Learning in early-career police: coming into the workplace

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This paper explores the experience of police recruits as they move from the classroom experience to learning on the job. The research presented forms part of a larger study of newcomers to policing in New South Wales, where recruits generally undertake 20 months of university study, with the final 12 months of their study coinciding with their role as a probationary constable. During this period of time the recruits are developing their professional practice and identity through a process of socialization and situated learning. This paper will present findings, using case studies, of the initial experience of new recruits in the policing world to better understand the effectiveness of university–industry partnerships and pedagogical practices in the development of early-career professionals. (Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 10(1), 19-28).

Keywords: Australia, policing, professional practice, situated learning, socialization, workplace transition.

Coming into any community requires the newcomer to adapt to new circumstances, build relationships and access new learning opportunities. Students emerging from university studies into the world of work are often underprepared for this negotiation of the social and cultural dimensions of the new work environment with the focus of study most often being on professional tasks rather than negotiations of workplaces (Martin, Milne-Home, Barrett, Spalding & Jones, 2000); this is especially true in policing. This paper describes the first part of a longitudinal study of early-career police, focusing on three recruits, and their experiences as they moved from the college environment into the field of policing, or from being legitimate peripheral participants to full members of a policing community of practice.

EDUCATING PROFESSIONAL POLICE

University study as a part of the initial professional development in the field of policing is a relatively recent development within the Australian context (Chan, Devery & Doran, 2003). University-based courses in policing have only been present in this country for a little over a decade. Studies such as Chan et al. (2003), Van Maanen in the US (1978), and Fielding in the UK (1988) have investigated the socialization of police recruits into the culture of the policing organization, however, few studies have looked at the long term impact of academy training on police recruits and at the specific impact of university education as opposed to 'in-house' training programs. This paper focuses specifically upon the transition of police recruits into the field of policing whilst they simultaneously complete a university qualification in policing practice.

It is often argued that within police culture there exists a strong bond among members with significant camaraderie and trust (Reiner, 2000; Reuss-Ianni, 1984; Wood, 1997). Reiner (2000) considered that these traits emerged as a result of the nature of police work, which involved high levels of stress, exposure to dangerous situations and the necessity to deal with aspects of humanity that most others can ignore. However, "police culture – like any other culture – is not monolithic" (Reiner, 2000, p. 85). Even at a local level it is argued that there exists many

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varied groups of police that are separated by culture, for example the differences between detectives, highway patrol and general duties police (Chan, 1997), Reuss-Ianni (1984) drew a distinction between the culture of the management-cop and street-cop. Reiner (2000) identified in police culture the characteristics of a sense of mission, cynicism, isolation, solidarity, conservatism, machismo and racial prejudice. Police culture permeated all functions of policing as tacit knowledge amongst the experts in the field. Furthermore, the practice of policing is embedded in this culture, and a newcomer to the community is required to negotiate its social and cultural layers while accessing professional knowledge (Gherardi, Nicolini & Odella, 1998). These commonalities not only influence the nature of policing, but impact on the identity and self-image of police creating defining characteristics of legitimate, and illegitimate, practice (Findlay, 2004).

The organizational culture of policing is more than just a reflection of the social, cultural and historical backgrounds of individual officers. It is strongly argued in the literature that a collective and shared value system is passed onto newcomers (Chan, 1997; Chan, Devery & Doran, 2003) and reinforced through socialization that occurs at the academy (Soeters, 2000). The role of the academy and the organizationally reinforced process of socialization are significant in bringing forth a policing culture as something different to other organizational cultures. Fitzgerald (1989) suggests that although there are a myriad of subcultures that permeate the policing world, officers still form a strongly bonded organizational culture effectively forming a separate social group.

LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

Learning in many educational settings, including the workplace, has been traditionally conceived of as being individualistic, dependent on transmission pedagogies and associated with the transfer of a decontextualized knowledge separated from the activities of life (Guile & Young, 1998; Kozulin, 2003; Wenger, 1998). Through such a conceptualization collaboration is discouraged and assessment of learning focuses upon the achievement of the individual in examinations removed from context. It is contested in this paper that such a view of learning ignores the complexities of human interactions and fails to consider learning as a social process with its meaning being in the 'lived-world' (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Unwin, 2005; Guile & Young, 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). Learning in a situation and through goal-directed activity involves the acquisition of tacit knowledge, which is situated in the activity that is occurring (Billett, 2002b; Steadman, 2005). Situativity, as labeled by Greeno (1997), depends on the acquisition of the ability to participate and interact in a successful manner – success being defined as the ability to learn from others, operate in the given environment, and be accepted in the community. Through trajectories of participation, "…individuals develop personal identities that are shaped by and are formative of their activities in the various communities in which they participate" (Greeno, 1997, p. 7).

It can be argued that formal education and informal experience combined to develop in a person, new to a social group, adaptations that ensure their social survival (Bourdieu, 1977). These aspects often coexist and interact within an organizational setting. Schein (2004) viewed such a process as leading to the internalization of espoused organizational values and beliefs. The formal and informal cannot be separated neatly to the academy and the field, but worked together throughout the experience of the student and early-career police officer (Soeters, 2000). Chan et al. (2003) asserted that success within the policing world was

determined by the capacity of the newcomer to accumulate social and cultural capital. To acquire social capital it was necessary for police to cultivate supportive networks of relationships, and this included their supervisors (Chan et al., 2003; Fielding, 1988; van Maanen, 1978). Situated learning is separate from the notions of socialization and enculturation that has dominated the earlier discussions of police learning (Billett, 1996). Although there exists a significant power-differential between the novice and expert within the community and access to learning within a social setting can be directed significantly by proclaiming adherence to the values of the community (Billett, 1996; Gherardi et al., 1998; Huzzard, 2004) the trajectory undertaken by an individual is not pre-determined and unchallenged (Billett, 2002b; Fuller et al., 2005). Individuals are active in their learning and participation within the community and bring to bear their own histories and goals of learning in the new setting.

The concept of a community of practice builds on a pedagogical tradition of viewing learning as a socially mediated activity (Daniels, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and forms the conceptual framework in which this study is grounded. The participants in this study emerged from a police recruit-training program that provided them with a base level of skills into a learning environment where they engaged with more capable peers, in the form of more experienced and senior police. They brought to this situation "functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic stage" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In this environment, the novice and expert engaged in learning interactions that moved both beyond their individual capabilities and developed within the novice a complex interaction of their identity within and knowledge of the practice of policing.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative case study (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003) providing for deep analysis of and insight into an individual's encounter with the phenomenon being studied. Data were collected through a series of one-to-one semi-structured interviews and observations of participants in the field during normal shifts. The individual interviews provided for an exploration of phenomenological ideas, but also for clarity and triangulation of field-based observations (cf. Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The interview, combined with observations, helped the researcher understand the meaning that everyday activities held for individuals and provided a more substantial perspective of the phenomenon. Van Maanen (1978) argued that observation of the policing field provided the best source of data for understanding the relationships and culture of policing, both important foci of this study, especially with regard to the community of practice. In the observations of practice, the researcher was best defined as a 'peripheral member-researcher' (Adler & Adler, 1987).

The data were analyzed using the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007) within a framework grounded in notions of situated learning. This perspective presents knowledge as not being something that is a self-sufficient substance but as something that is intrinsically linked to the situation, that is the social, cultural and physical world, in which the learning occurs (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Communities of practice, which draw on conceptualizations of situated learning, allow the study of learning situated within a particular practice and organization (Cox, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). A perspective of communities of practice highlights the expert-novice relationship and its contextualization within a broader social

network that shapes practice, knowledge and identity, *in situ* (Brown et al., 1989; Brown & Duguid, 1991, 1996). Through a combination of observation, of "structures, rituals, repertoires and relationships" and in-depth interviews to elicit "detailed descriptions of activities" an understanding of the characteristics of the community emerged (Benzie, Mavers, Somekh & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2005, p. 183).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

All three participants in this study were female and voluntarily agreed to participate in line with expectations of the accepted ethics for research. Two were 50 years of age and the other was 21. The two older participants were both located at the same Local Area Command, which was an inner city command, small in geographical size, with most of the population of low socio-economic status including a large Aboriginal population. This command area will be referred to as 'West Side'. The younger participant was located at a suburban Local Area Command in a wealthy area, which was moderate in geographical size, with significant representation of people from Anglo and Asian backgrounds – in this paper referred to as 'Uptown'. The details of the participants are summarized in Table 1, including the pseudonyms by which they will be referred to (note: LAC=local area command).

TABLE 1
Demographic data for research participants in study of learning in early-career police

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Location	Previous work experience
Eloise	50	Female	Inner city Busy but small LAC *West Side*	University qualified and worked in this field for a period of time, most recently was a baker.
Emily	50	Female	Inner city Busy but small LAC *West Side*	Nursing unit manager Midwife with significant managerial experience
Sophie	21	Female	Suburban area Quiet but moderately sized area command *Uptown*	Limited work experience Attended a wealthy private school Worked previously in the family business

The motivation of the participants to join the police varied. Eloise and Emily, who are older and both had successful careers previously, spoke about being motivated by the challenge of the job and seeking out something different. Both knew police already with Emily's sister having previously been a police officer, and Eloise's partner is a current serving officer at another station. They were not naïve about policing and the repetitive nature of the work, but saw the opportunity as something that could advance themselves and address some of the frustrations that they were experiencing in their previous occupations. In particular, Emily spoke of her frustration of dealing with drug addicts and not being able to solve the overall problem. Sophie came to choose policing for very different reasons. Policing was something that came to be of interest when other possibilities did not eventuate. Sophie's parents ran a successful business that she worked at for a while, but did not enjoy the field. Before that her parents had hoped that she would pursue a career in the law, but her final school results were not enough to gain entry. Policing was a fallback position and a compromise that Sophie identified as partially fulfilling the "law thing".

Given the diversity of reasons for joining there was natural variation in the expectations of the job. Being younger, Sophie, saw policing as a long-term occupation and one in which she sought diversity in experience, and the ability to undertake many different roles. Such an expectation presented as a frustration while she was required to fulfill her tenure at Uptown. This frustration was further exacerbated by Sophie being given the opportunity to work at a nearby station for one shift in which she spoke of being more engaged and active and encouraged to challenge herself. Eloise and Emily had clear expectations of policing as not being for the long term, with both of these set to retire from the workforce in the coming 10 years; so their focus was far more upon the individual challenge of the day-to-day tasks. They, like Sophie, and despite their differing motivations, are seeking to push themselves and experience a variety of policing. The aspect of challenge and change is seen as important to all three, especially to Emily who commented that "… I am up for the challenge and I like the challenge, but sometimes I need a bit of a shove to get in there."

They were hungry to learn this new thing of policing and all have experienced frustrations with partners who are not willing to provide these chances. Emily, in speaking of her Field Training Officer (FTO), states that "He's terrific. He has been pushing me. He was the one who pushed me into doing the assault. He just got me out the front and said, 'What are you going to do? What are the main things you are going to have to do?' "

Such a view was evident in all the participants. However, this was often tempered with the need for support. Sophie, talking of her second FTO, was more concerned about what she will be doing and whether her FTO will provide the assistance that she needs.

Sophie: I don't have a problem with him. I wouldn't get on as well with him, because I am going to do all the work, though there isn't that much. He will be like you do this, you do that.
Interviewer: Do you think this is because they want you to learn?
Sophie: No, this guy is just lazy. … He is nice, but he is … he won't copy jobs he will just wait for someone else to copy it, and say don't worry about that one.

Copying a job is when a car crew indicates their intent to attend. Police expect that all car crews in a team would equally share the jobs throughout the night, but experienced police also know that a job cannot remain outstanding. By not copying jobs an officer is able to reduce their workload, especially paperwork, very easily. Such a practice is disapproved of by most police and the blame is often attributed to the crew as a whole despite the obvious power differentials. Sophie's frustration is therefore two-fold. First, she is being 'punished' for something that is out of her control and, second, she is missing out on learning opportunities.

Eloise described well the role of the FTO in providing opportunities for learning when she indicates:

So it was really up to that senior constable or constable to basically do what they wanted with you. Fortunately the guy I was with said you might as well get right into it, so this is how you answer the phones, if you've got any problems let me know. And he was very good.

This quote started to suggest a problem in the current induction and early training methods evident in this context. Despite the use of checklist manuals and an overall expectation by the policing organization that recruits will develop with a core set of competencies that are transferable to other stations and commands, the reality is that there is significant variation in the skill and behaviors of police officers. This variation is dependent upon the type of command, the training and experience of the FTO, the willingness of the new recruit to seek

out learning opportunities, and the presentation of points of access to the situated curriculum of policing.

The FTO was the most significant point of access to the community of practice and the situated curriculum. Sophie worked at a station where she was allocated one FTO for each of the six-week training periods. Her association with these FTOs, both of who were senior constables, allowed her to build a reputation with others at the station and to be included within the general social norms of the community. This allowed her to acquire points of access. However, through this process it took Sophie most of the first 12 weeks to become fully accepted, though she was exposed to quality learning opportunities and was developed with respect to her level of ability. Emily and Eloise had very different experiences, where Emily's FTO had been appointed to higher duties and was unable to work with her and Eloise was unsure as to whom her FTO was and worked with a variety of other staff. Given their age and previous experience both Emily and Eloise were able to negotiate access to knowledge with this being aided by their previous experiences, namely nursing and being a partner to a police officer. However, at times it proved frustrating for both Emily and Eloise. The consequence for Emily was a failure to access a range of opportunities, such as working with specialist units, which others in her cohort had made available to them. Eloise struggled to fully assimilate to the community, and did not enjoy her early encounters with many of the staff.

Amongst all participants there was a willingness and desire to experience policing on the street and to "get out amongst it"; however, the dynamics of the command made this more or less possible. Sophie's command was a quiet suburban area where she would deal with a serious situation once in a while, which she found concerning when compared to the breadth of experience of recruits at other commands. Sophie had a particularly frustrating experience where she was mainly located on custody/station duties because her FTO was the only one qualified on her shifts to undertake these roles. She recognized the importance of these functions to policing, but given her length of service and restrictions, due to rank, on what she could undertake, most of this time was wasted and she could see others from her cohort moving forward with their learning. Emily's and Eloise's command was much busier and more varied in the types of jobs. They have a different experience to Sophie in that the learning that occurred at any one job was associated with the immediacy of the job and they were often likely to be moving onto another before consolidating their learning.

Each of the participants saw value in the formal education at the College and how it supplemented their experiential learning in the field, but the education at the College was often sidelined as "best practice" versus the "real thing" in the field.

> At the College everyone said this is what you get taught this is not what will happen, which is true to a certain extent, but I can't see how they would teach it differently, how they could teach it the way it would happen. They have to teach best practice down there, and if you find shortcuts work better, you come across your shortcuts … one of the things I have always got others to do is listen to what everyone says and then work out what is best for you. (Emily)

Eloise expressed that although the College provided a good foundation she had now moved into the field and her learning needs changed.

> I'd have to say that most of the stuff we learnt was very relevant. Certainly all the OS [Officer Safety] stuff is always very well taught – the academic stuff … it's a bit different. They do things differently definitely outside like it's not the detailed notes that we got taught to take and that sort of thing but yeah I think what we learnt was definitely relevant. I guess that we've learnt enough though.

This comment highlighted a frustration that was evident in both interviews and observations where new recruits were required to continue their formal university studies in conjunction with adapting to the new workplace; the university program commenced at the College but continued for 12 months while also in the field. Eloise articulated this frustration the best when she said:

> Look I think it's all good practice to go through case studies and write fact sheets and all that sort of stuff but I think that it's ironic I'm working and having to do a narrative of a break and enter for my notebook entry in real life and then I've got to come back and do it as an assignment. I think, and this is just what I believe, that the schooling should be finished by now. It's enough of the formal stuff because now I think it's all about learning on the job. I've always been of the opinion it's a hands-on, learn-on-the-job profession … a vocational profession.

Acceptance was a key theme evident in the data of each participant: "Everyone wants to fit in. You don't want to be the one that everyone talks about behind your back. … I don't want to be on shift for 12 hours talking to myself. (Sophie)." Signs of acceptance come in many forms. Things such as inclusion in the gossip of the station, gaining a nickname and having this used on the allocations board, being asked about dinner or lunch, and the freedom of other police to make "rudey-nudey comments" around the new recruit. The time this took was dependant on various factors, but it was often mostly associated with the shared experience of having completed some jobs together successfully. The new recruits were tested to see their commitment and personality. Despite levels of acceptance improving, the participants experienced a strong cultural sense of hierarchy, rank and position, and they were the lowest of all. As one officer put it during an observation, "even police dogs get more respect than a new probationer". Emily commented that, "I will be doing all the s--- jobs, like checking the truck and doing all that. In my old job I did that, I was good at delegating, but I can't delegate at my level in the police force".

Even though the participants spoke warmly of the sergeants that they worked with, there was still a clear protocol about asking them for help. For most issues the participants sought help from other probationary constables, who were of the same rank but had more experience. They would then move through the ranks depending on the difficulty of the question.

> It is just like they're [senior officers] very busy and they have no time for stupid probationary constable's questions who want to know how to do stuff. They expect you to go the next probie [i.e., probationary constable], and then the one next up from there, and then maybe a constable and then senior constable. (Sophie)

DISCUSSION

From considering the data three key ideas begin to emerge, and these frame the discussion.

Management of Variability of Learning and Acceptance of the Development of Professional Practitioners is Contrasted with 'Production Line Outputs'

There inextricably exists variation in the learning opportunities presented at various sites and with different staff. Within policing, considering that a junior police officer after a period of time can move anywhere across the state of New South Wales and into a range of specialists fields, there needs to be a greater diversity of learning opportunities with newcomers. They need exposure to a variety of policing environments with a developing consciousness of the variability of policing and the need to be professionally flexible in responding to situations.

Building Better Learning Partnerships Between the Field and Training Institution

The gap between the field and the training institution, in this context the Police College and the university, needs to be narrowed. As Boyer (1996) argues, the purpose of scholarship should be to engage the field and contribute to the way the field operates, alternatively the field should also contribute to scholarship. Although, within this study, graduates can make some links between the two experiences there exists a need to make obvious what these are and to not have the College and the field perceived as opposing forces. This divide, as identified also by Chan et al. (2003), is culturally based, and requires change at that level, as well as in practice, to overcome this hurdle. It appears, though, that this gap is slowly being eroded if comparison is drawn between what Chan et al. (2003) concluded and this study reveals.

Workplaces Need to Aim to Capture the Enthusiasm of a Newcomer and Build Upon the Previous Experiences That the Newcomer Brings

Within the policing context newcomers join with an enthusiasm to contribute to what they perceive as the ideals of policing, and they desire to 'get out and amongst it'. In the early stages of the induction process there needs to be adequate opportunity for this to occur, but more importantly when working alongside the FTO the newcomer needs to be presented the opportunity to practice what they have been learning. There is a tendency during the early stages for the newcomer to be sidelined with an attitude of 'watch and learn' dominating. To an extent this is a result of the discounting of previous knowledge and experience. Within policing there does not overly exist much of a welcoming of challenge by the newcomer to way things are done, especially given the rank structure of the organisation. The newcomer is expected to conform to the norms of the community rather than the community being changed and shaped by the experiences that the newcomer brings. Constantly emerging communities of practice are great sources of innovation (Brown et al., 1989), in considering the workplace as a learning space it is imperative that the learner is not conceived as *tabula rasa*, instead they bring a social and cultural history which has shaped the value they assign to particular experiences and therefore their level of commitment to the effortful task of learning within activity (Billett, 2002a).

CONCLUSIONS

The participants in this study have made their first step on a long journey from students at the Police College to fully accepted and serving police officers. Differences in age, experience of the participant and the characteristics of the command all contribute to the path of this journey. The underpinning desire to fit in is evident amongst all participants. How such a process is facilitated is important for ensuring that newcomers have adequate access to the knowledge of the community and can develop fully as professional practitioners.

This research forms the first stage of a longitudinal study that has tracked these participants through their early career development. The overall study will address a gap in the current literature around this period of development in police, in particular the absence of substantial research on the immediate post-probation period of professional learning. There is generally a paucity of research on police learning and development; this paper begins a larger exploration of this area providing a lens of analysis on future data. Future research should aim to explore to greater depth the long-term experience of these participants. The

ongoing development and learning of police at the various stages of their careers presents as a fertile ground for future research and there is a clear need to further test these findings in larger populations.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based.

Cooperative education in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. Essentially, cooperative education is a partnership between education and work, in which enhancement of student learning is a key outcome. More specifically, cooperative education can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The editorial board welcomes contributions from authors with an interest in cooperative education. Manuscripts should comprise reports of relevant research, or essays that discuss innovative programs, reviews of literature, or other matters of interest to researchers or practitioners. Manuscripts should be written in a formal, scholarly manner and avoid the use of sexist or other terminology that reinforces stereotypes. The excessive use of abbreviations and acronyms should be avoided. All manuscripts are reviewed by two members of the editorial board. APJCE is produced in web-only form and published articles are available as PDF files accessible from the website http://www.apjce.org.

Research reports should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research. Essays should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to, and discussion of, relevant literature, and a discussion of the importance of the topic for other researchers and practitioners. The final manuscript for both research reports and essay articles should include an abstract (word limit 300 words), and a list of keywords, one of which should be the national context for the study.

Manuscripts and cover sheets (available from the website) should be forwarded electronically to the Editor-in-Chief directly from the website. In order to ensure integrity of the review process authors' names should not appear on manuscripts. Manuscripts should include pagination, be double-spaced with ample margins in times new-roman 12-point font and follow the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association in citations, referencing, tables and figures (see also, http://www.apa.org/journals/faq.html). The intended location of figures and diagrams, provided separately as high-quality files (e.g., JPG, TIFF or PICT), should be indicated in the manuscript. Figure and table captions, listed on a separate page at the end of the document, should be clear and concise and be understood without reference to the text.