Changing the perception of police culture: recognising masculinity diversity and difference in a “dirty hands” vocation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to problematise the application of hegemonic masculinity to police practice and culture.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper offers a viewpoint and is a discussion paper critiquing the application of hegemonic masculinity to police officers, their practice and culture.

Findings – The paper suggests that a broader conceptualisation of masculinity, offered by scholars such as Demetriou (2001), is required when considering policing and its culture, in order to more accurately reflect the activity and those involved in it.

Research limitations/implications – Writings concerning police practice and culture, both in the media and academic discourse, are questionable due to the application of hegemonic masculinity. The application of hegemonic masculinity can create a biased perception of policing and police officers.

Practical implications – The paper helps to engender a more accurate and balanced examination of the police, their culture and practice when writing about policing institutions and encourage social institutions such as academia to address bias in their examination of policing institutions and police officers.

Originality/value – There has been limited consideration in regards to multiple masculinities, police practice and culture.

Keywords Dirty hands vocation, Hegemonic masculinity, Multiple masculinities, Police culture, Police masculinity, Police practice

Paper type Viewpoint

Understanding police work: an introduction

Carl Klockars (1979) described police work as a “dirty hands” vocation in order to convey the moral dilemma police officers face in the execution of their work. Klockars went on to explain that at the very core of police culture is the belief that the police should get their hands dirty as quickly as possible every day. Recent terrorist attacks such as those seen in Melbourne, Manchester, London and France during 2017 as well as other serious incidents, for example, the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting, reflect the “dirty hands” analogy and its contemporaneous application to twenty-first century policing. Other scholars have considered police work in a similar way to that of Klockars, for example, Van Mannen (1978) simply termed his analysis of the policing profession and those involved as “the asshole”, while Dick Hobbs (1988) referred to police work as “doing the business”. The identity of the police and their work takes on many guises and is understood in various ways, however the conceptualisation of police work as a “dirty hands” vocation, “doing the business” and the police officer as “the asshole”, has resulted in the activity of policing and those involved in the activity commonly constructed and understood through a lens of hegemonic masculinity. As a result of this, police officers, and the profession more broadly, are typically understood as aggressive, corrupt and deviant with many explanations of police culture being reduced to a hegemonic notion of police masculinity.
Hegemonic masculinity, policing and police culture

Theorising masculinity has typically promoted a traditional view of maleness, characterised by dominant, aggressive and emotionless behaviours. This hegemonic masculinity is regularly applied to police culture and practice. For example, Prokos and Padavic (2002) described how hegemonic masculinity is at the core of defining who the police are. Contemporary work on masculinity, however, has proposed multiple masculinities, rather than the notion of a unitary masculinity (Demetriou, 2001). Multiple masculinities counter hegemonic masculinity, rejecting the simplistic hegemonic “policing” masculinity presented by post-modern commentary concerning the police. Furthermore, Klockars (1979) argued that the police must be vulnerable in their role because of their relationship to the state, a Marxist position for understanding the activity of policing, the police and their culture. According to Klockars, as the police are an agency of the state, they require their employer to be responsible for the conduct, legal liability, misdeeds and indiscretions police officers may commit as “tools of the state”, while the work of social theorists such as Agger (2013) outline how post-modernists would reject such a proposition. Agger’s work can be used to illustrate how post-modernists would reject a Marxist position for understanding the police and broader police culture, mainly on the basis of its meta-narrative. However, in the same epoch, the post-modern movement declared themselves to be the intellectual vanguard of social change. In this process, the humanistic “alienation” of Marxism seemed to be replaced with the multi-cultural trinity of class, gender and race that rejected meta-narratives along with any single struggle against state oppression. Agger (2013) argues that in this process the identity politics of gender are celebrated within a diverse framework. At the same time, in surpassing Marxism, the post-modern movement embraced capitalism and as such focussed on the low-level functionaries of the state, such as policing institutions and the individuals working as police officers. By doing so, this has resulted in police masculinity being presented as a dominant causal factor in regards to police deviance and other observed failings of policing as an activity and its culture.

Since the onset of post-modernism (and beyond) policing, police officers and their culture have been exposed to an age of police oversight and the (over) reliance on punishing and shaming police officers by the brutal enforcement of general rules, orders and regulations. This often includes the right for most police organisations to expedite a dismissal or disciplinary action. Paul Rock (1997) argued that criminal justice is engineered to keep the public eye on working-class and ethnic communities and divert it away from the ills of capitalism. At the same time, the criminal justice system itself provides vague rules in relation to police powers; rules which effectively condone police deviation and simultaneously make police the “fall guys” of the legal system with regard to injustice (McBarnet, 1981, p. 156). The impact and outcome of such vague rules was explored in the earlier work of Klockars, who explained that many police learn to either lie or say nothing when questioned about their conduct. Exhibiting such behaviours can be associated with hegemonic masculinity and typically used within social commentary to justify an understanding of policing, the police and their culture through such a theoretical lens, overlooking the notion of the “fall guys” as recognised by McBarnet (1981).

Masculinity dualism, policing and police culture

Contemporary masculinity theorising, such as that offered by Demetriou (2001) allows for “difference” and particular identities such as race, ethnicity, sexuality and their separate, yet interrelated, oppressions and struggles to be recognised. If such difference, as defined by contemporary theorising of masculinity, is applied to policing and police officers, it would allow for a more accurate understanding of those involve in this activity and its culture. Arguably, contemporary theorising is rarely afforded to police officers and their work. The continuous application of the hegemonic hypothesis to police culture underplays the realities of being a police officer, which can be illustrated through the health and wellbeing of those involved in policing (see the work of Vickers et al., 2014). A challenge in applying hegemonic masculinity to police culture and practice though, is exemplified by the fact that on any given workday in New South Wales (Australia) around 12 per cent of the police workforce is unable to be deployed, with psychological injuries being the primary reason (NSW Police Force, 2011). Moreover, the impact of stress appears to be cumulative, with few police officers actually retiring
in the usual way; most exit from the organisation on medical leave due to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Despite efforts to address the issue of police stress, it remains a critical issue for police services to deal with (NSW Police Force, 2011). Such an issue, and its impact on policing, police officers and police culture is commonly overlooked by the public, the media and academics when discussing this activity and those involved in it.

Vickers et al. (2014) conducted interviews with rank and file police officers in which a number of themes emerged that challenged the accuracy of understanding police practice and culture through a lens of hegemonic masculinity. It was revealed by Vickers et al. (2014) that police culture is adversely impacted on, and police officers are challenged both personally and professionally, by surveillance processes, from numerous quarters, pervading their lives and the conduct of their job. Many officers also spoke of very challenging and stressful events during their working day. Recently, police services have begun to set in place strategies designed to improve the response to mental health problems among their members, such as creating 24-hour assistance programs with direct access to mental health practitioners. However, much of the focus has been on responding to major trauma and PTSD. While this is important, police also need to take account of the effects on staff of recurrent exposure to poor management and cultural stresses, and the stigma attached to mental illness within the profession. Certainly, educating staff – especially managers – into how to respond adequately to distressed colleagues, encouraging a culture of openness about mental health issues and removing any perceived stigma of personal distress would be useful strategies in this regard. This may reduce, for example, the risk of police suicides, this does, nevertheless, require policing as a profession and individual police officers to be conceptualised through a lens other than hegemonic masculinity.

Challenging the perception of police culture: recognising masculinity diversity and difference

Hegemonic masculinity does not accurately reflect the full spectrum of characteristics and behaviours displayed by police officers and/or within police culture. Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity is a label that is constantly applied to police officers and their practice in order to explain their conduct. Gottlieb (2016) explains that these "innate" notions that embrace hegemonic definitions need to be constantly challenged, realising that the adherents will fail to come up with something better. In fact, it does appear that talk of "innate" knowledge or ideas has always traded on its own imprecision. Subsequently talk of hegemonic masculinity has prevented police officers from publically and openly displaying characteristics and behaviours that a more inclusive understanding of masculinity involves, as proposed by scholars such as Demetriou (2001). Within such contemporary writings, a more inclusive construction of masculinity is engendered and reflects contemporary police research, such as that of Vickers et al. (2014), allowing for a change in the perception of police culture and practice, a perception that recognises the diversity and difference by those engaged in this "dirty hands" vocation.

Even in Klockars' (1979) work, open and frank discussion was acknowledged as being part of the answer in dealing with stressful situations that arise from policing being a dirty hands vocation. We would argue this assertion is still applicable, contemporaneously, to twenty-first century policing and indeed would be supported by the discourse ethics of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas (1994) explains that he is a defender of critical theory, however seems to challenge other critical thinkers from the post-modern and post-structural genre, arguably constructing them as neo-conservatives. Habermas argues these critics are forced to acquiesce in the status quo because they have relinquished any means of providing a critical appraisal of it. Critique for them, according to Habermas, can be no more than ad hoc negation or context-dependent criticism. Habermas (1984) is of the view that by abandoning the "force of the better argument" (p. 25) this also abandons the aspirations that have always been at the core of all forms of non-conservative politics. This in itself could be an explanation as to why the use of hegemonic definitions regarding masculinity is presented by "progressive" thinkers in their critique of policing practitioners. The challenge of masculinity regarding policing practitioners and institutions is presented as a critical examination of a "tool of the state", whilst all of the time it reinforces the status quo. The way in which police officers, their practice and culture are understood will not change until media, social commentary and public perceptions are corrected, recognising the
diversity and difference in this “dirty hands” vocation. Such inaccuracies in social commentary and the public perception of the police is at odds with contemporary police research, such as that of Vickers et al. (2014), where it is recognised that those involved in police practice possess a range of characteristics and behaviours, some associated with multiple masculinities. However, such a shift in the understanding of policing, police officers and police culture would require a serious amount of self-reflection, this may be appropriate advice for policing practitioners, but it seems their critics often fail to observe similar advice.

References


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