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LEARNING AND SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY: EXPLORING
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Applying Communities of Practice to the
Learning of Police

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APPLYING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO THE LEARNING OF POLICE

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Abstract

This paper presents an argument for the application of Wenger's (1998) theory of a community of practice to develop understanding of the learning that occurs in early-career police. The focus of this research is on the ways that early career police learn the craft of policing. Early career police are defined as police in their first three years of service. This definition is formed from the general requirements of the New South Wales Police for the completion of one year probation and two further years as a general duties constable prior to application to transfer or specialise. During the probation year police officers continue to undertake further formal university-based study. Police learning experiences will be investigated using Lave and Wenger's social theory of learning and the notion of communities of practice, applied within a para-military police culture.

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Introduction

This paper will present a review of literature in the area of social learning theory, with a focus on communities of practice, police culture, socialisation and identity formation in order to develop an approach to analyse the development of professional police during their early-career phase. To achieve this, the paper will be presented in three sections: communities of practice,

police culture and socialisation. The focus of this paper is to explore the notion of a community of practice with particular reference to the ideas exhorted by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), and to situate these ideas within the context of policing through a focus upon the works of Chan (1996; 1997), Chan, Devery and Doran (2003) and Reiner (2000).

Lave and Wenger (1991) brought forth the notion of communities of practice as a tool for analysis of the relationship between learning and the social environment (Benzie, Mavers, Somekh, & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2005; Cox, 2005). Much discussion has been pursued in defining this idea and translating it into different contexts (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Contu & Willmott, 2003; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), however, the basic principles of this notion, and its further articulation by Wenger (1998), have generally been accepted by the scholarly community.

In 1997, Chan *et al.* undertook the most extensive review of police recruit socialisation using the context of the New South Wales Police Service (Shanahan, 2000). This research project was later published as *Fair Cop: Learning the art of policing* in 2003. This project built upon the earlier work of Fielding (1988), van Maanen (1978) and Manning (1977), as well as earlier works by Chan (1996; 1997). Given the timing, context and breadth of the study of Chan *et al.* (2003), it provides the most useful text to explore the notions of police socialisation. To support the understanding of this text it is also necessary to explore the thematic area of police culture. In this area the work of Reiner (2000) presents the most comprehensive text. In most work on police culture reference is made to the work of Reiner and his principles of police culture, and although argument exists that it is difficult to identify one common culture in policing, a point made by Reiner himself, these principles provide a useful generalisation and description of a very real phenomenon.

The purpose of drawing together these bodies of literature, that is police culture and communities of practice, is to argue that there is cause to adopt a theoretical framework, based on communities of practice, to analyse the learning of early-career police and describe how they move into and through the community of policing and develop their identity as police officers. Given the limitations of space this paper will not be exhaustive in the list of authors and literature considered, it will instead primarily focus on key literature to argue that there exists a gap in the application of a communities of practice framework to the policing environment and that such a framework needs to consider the process of socialisation.

Theoretical Overview

Communities of Practice

The concept of a community of practice builds on a pedagogical tradition of viewing learning as a socially mediated activity (Daniels, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Salomon (as cited in Daniels, 2001, p.70) asserts that:

... a clearer understanding of human cognition would be achieved if studies were based on the concept that cognition is distributed among individuals, that

knowledge is socially constructed through collaborative efforts to achieve shared objectives in cultural surroundings and that information is processed between individuals and tools and artefacts provided by the culture.

Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) assert that a community of practice is “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” The community of practice is not an isolated body, but is composed of many members, who themselves are also members of many other communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Drawing from this definition are the aspects of a community of practice being a source of meaning making, both individually and socially, and the pivotal role of the social structure in defining possibilities for learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus a community of practice provides a framework from which learning in social environments and the development of expertise, in its many definitions, can be understood. Brown and Duguid (1991), in their discussion, suggest that learning with a community of practice should be viewed as the bridge over the gap between working and innovating, and that “through their constant adapting to changing membership and changing circumstances, evolving communities-of-practice are significant sites of innovating” (p.2).

Embedded in the concept of communities of practice is the idea of the legitimate peripheral participation of community members. In arguing for their definition of legitimate peripheral participation, Lave and Wenger (1991) proffer that legitimate peripheral participation is an inseparable term and each of its parts cannot stand in opposition to the other. The legitimate aspect of the term is drawn from the sense of belonging inherent to a community. To be part of a community people must be first accepted as members of its *structure* (Chavis & McMillan, 1986; McMillan, 1996). Lave and Wenger (1991) further argue that it is a fundamental part of the learning that occurs within the social world that people/actors change direction, develop identities and re-shape their membership of the community. A new member of the community has legitimacy to participate in the learning of the community, but lacks the old-timer expertise of the community to be at the core of the learning process, instead they exist on the periphery of the learning. The beliefs, behaviours and values of the community are acquired by the newcomer as they move to the role of full membership (Daniels, 2001). As they develop their identity within the community, the new members move from this position of a legitimate peripheral participant towards a full membership of the community, developing and shaping the learning of the community. Contu and Willmott (2003) further assert that the notion of legitimate peripheral participation:

... highlights the power-invested process of bestowing a degree of legitimacy upon novices as a normal condition of participation in learning processes. It is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to learn a practice, and thereby to become an (identified) member of a community of practice, when power relations impede or deny access to its more accomplished exponents ... (p.285)

Huzzard (2004) extends this argument to make the point that Lave and Wenger (1991) recognised learning as contextually dependent, social and embedded in particular practice, and that therefore learning should be viewed as an “integral aspect of social practice” (Huzzard, 2004, p.351) and that learning is, in and of itself, a social process. Daniels (2001, p.116) argues that the radically situated account of knowledge and learning must be placed within a political analysis of power and control. The learning within a community of practice cannot be divorced from the

power relations that occur within the social setting. It is these relations that often determine the path of identity formation within the community and subsequently the learning that is to occur.

Wenger (1998, p.3) argues that traditionally institutions are “largely based on the assumption that learning is an individual process”, where he would prefer to view learning as being “fundamentally a social process”. He argues that this social learning is fundamentally based upon the formation of identity and meaning within a community that focuses on particular practice. Thus the coherence of a community of practice comes from *mutual engagement* “in actions whose meaning they negotiate with each other” (p.73), *joint enterprise* (a shared goal and accountability), and a *shared repertoire* (the use of terms whose definition and use has particular meaning within the community). However, as highlighted by Contu and Willmott (2003), this does not exclude the conflictual nature of social engagement and learning. Wenger (1998) provides indicators of a community of practice, reproduced in Table 1, which can be divided into groupings related to these key foci.

Through the employment of these foci as a lens on which to view the workplace, the concept of communities of practice provides an analytical tool that can be used to explore learning. It allows the study of learning situated within a particular practice and organisation in which the knowledge and skill will be used (Cox, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) provides the shift in focus of communities of practice from an explanation of learning, to a full theoretical framework from which analysis can occur (Benzie et al., 2005). According to Benzie et al. (2005, p182-3) “the notion of a community of practice provides a very useful theoretical framework for research into the social processes of groups in contexts such as the ... workplace” observable through “structures, rituals, repertoires and relationships” (Benzie et al., 2005, p.183). The core focus of this study is the community of practice located within the policing workplace.

Table 1: INDICATORS OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

<i>Wenger's indicators of a community of practice</i>
1. sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual
2. shared ways of engaging in doing things together
3. the rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
4. absence of introductory preambles ... conversations are an ongoing process
5. very quick set up of a problem to be discussed
6. substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs
7. knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
8. mutually defining identities
9. the ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products
10. specific tools, representations, and other artefacts
11. local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter
12. jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones
13. certain styles recognised as displaying membership
14. a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world

(Wenger, 1998, p.125-6)

Police Culture

Organisational culture encompasses the behaviours and symbols of the organisation, the espoused values of its members and the fundamental beliefs that underpin both (Schein, 2004). In the situation of policing, those who form the organisation take on notions of the organisational culture, which is primarily fitting within a hierarchical uniformed organisation, but also evolve an identity as a police officer that distinguishes them from the rest of society both on and off duty. However, the concept of police culture is generally loosely defined (Chan, 1996). Manning (1977) refers to core skills, cognitions and affect; it includes “accepted practices, rules and principles of conduct that are situationally applied and generalised rationales and beliefs” (Chan, 1996, p.111). Reiner (2000) equates police culture to the values, norms, perspectives and craft rules of the organization, whilst Skolnick (1966) writes of the ‘working personality’, response to danger, authority of constables and pressures to perform. Chan (1996) argues “police cultural practice results from the interaction between the socio-political context of police work and various dimensions of police organisational knowledge” (p.110). Such an argument positions the concept of social learning theory and communities of practice as relevant tools for the analysis of police culture and early-career development within this cultural milieu.

Early studies into police culture revealed “a layer of informal occupational norms and values operating under the apparently rigid hierarchical structure of police organizations” (Chan, 1996, p.110). Nevertheless it is argued that:

... organisational culture is more than the sum of interrelationships and behaviours; it incorporates the very principles and values of the people who make up the organisation. It could be termed the ‘group-think’ of the organisation (Nixon & Reynolds, 1996, p.50).

It is often asserted that within police culture there exists a strong bond amongst members with significant camaraderie and trust (Reiner, 2000; Reuss-Ianni, 1984; Wood, 1997). These traits emerge as a result of the nature of police work: the high levels of stress, exposure to dangerous situations and the necessity to deal with aspects of humanity that most others can ignore (Reiner, 2000). Wood (1997) concluded, with particular respect to the New South Wales Police Service, that these traits tend to exist (or at least did exist) within the forms of excessive drinking with colleagues, long lunches and a strong code of silence amongst the members of the service. It is often argued that these traits are a positive sign of a strong community, even though they in themselves are negative behaviours. However, it can be further argued that they are not conducive to the learning process (Moore, Burke, & Parks, 1998).

Although these previous paragraphs have attempted to describe one culture that permeates all aspects of the force it is important to note that “police culture – like any other culture – is not monolithic” (Reiner, 2000, p.85). Even at a local level there are many varied groups of police that are separated by culture, for example the differences between detectives, highway patrol and general duties police (Chan, 1997). Reiner (2000) argues that there are some aspects that are common threads through all of the police, however these vary from location to location and between specialities. While in the most part police culture has the characteristics of a sense of mission, cynicism, isolation, solidarity, conservatism, machismo and racial prejudice,

these aspects vary in their expression and realisation as you move within the police organisation (Reiner, 2000).

Chan (1997) identified three major assumptions in the majority of academic discussion around police culture. First, the demands of police work were linked to culture; second, the culture was relatively stable over time and space; and third, the culture had a negative impact on police practice. As Shanahan (2000) points out, Chan suggests that the first two assumptions “were simplistic and did not take account of social influences as well as individual acquiescence to the culture, internal differentiation and jurisdictional differences” (Shanahan, 2000, p.3).

The third assumption is challenged by the assertion that overall police culture is positive, with a sense of teamwork and ‘mateship’ evident throughout most discussions. The culture is functional to the survival and security of police officers working in a (perceived) dangerous, unpredictable and alienating occupation and can therefore place pressures on officers, particularly junior and early-career police, to comply with behaviours that they may not agree with for fear of isolation and/or reprisal. It is argued that it is the individual that determines the degree and direction of influence (Chan, 1996, 1997; Chan et al., 2003; Fielding, 1988; Reiner, 2000). That is, the individual is not a passive absorber of culture but actively engages in the learning of the culture and its reshaping to make meaning for the individual.

Chan (1996) asserts that there are four dimensions to the cultural knowledge of a police officer: dictionary, directory, recipe and axiomatic. *Dictionary knowledge* categorises people with whom police have contact. Police respond negatively to those people who do not fit within the mould of middle class respectability that police revere (Reiner, 2000). *Directory knowledge*, which informs police about the way police work is usually carried out; “look for the unusual and take shortcuts” (Chan, 1996, p.120). This dimension is vividly described by Lee (1981, cited in Chan, 1996):

Taking charge efficiently may seem to call for minor and sometime major shortcuts in legal niceties. The officer may bluff or bully, mislead or lie, verbally abuse or physically ‘rough up’ the alleged offender. Senior officers are not concerned to eliminate such short cuts, but merely manage them, so as to keep citizens’ complaints ... at a minimum while getting the day’s work done. The most important learning required of the rookie in his first six months is the ability to keep his/her mouth shut about the deviance from law and police regulations which veteran officers consider necessary if the police are not to be ‘hamstrung’ in their control of social order ... The rookie who survives on the force learns to look at the world through the needs of his/her occupation ... (Lee, 1981, p.51, cited in Chan, 1996, p.121)

Recipe knowledge is the philosophy of ‘cover yourself and don’t rat on others’. Such a philosophy is presented in the code of silence and solidarity amongst officers in light of external

challenge (Reuss-Ianni, 1984). The code of silence is not often concealing major incidents, but is often associated with the covering of minor infractions from senior officers (Chan, 1997; Reiner, 2000; Reuss-Ianni, 1984). And, finally, *axiomatic knowledge*, conveys the notion of assumptions about why things are done the way they are; the concept held by police of their responsibility to wage the war on crime, maintain order and protect life and property.

How the new police recruit comes to understand the cultural world of policing, their position within the organisation and how they develop a knowledge of policing is of particular interest. Chan (2003), in other studies, has often explored these ideas within the limited framework of the probationary constable. Learning to be a police officer is not isolated to this period, though the formal recruit education may cease at this time. The identity of a police officer continues to develop throughout his or her entire career.

Socialisation and Identity Formation

Having explored the concept of communities of practice and developed a picture of the police cultural world, the next section of this paper will combine these two notions around the affect of the socialisation of new recruits into the policing world. In particular, the focus will be upon the formation of identity in this early-career phase through a process of socialisation.

Identity formation is a key aspect of Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning. Accordingly he argues that "building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities" (Wenger, 1998, p.145). A distinction is often drawn between the social identity of a person (that is the identity of their groups) and the personal identity (related to personal relationships and behaviours) (Hogg, 2003). Wenger (1998) considers that such a rigid divide is not necessary to the understanding of how identity relates to practice and to membership within a community. Instead he argues that the discussion should be at the interplay between the identity of the person and the identity of the community. "An identity, then, is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other" (Wenger, 1998, p.151). Wenger (1998, p.149) defines five characterisations of identity within a community of practice; namely through negotiation of experience, community membership, learning trajectory, nexus of multi-membership, and a relation between the local and the global. Each of these can be used to understand the identity of members within the community.

It is further argued that ones membership within the community provides ones identity, both in the cultural markers of identity, but also competence, in the social and cognitive senses, in the community.

When we are with a community of practice of which we are full members, we are in familiar territory. We can handle ourselves competently. We experience competence and we are recognised as competent. We know how to engage others. We understand why they do what they do because we understand the enterprise to which participants are accountable. Moreover, we share the resources they use to communicate and go about their activities. (Wenger, 1998, p.152)

Our identity in the community is marked by what we know and also by what we do not yet know. As a novice or newcomer the latter is by far greater, and in the context of policing this presents as a weakness for the emergent probationary constable. There exists a gap in their knowledge to be filled through their interactions with more experienced police, cultural artefacts and symbols. There is a need to recognise the importance of cultural artefacts and representations of meaning as instruments of cognitive formation (Daniels, 2001) and hence a realisation of the significance of the role of senior police, rank structures, uniform and police culture in shaping the knowledge of practice in a novice police officer.

In forming identity as a new recruit to policing it is argued that the recruit moves through a process of socialisation into the cultural nuances of the policing environment. In becoming a member of a community a person develops an identity and meaning that fits them within the social constructs of the community; such a process is termed in this study as the ‘socialisation’ of the person. The word ‘socialisation’ is used as opposed to ‘enculturation’ to emphasise the somewhat voluntary, learning and osmotic process rather than a forced change. Furthermore socialisation describes a re-birthing of a person with the term most often associated with the social development of children. In examining policing it can be argued that new recruits move through a re-birth from their previous lives to that of a police officer. This is highlighted by the significance and role of the academy in shaping discipline and attitudes amongst police recruits. White (1977, p.1) describes socialisation as the process of learning to live in a social setting. He highlights the importance of the acquisition of “values and attitudes, behaviours, habits and skills” beyond what is achieved through just formal education; “socialisation does not just include imparting factual information but attitudes about the organisation, its system of authority, its work and a host of other features. Much of this is learnt from informal sources ...”(White, 1977, p.1)

“Successful socialisation often involves a personal metamorphosis” (Chan et al., 2003, p.1). However, socialisation is a complex process in which, although recruits may acquire skills, knowledge and values through the process, they “do not necessarily end up with a uniform set of attitudes and practice orientations” (Chan et al., 2003, p.19). The culture of policing is diverse, and therefore the socialisation of recruits produces diverse results. Socialisation, though, provides a key link between the existence of the culture and the learning of the recruit to exist within its constraints and values. As highlighted above communities of practice are predicated upon social interaction. Social interaction occurs within a cultural world into which one is socialised and ones identity changed.

The process of organisational socialisation begins through interactions at the academy, where the recruit moves from being an outsider to an insider of the organisation (Chan et al., 2003; Soeters, 2000), though it is argued that the overall process of socialisation may begin even earlier (Chan, 1996, 1997; Chan et al., 2003; Fielding, 1988; Manning, 1977; Soeters, 2000; van Maanen, 1978). The academy process is an institutionalisation of the recruit into the culture of the organisation; this is reinforced through the use of artefacts with senior students being permitted to wear uniform; parades and drills which are overseen by protocol officers (senior police whose role is to enforce standards of conduct and appearance) and senior police; as well as more generic disciplinary expectations as students are scrutinised for their employment suitability.

The process of socialisation continues through the experience of the field (Beck & Wilson, 1998; Chan et al., 2003; Sato, 2003; Soeters, 2000; van Maanen, 1978). As Chan et al. (2003) observed through their study of police recruits:

As probationers entered the operational field, they left the academy behind both physically and mentally. The knowledge and skills they had acquired at the academy soon lost their currency. Interviewees repeatedly referred to the operational field as 'reality', 'the real world', or 'real life', compared with the academy, which was about 'theory', 'scenario', 'play acting', or 'made up' reality. ... Once out in the operational field, probationers began to see the gap between the knowledge they had acquired at the academy and the skills they needed to survive in the field. (Chan, et al., 2003, p.155)

The role of the field training officer, or buddy, was demonstrated by Chan (2003) as being instrumental in shaping the identity of the probationer within their new community of practice. Upon entering the field of policing an officer, at least in the context of the New South Wales Police Force, is paired with a field training officer (FTO). The role of the FTO is to work alongside the new officer showing them 'the ropes' of the job. Given the nature of policing the new recruit and FTO spend most of their time away from the station, paired up as a car crew. Therefore the new recruit's experience of policing is very much shaped by the actions, experience and attitudes of the FTO.

Field training remained an apprenticeship arrangement where probationers learned by watching, listening and mimicking their field training officers and other officers in the field. ... Probationers developed a number of strategies for coping with the challenges of the job and for fitting in at their new environment. One of these was to listen, observe and ask questions, but not say too much – and especially not challenge anyone's practice openly. (Chan, 2003, p.304)

The above quote uses the term of apprenticeship; Lave and Wenger (1991) argue against the master-student relationship of an apprenticeship model of learning in favour of a two-way recognition of learning as shaping both the expert and the novice. This concept aligns with the ideas of Vygotsky and socio-cultural learning in general. By applying a theoretical model to the context of police it is proposed that the reverse learning processes, that is, how the senior officer learns from the recruit, should become more explicit. The actions and behaviours that are formed through interactions with senior officers should continue to shape the behaviour of the recruits beyond the probation period, and the reverse should also hold true. Further to this the learning that occurs between the buddy and the recruit should also impact upon their future learning within the policing context. The social reality of learning, can be argued, is still evident even though the immediate relationship is not present. As Daniels (2001) states:

... that what could appear to be individual problem solving may still be thought of as a collaborative activity given that the 'voice' of the 'other' may still serve to guide individual actions. (p.70)

Further to viewing the impact upon the 'new' police officer the extension of viewing learning as a two-way interaction also leads to questioning how learning within the officer changes as they start to take on a leading role within the station including the role of 'buddy' to

future generations of police. This is the clear limitation of focusing purely upon the probationary period, a limitation evident in previous studies.

Conclusion

The above discussion of the literature argues that a theory of social learning and communities of practice provide a useful analytical tool for exploring the learning and development of individuals in the socio-political environment of policing. In particular communities of practice accept the position of power in the forming of identity within the community and challenge a researcher to consider the cultural milieu in developing an understanding of the learning and meaning making that occurs. Wenger's (1998) characteristics of a community of practice provide a framework from which an investigation of a community can develop.

The literature also explored, in a very limited capacity, the experience of the recruit to police within their development at the Police College and in the field as probationary constables. The work of Chan et al. (2003) highlights the identity shift that occurs in the police recruit, particularly as they move from the police academy to the field. However, the literature has not considered whether the identity that is adopted during this phase exists with the officer as they become a confirmed constable and develop through their early-career, shifting their position within the organization and community of practice.

Further to this the literature, as highlighted by Chan (1996; 1997) and Chan et al. (2003) often makes an assumption of the negative nature of police culture and views this as the antitheses of professionalism. Police culture is often viewed as a source of corruption and poor work performance. To fully understand the development of a professional police officer it is important to further explore this culture, but more importantly apply a theory of communities of practice to develop an understanding of the learning process to more fully appreciate the interrelatedness of culture and learning. By achieving this understanding it should be possible to shape the learning of early-career police to enhance their professional capacities and better design learning opportunities for early-career police.

It is proposed therefore to undertake a study of early-career police that begins at the start of the probationary year, but extends beyond this time to capture at least the first three years of service. During this period the officer will take on leadership roles, including the role of FTO or Buddy, and will move from a position of a legitimate peripheral participant in the community of practice towards that of full member. This study will aim to answer the question of how recruits learn to become police officers.

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