings:

It is interesting to note that the greater an individual's rank, the less power he or she perceives. This finding could become a discussion topic among officers of lower rank and their administrators. Many officers who attain administrative ranks are often disillusioned when they perceive that moving up in rank doesn't necessarily lead to a greater sense of power. By understanding the nature of these differences greater awareness of rank IETDs can be achieved, and newly appointed administrators can appreciate and prepare for the subtle demand shifts that occur when they are promoted to a sergeant or administrative position. It is equally important to realize that everyone, regardless of rank, shares a common Achievement culture preference. The fact that everyone wants the same type of culture is important for team building types of activities, as well as other types of organizational development programs. While different ranked individuals may perceive a different culture, it is evident that everyone's preferences are very similar.

An informal observation from our promotional assessment center programs suggest that those who view the culture as similar to those in the rank for which they are being assessed, obtain higher scores on in-basket, role- playing, and problem analyses components of the assessment program. We also have found that individuals who have high existing power scores typically do well during the interview, but have problems in other areas of the assessment.

Departments, ranks, and units universally experience a high Power culture, but there is a clear demand for low Power and high Achievement culture. Departments interested in organizational development, training, mentoring, evaluation, and core values exploration should design strategies that incorporate the IETDs of a preferred Achievement culture into account, while at the same time recognizing that Power is the highest existing culture.

(Hypothesis): All personnel, regardless the rank, department, or units have similar preferred cultural IETDs. Thus, there are strong demands for achievement and weak power demands for everyone. The individual who doesn't recognize and meet the appropriate IETDs has problems adjusting to the job, regardless his or her ability to meet the SETDs of the department, rank, or unit.

Social Climate:

Between Departments:

- 1. Euclid higher than Metroparks in Coworker Cohesion, Task Orientation, Work Pressure, and Clarity**
- 2. Metroparks higher than Euclid in Innovation**
- 3. No department differences in Involvement, Supervisor Support, Autonomy, and Managerial Control**

Across Rank:

1. No differences between officers and sergeants in any social climate factors
2. Officers lower than administrators in **Involvement, Coworker Cohesion, Supervisor Support, Autonomy, and Innovation**
3. Sergeants lower than administrators in **Involvement, Coworker Cohesion, and Innovation**
4. Some sergeant climate IETDs are similar to administrators in some climate areas, but not different from officers in any social climate areas.

Between Units:

Detective unit similar to administrators in **Involvement**

Implications of Social Climate findings:

Comparing departments, Euclid officers have stronger IETDs related to **Coworker Cohesion, Task Orientation, Work Pressure, and Clarity**. Personality-wise, the Euclid officer should be able to form closer bonds with coworkers, stay focused on tasks, tolerate more work pressure, and respond to more clear directives than his or her Metroparks counterpart.

The shift from officer to sergeant involves minimal IETD shift, although they become more like administrators than officers in **Supervisor Support, Autonomy, and Innovation**. The promotion from sergeant to administrator results in a substantial change in IETDs.

Moving from officer to administrator involves increased pressure to meet the IETDs for **Involvement, Coworker Cohesion, Supervisor Support, Autonomy, and Innovation**.

Sergeants are faced with a more complex set of IETDs. While the demands they face are similar to those of officers, a differentiation process of increasingly similar IETDs from the administrative level illuminates the ambiguity and transience of the position, and supports the view that being promoted to sergeant results in a greater test of an officer's adaptability and openness to change. (Hypothesis): Of all the ranks in a department, the IETDs of sergeant require the greatest adaptability.

The high detective IETDs from **Involvement** are similar to those of an administrator. (Hypothesis): Success in the detective bureau presages success in administrative levels because of prior experience with meeting **Involvement**

IETDs. A detective sergeant has fewer adaptations to make to the administrative IETDs than his or her counterpart from traffic or patrol.

Movement to an administrative position results in greater IETDs for **Supervisor Support**. The administrator who does not meet this IETD will be less effective than an administrator who does, regardless his or her ability to meet administrative SETDs.

Final comments:

The socialization of an individual to the police environment involves meeting the SETDs of police work as well as those that are implicit. Success in law enforcement is not based on salient task performance alone. The individual who fails to meet the implicit demands arising from culture and social climate will not be a good fit to the position, and will not perform his or her best. The successful progression of an individual in rank is a function of successfully meeting the SETDs *and* the IETDs of the position. A successful department management development program will incorporate the principle of meeting IETDs along with salient skill training. For example, the socialization of officers to administrative levels involves the development of increasing sensitivity to Supervisor Support and Coworker Cohesion IETDs, and responding thoughtfully to those related to Involvement, Autonomy, and Innovation. An effective program should select and train individuals based on their ability to respond positively to the shifts in IETDs that occur over the course of their law enforcement career. The bottom line is that individuals perform best when there is a good fit to the position or department. And IETDs play a large role in determining that fit.

References

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Moos, R. H. (1994). *Work Environment Scale Manual*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press Inc.