The importance of a new philosophy to the post modern policing environment

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Abstract

Purpose – To provide a concept for a different policing organizational model, founded upon democratic policing principles and a victim-centered philosophy, which may be more useful for a postmodernist society.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents an alternative model of policing; based upon a literature review of authoritative material concerning the postmodernist environment, the historical background of policing, police organizational research, and the philosophy of victim-centered policing.

Findings – The paper presents a literature review, which identifies that the bureaucratic model of policing may no longer be functional for policing post-modern society and inconsistent with modern governance principles. A more democratic heteronomous model of policing, where management determines the broad philosophical principles and co-ordination of tasks while the policing practitioner makes localized decisions, may improve organizational effectiveness. A philosophy of victim-centered policing may assist in achieving a policing legitimacy and the development of a new administrative approach. An existing model of this new approach may be found in the community beat officer, which is currently operating in many jurisdictions.

Practical implications – The implementation of the principles espoused in this paper may improve the policing legitimacy in heavily fragmentated societies, reduce deviant behavior by police officers while increasing job satisfaction, support restorative justice issues for victims, and assist the maintenance of public order.

Originality/value – The paper may be of value of policy-makers, police administrators, police union officials, anti-corruption units, and criminal justice academics/practitioners.

Keywords Postmodernism, Policing, Philosophy, Bureaucracy

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Introduction

The twenty-first century presents some significant challenges for the administration of policing that could not been foreseen by the founding fathers of the modern police force in the nineteenth century. The technological advances in communication has created a global village of disparate groups that have potential points of cultural conflict which has superseded the potentiality of the class conflict of the early nineteenth century.

The postmodern society is really a construct of many societies. This multidimensional phenomenon exists within a given geographical area and yet transcends that containment by the rapid transit capability and communications of the postmodern world. Governance now has been defined by Dunsire (1993, pp. 26-7) as “a process of co-directing in a network of many separate actors with different and opposing interests and more or less independent positions”. The Commission on Global Governance (1995, p. 2) supported this position in defining governance as “ the sum of
the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs”.

The political and sociological paradigm has laid the ground rules for organizational internal and external practices. Hames, as paraphrased by Clark and Clegg (1998, p. 21) demonstrated the organizational reflection of the broader political and sociological paradigm: “Hames stresses the emergence of the information organization centered upon ‘appreciative systems’ which are open adaptive, premised on learning, co-operation and flexibility, on networks of individuals rather either individuals alone or structures alone”. The external networking of organizations has pushed back the boundaries of the state by ongoing interactions for mutual self-interest between public, private, and voluntary sectors (Rhodes, 1995). The authoritarian centralized structures within society are increasingly dismantled and replaced by co-operative flexible frameworks based upon mutual interests.

An expression of values within an organization may now be required for the construction of co-operative work groups and for the creation of external co-operative networks. This expression of values could be undertaken by the development of a philosophy that symbolizes the organization to both external and internal stakeholders. The symbolism of the philosophy becomes the underpinning of the development of a co-operative network.

Policing has to meet, internally and externally, the challenges of a new environment that is characterized by heterogeneity and the discontinuity of the grand narrative. Postmodernism has defining characteristics of diversity and equality of value of every viewpoint. Previously accepted broad philosophical positions are largely deconstructed (Stevenson and Haberman, 1998). Society is now diverse, pragmatic, and questioning of authoritative stances. There is a dichotomy now, where local pragmatism drives the community agenda, while global events can create contemporaneous local issues because of global communications.

Policing is now required to be both globally and locally orientated. It is also required to be multidimensional in terms of function and structure to address the variants across a given jurisdiction. This position was summarized by Reiner (1992, p. 780) in the following way:

In short, policing now reflects the processes of pluralism, disaggregation and fragmentation which have been seen as the hallmark of the postmodern.

The question now needs to be asked whether the “grand narrative” of the bureaucratic policing model constructed in the early nineteenth century, with the adaptations, is able to cope with the postmodern community or, whether, it should be deconstructed. The bureaucracy, with its rigidity of conformity to rules and regulations, is now beleaguered under a multitude of situations that may cause the operational component to challenge organizational compliance. Angel (1971, p. 189) outlines the difficulties with a centralized bureaucratic model in the following terms:

Their concern for efficiency and economy has caused police administrators to develop amania to side effects that accompany increased centralization of police departments. For example, consider the side effects from attempting to develop the one “best” procedure for enforcing an abandoned vehicle law in a large jurisdiction with an economic heterogenous population. Assume that those that those who have the greatest economic advantage and the most political influence feel a need to eliminate inoperable vehicles from the city. Since they
are politically powerful they have no difficulty impressing upon equally middle-class police management the importance of enforcing this law. According to classic theory a uniform policy is developed and officers are instructed to enforce the law in a non-discriminatory fashion (that is, they cannot make exceptions to the enforcement policy) and they carry out the policy in a highly impersonal manner.

Although not blatantly apparent, this kind of enforcement is highly discriminatory. First, the lower-income citizens are generally the only people who have inoperable vehicles . . .; second, lower-income people cannot afford to maintain their cars in as good a state of repair . . .; third, lower-income people need the parts from their inoperable vehicles to repair the ones they are driving.

The example provided by Angel illustrates the difficulty in developing a prescriptive approach to an issue by a centralized bureaucratic structure. The 34 years that have passed, since Angel provided the illustration, have exacerbated rather than reduced the complexity for policing.

The policing administrator is confronted with an expanding base of expectations and operations that may create divisions between management and operations because of an over reliance on bureaucratic regulation that is beyond the operational wing’s information and implementation capability. The credibility of the management may be critically weakened, affecting morale and the ethical base of the organization.

The postmodern period will challenge traditional policing to change its bureaucratic model to a philosophically driven operational base, rather than a prescriptively driven one, more representative of a past more simplistic period, or face the alternative of “spinning off” functions to single issue organizations in a downsizing program. Reiner (1992, p. 780) posed the proposition in the early 1990s that the British Police may have to “spin off” functions to single issue organizations:

Hitherto, the British police have been unique in combining within a single omnibus organization the disparate functions of patrol, public order, serious criminal investigation, political policing and regulating corporate crime. In most other countries, a variety of specialist organizations cope with these separately. It would seem, indeed, that they call for very different skills and tactics of mobilisation. It is most unlikely that the British police will survive the pressures towards an organisational division of policing labour in the last decade of the millennium.

Whilst the former may have issues and difficulties, the co-ordination of the latter for a whole of government approach to community safety would bring more “working parts” into the policy machine, making the risk of malfunction greater, and compliance perhaps more unlikely. The differing organizational cultures, management structures, and privacy related issues, coupled with jurisdictional defensive measures, might create a “silo corporate mentality” that is counter-productive to the interagency cooperation and a whole of government response.

A single omnibus corporate arrangement, which consists of different business units sharing the same underlying philosophy, may have more worth than splintering the organization. A common professional and organizational philosophy could harmonize operations although the business units are operating within a different reality. The professional philosophy may reduce the need for a highly directive bureaucracy of the Weberian typology. The solution may involve the reform of the bureaucracy by the creation of a professional and organizational philosophical base rather than “splitting the tree into different logs”.
A philosophical base, that performs similarly to how a “Hippocratic Oath” does for the medical profession, requires the defining of a client base for the profession and the organization. The difficulty has been in policing to define that client base, particularly now in the present community structure. The medical profession has designed its community around those persons who are ill or are likely to become ill. By doing so, it may be argued that it has achieved a legitimacy within public life, defined its organizational boundaries, and encultured its professional membership. The objective of the organization, the medical profession, and allied professionals is quite clear. The philosophy of medicine binds them together by a common cultural value, i.e. the treatment and prevention of illness.

Policing has the potentiality to achieve organizational and professional homogeneity by the creation of a “Hippocratic Oath” around the victim. The philosophy of policing could be reconfigured to achieve a value-laden organization in a similar model to that of health organizations by the adoption of a victim-centered policing model. This overarching philosophy has the potential to place disparate units of policing into more a co-operative structure than a hierarchical bureaucratic model.

There is also a significant danger in the new era of terrorism that the police will retire to a more complete military model, which is incompatible with its long-term professional objectives, unless the bureaucratic model is underpinned by a strong underpinning philosophy.

The background
The modern police service was designed on a paramilitary model. It required unquestioning obedience to directives handed down in a strong hierarchical system. Reiner (2000, p. 51) viewed the command structure at the inception of the modern police service in the following way:

A chain of command was constructed on quasi-military lines, and at first the policy was to appoint former non-commissioned military officers to the higher ranks, because of their experience as disciplinarians. This later changed in favour of internal promotion from the ranks (Wall, 1998). But the promotion system itself became an instrument of bureaucratic control. Only those who obeyed order “readily and punctually” could aspire to be promoted, for “he who has been accustomed to submit to discipline will be considered best qualified to command”.

The rigidity of the policing model was, at the time, a stark contrast with the pre-existing system of Nightwatchmen and Parish constables who were not in the least bureaucratic and were more likely to rely upon informal solutions than resort to the formal system of justice. King (1984, pp. 57-8) saw this informality as a form of arbitration for aggrieved community members: “a multiple-use right within which various groups in the eighteenth-century society conflicted with, and co-operated with and gained concessions from each other”.

There is considerable distance between orthodox and radical viewpoints on the formation of the police and its bureaucracy. Whilst the orthodox viewpoint was that the formation of the modern police force was a response to the civil disorder and crime caused by the industrial era (Lee, 1901; Midwinter, 1968; Reiner, 2000), the radical perception was entirely different. Hirst (1975, p. 225) has summarized the radical point of view as:
The existence of the modern police force owes little to the exigencies of combating professional crime and was developed primarily as an instrument of political control and labour discipline.

The radical viewpoint denounces the modern police bureaucracy as an instrument of capitalism for suppression of alternative political thought, rather than a community service organization. A structure designed for this purpose, of necessity, needs to include the suppression of any philosophy that may align policing with a community service orientation which would decrease its loyalty to political conservatism.

The radicals’ perception of the modern police service has not been without some credibility. O’Byrne (2001, p. 24) in reviewing the 1980s policing in the United kingdom found:

In the 1980s the perception grew that the police were no longer impartial but actively supported the political stance being taken by the Conservative Party.

This position was not dissimilar from the findings of the Fitzgerald Royal Commission in Queensland, Australia in 1989. It was found by the inquiry that the then Queensland Police Service was closely aligned with conservative political forces and had actively suppressed dissent during the period of conservative government (Fitzgerald, 1989). This finding was replicated internationally in other common law jurisdictions where police, generally, were perceived as aligned with conservatism (Waddington, 1999).

Another view has expressed that policing aligns itself with the dominant political force (Brewer, 1991). This, again, has some credibility when it is examined against the ascendancy of a social movement in the community and its impact on the provision of policing services. The Gay community in Australia achieved a policing response to violence against its constituency when it gained political momentum. Tomsen (1996, p. 87) argued:

It seems likely that the increased concern with this violence is a result of the efforts of activists themselves. Community research, protest rallies and other publicity, have provided the catalyst for making homophobic violence into a public issue. This change has often reflected the growing political strength and organisation of this minority group.

The organization that is conditioned to obey can reasonably be expected to respond to a dominant political force. The absence of any philosophical position in policing that transcends political ideologies, may create loyalties to a dominant political value by default. Weber (1947) argued that organizations seek legitimacy, as well as power, and could be reasonably expected to attempt to co-opt the authority of the dominant political value. Extensive research has found that policing is dominated by authoritarian conservative attitudes that are consistent with the dominance of conservative political forces (Waddington, 1999; Fielding and Fielding, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1989).

The policing organization has arguably been designed to encourage obedience to the dominant political force and this has been reinforced by rigid systems of rules demanding compliance. Smith and Gray (1983, p. 169) framed the situation as:

It is important to recognize that these rules are almost purely negative in their effect; that is, police officers may be disciplined, prosecuted or otherwise get into difficulties if they are seen to break the rules, but they will not necessarily be praised, enjoy their work or achieve their career objectives if they keep to them.
The rigid compliance systems do not encourage the development of original thought and the exercise of judgment required for professionalism. It may encourage a negative viewpoint of the organizational leadership and create a prevailing perception that the rules are merely instruments to punish, rather than the expression of a professional and organizational doctrine that is philosophically based and legitimized.

The policing bureaucracy may now be placed in a dilemma because the complexity of the postmodern society. The rules required for compliance in this environment are so numerous that the policing practitioner cannot absorb them. The rules can only be utilized retrospectively to analyze what should have occurred, rather than a proactive use for a professional response to an incident. The information overload in the operational setting has the capacity to create disregard for formal authority and may undermine the very command system of the bureaucracy. Manning and Van Maanen (1977, p. 79) summarized this position:

The view (among officers) is that there are so many regulations, covering so many aspects of the job, that routine work will intrinsically require violation of one or more the rules listed in the 10,000 paragraph General Orders.

The negativity of the work environment encourages mediocrity and reduces the ability to adapt to different situational predicaments that are increasingly more common in the new millennium. Bittner identified that the officer, with a minimalist performance level, did not suffer in a police career as long as the officer was rule compliant. It logically follows, that by limiting the exposure to an uncertain field environment, the officer is more likely to be rule compliant. The difficulty may arise because this officer could conceivably move up the promotional ladder ahead of those, perhaps, more active in field operations where detection for rule noncompliance may be more likely.

The prevalence of regulatory supervision, that is, control that merely measures performance against formulated norms of conduct, can only produce judgement that the assessed person did nothing wrong. Insofar as this is the case, an incompetent, ineffective, and injudicious officer could remain in good standing in his department provided it cannot be shown by any accepted method of proof that he has violated some expressly formulated norm of conduct. This comes very close to saying that an officer that shows up for work, does what he is told to do and no more, and stays out of trouble, meets the criterion of adequacy demanded of him (Bittner, 1983, p. 5).

The impossibility of compliance creates an environment that rule breaking becomes a cultural trait and a realistic expectation in the field for efficiency and effectiveness. This is a difficulty for the creation of an open and accountable policing culture. The aspect of accountability and transparency may become an illusion that is protected by a code of silence reinforced by peer loyalty. Waddington (1999, p. 130) has provided a simple illustration of how this may work in actuality:

To prevent being caught engaging in such minor peccadilloes, colleagues who discover to which police station a senior officer is en route will be expected to telephone the destination and forewarn them. Hence, on arrival at the selected station, the senior officer finds officers all properly dressed and absorbed in their duties.

A highly centralized hierarchical policing organization that is punishment orientated may create a siege mentality where the management and the community are viewed as “the enemy”. There can little expectation that the community policing model adopted
by modern policing agencies will receive any real acceptance by the field practitioner in this environment.

The postmodernist environment, with its disparate groupings and political realities, has the potentiality for severely punishing the police administrator that maintains a rigid adherence to philosophically bankrupt highly directive rules and regulations, which are systematically resisted by a methodology of passive dissent by the practitioners.

Another way
The traditional Weberian rational legal model of bureaucracy may be increasingly ineffective for current demands of policing. The internal passive dissent is creating barriers between the management and policing practitioners in the organization and is not assisting the ability to connect with the disparate communities in an increasing volatile and fluid world. The policing organization has to either “spinoff” responsibilities to single issue entities or to create a flexible responsive structure to meet the needs of the community.

Policing will require more self-direction by the policing practitioners than the current rigidly bureaucratic model allows. The concept of self-direction is more likely to meet the needs of the community and the reduction of police “flashpoints”. Spenner (1988, p. 75) identified that self-direction reduced authoritarian responses and made the worker more self confident and responsive to standards of morality:

Men in self-directed jobs become less authoritarian, less self-deprecatory, less fatalistic, and less conformist in their ideas while becoming more self confident and more responsible to standards of morality.

Self-direction can only occur when bureaucracy is reduced and the organizational culture becomes internalized by the individual. The police practitioner is not different from his fellow human beings in that there is a requirement for meaning to be attributed to the work being undertaken. Peters and Waterman (1982) argued that the need for meaning within the work environment was so strong that most people would give great latitude to the organizations that supplied it.

There is substantial evidence that the policing practitioner is encultured into the organization mostly by myths generated by his fellow practitioners. These myths, often expressed in informal settings and contrary to the official viewpoint, are incredibility strong and enduring (Waddington, 1999; Reiner, 2000). The changing of any negative culture that has permeated the police service requires in Reiner (2000, p. 106) terms, “a reshaping of the basic character of the police role as a result of wider social transformation”. The argument, that the value system of the police practitioner is often at odds with the stated organizational values, has a certain credibility when viewed against the body of evidence. It may be a counterculture created to provide a reality of meaning to the operational practitioner, that the organization has failed to deliver.

A more democratized heteronomous organization as described by Scott (1992, p. 254) may be a model that could be adapted for policing.

The structure of heteronomous professional organizations is in many respects similar to the arrangements already described in which organizations handle complex and uncertain tasks by delegation. The work of professionals takes place within a structure of general rules and
hierarchical supervision, but individual performers are given considerable discretion over task decisions, particularly those concerning means or techniques. Thus, individual teachers make choices regarding instructional techniques, and individual engineers make decisions concerning design or construction strategies.

The democratized model of organization is heavily defined by independence of decision-making, whilst structural forms are utilized for coordinating the work between professional business units in a team concept similar to a project team formed for complex tasks (Scott, supra). Angel (1971, p. 196) argued that a democratized model required a freedom from rules that allowed:

- the local teams to adopt goals and policies consistent with the needs and desires of the people in their community; and
- the teams to develop their own methods for handling the problems within their geographic area.

Angel (1971, p. 199) also argues that the administrator takes a coordinating role, similar to a hospital administrator, with the following duties:

- represent the organization on occasions when a spokesman for the entire organization is needed;
- oversee the continual updating of the organizational philosophies and long-range objectives;
- coordinate the activities of the various segments of the organization and settle conflicts and duplications of effort; and
- provide the employees and teams with maximum, yet equal, support within organization resources.

There is some evidence in the policing environment that this would produce considerable results. Community constables or beat officers are usually small autonomous units working within the community that interact with other policing units on a needs basis to achieve a force multiplying effect. Researchers have been consistently viewed beat policing concept as being a successful model (Skogan and Wycoff, 1986; Mahoney, 1981). The Crime and Misconduct Commission defined beat policing as:

... a community policing strategy designed to make an individual police officer responsible for the community’s policing needs in a defined geographical area (the beat). Beat officers are encouraged to take “ownership” of their area and employ proactive strategies to address the underlying causes of crime and community problems within their beat (Mazerolle et al., 2003, p. 11).

The autonomy of the unit illustrates an example of the professional model. The key to its professionalism is the practitioner and the officer’s value system (Skogan and Wycoff, 1986). The ethical and organizational cultural base of the practitioner dictates the terms of success.

The success of the policing organization may depend upon the construction of the organization into cooperative teams of autonomous working units, where the individual is less constrained by the prescriptive dictates of a central hierarchical bureaucracy. This model may also allow for non-policing professionals in allied work areas, such as criminologists and psychologists, to engage in joint venture
arrangements more easily. The provision of a limited number of principle-laden guidelines to support the co-ordination of work units, that is consistent with the heteronomous professional organization as defined by Scott (supra), may yield more results than the current model.

The requirement of a victim-centered philosophy
The professional organization has, as a central feature, a common philosophy of service. Policing has borne criticism because of its perceived political alignment with dominant political forces in the community. There is an argument that this alignment has its origins in the need for a value laden working environment and this may be especially so for those placed in high risk enterprises such as policing.

There has to be a “totem”, to which the individual is connected, for the underpinning justification of a work related action. The Hippocratic oath and medical ethics provides a “totem” for the medical practitioner and the health organization. The well being of the patient is the ready reference point for all decisions in that public service area.

The philosophy of victim-centered policing may provide a similar effect for the policing practitioner and the policing organization. A victim-centered policing philosophy has been defined as:

... that victimisation be perceived in terms of primary and secondary victimisation. Primary victimisation refers to precursory acts to criminal victimisation and criminal victimisation itself, whereas secondary victimisation refers to victimisation processes caused by self-harm, technology, and natural phenomena.

With this perception, policing can thus be defined as the undertaking of lawful activities, including law enforcement and community-based practices, which prevent primary or secondary victimisation, and which reduce the effects of victimisation upon the community (Clark, 2003, p. 319).

This philosophy identifies the community of interest and the professional focus of policing for the practitioner in a similar way that the Hippocratic oath does in medicine. An ethical base constructed around this philosophy, combined with the restructured professional organizational model, may provide an answer to policing the uncertainty of the postmodern world. The philosophy provides a basis for reconciling the informal resolution of matters with the more formal that is difficult “legally” in a Weberian bureaucracy. Police practitioners can refer to the philosophical principles in the informal resolution bringing it into the mainstream of decision making.

The policing administrator is more reliant on the ethical base constructed from the philosophy for controlling the organization. The philosophy would provide meaning to the policing operational environment and remove the potentiality for the politicization of policing with a dominant political philosophy of the times. The internalization of this value system would provide the basis for constructive myth development for the informal indoctrination of the practitioner that occurs in policing organizations. Philosophical development and direction replaces the repressive measures that may be operative within the current bureaucratic policing model.

Conclusions
Policing is currently dependent upon highly centralized bureaucracies that are consistent with the Weberian legal rational bureaucratic model. The business units and
employees are tightly constrained by operating procedures dictated by a centralized command and control system. It may be considered largely inflexible and incapable for the provision of adequate services to the postmodern community that is fragmented and multidimensional in all aspects.

There is evidence to suggest that policing practitioner is experiencing an informational overload in policy and procedures to cope with this new environment and is operating on informally designed practices that has its origins in myths generated by the practitioners themselves. The formal bureaucratic rules are applied retrospectively to punish transgressors if a practice failure is discovered. The legitimacy of the police management is consistently undermined by deceptive measures designed to present an illusion of compliance. The bureaucratic response to a chance discovery is characterized by punishment and even more rules and regulations.

There may be two options open to government to deal with this phenomenon. The first is the splitting of the police organization into discrete bureaucracies that may be more able to be managed in the current model. The other is to reconstruct the existing model to provide for a principle led organization constructed around co-operation and founded upon a philosophical base.

The bureaucratic model may be providing a siege mentality where the police practitioner perceives that the organization and the public have a duality of purpose to undermine the ability to do the task at hand. The system may not necessarily delineate the higher performer from the rule compliant limited practitioner, undermining morale in the operational area.

There is a possible solution to this predicament in the construction of a model that is founded upon democracy and philosophy in a similar model to that operative in the health industry. This model values autonomy of practice in a co-operative management structure that allows joint ventures to be founded upon a needs basis with co-professionals.

The model may have the possibility to be constructed around a victim-centered policing philosophy, that has a broad credibility for the policing professional and the organization. A strong ethical base could be constructed around a philosophical position; again, by adopting practices that are operative in other professions to ensure issues of accountability and public service are met. This may be an important step in depoliticising the perception of the police.

The ability to deconstruct the current bureaucratic model may be problematic with the potential for the policing organization to move to a more militaristic stance with the advent of counter terrorist measures that have political currency.

Disclaimer
The views expressed in this paper are the views of the author and not necessarily the views of any agency.

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Further reading


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