A Grounded Action Study on the Role of the Police[1]

MARTINA EBERHARTER
Institute of Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Social Research, Vienna

The article gives an overview to the matter of how do policemen and policewomen learn their work and their role? Besides pointing out the central results of the one-year-study I want to draw attention to my experiences with the method of the grounded theory. In this project I tried to answer following questions: How do ongoing policemen and policewomen see their work? What kind of values and norms do they learn in their education and which ones are reproduced in their daily work. Furthermore I was interested to find out how certain values and norms influence the action and work of policemen and policewomen.

This article provides a summary of selected results of the 1-year study entitled *The Police—Caught between the Stereotypes of 'Rambo' and 'Columbo.'* The study discusses how police trainees learn about their role as members of the police force as well as the institutional attitudes, values and norms taught during the course of training. In society, the police force represents state authority, which assumes regulatory functions and punishes deviations from the norm. Both society and the police decide in a negotiating process which violations should be punished and which ones should not. Furthermore, the police force, in its executive function, decides in its everyday work which violations will be sanctioned and to what extent.

This institution stands somewhere between right and wrong, as it needs to continually reflect upon its actions due to its power to define.

My research questions—based on the method of the Grounded Theory—focused on how police officers learn their role in performing their work.[2] How do police officers perceive and experience their profession? What norms and values do they learn during training and through interaction on the job, and what effect do these have on the professional conduct of police officers?

METHODS

Based on the principles of Grounded Theory, my research focused on self-reflection, the interaction between data collection and data analysis as well as the continuity of daily and scientific thought (Strauss, 1998, p. 51).

In the course of the 1-year study I conducted interviews with instructors and trainees of a police training centre in Austria and with police officers. There was always an obvious

---

1 In Austria in 2004 the security forces consisted of Police and *Gendarmerie* (in rural areas) taken as one group, which is why I use the terms executive or police forces. Training had already been unified for some time and I conducted interviews with both Police and *Gendarmerie* officers.
2 Glaser and Strauss do not aim at a comprehensive description of topical areas, but instead focus on discovering general associations.

thread running through the interviews, to which I made small modifications depending on the various groups. Selecting a sample on the basis of grounded theory, theoretical sampling (Strauss, 1998, p. 49), which assumes that the collection of data will be guided by a developing theory, I conducted twelve qualitative interviews with people holding various posts within the organisation. In the course of my research, I interviewed six women and six men between the ages of 18 and 60 and acted as an observer both in the training centre and on the street.

From the start, I combined gathering data through observation, analysing data by posing questions and developing a theory by working out codes and categories. Data was analyzed based on the process of coding. Coding consists of assigning key words to passages of text. Codes are usually closely related to data, whereas categories represent general terms. Developing and associating codes leads to the development of categories and the corresponding theories (Berg & Milchweis, 2007, p. 191).

REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGICAL PROCESS

In the following, I would like to illustrate the reciprocity of data collection and data analysis as well as the development of theories according to the principles of Grounded Theory with respect to the research process. At the start of my research I began to realize, through a process of self-observation and reflection that a world which was previously foreign to me began to seem a little more familiar through repeated encounters. The encounters and interactions between me and my subjects became more natural and normed over time, as the process become more familiar and practiced. For example, I always called on the same contact person whenever I went to a particular training centre. The person referred me to other interview partners and facilities where I could conduct the interviews. The grounds of these training centres are closed. Civilians can only enter through crossing gates at which a guard is posted. Persons outside the organisation first register with this guard in order to obtain permission to enter. After recurring visits, this procedure in time became a 'matter of course.' Although this rule seemed strict at first, the regularity of contact changed my perception and my behaviour. The norm was also relaxed slightly: Sometimes it was enough to wave or nod my head in the direction of the guard, and sometimes this was not enough for the guard, who then waved me inside to register properly. I observed the routine which developed in regular contact through repeated interaction.

Daily break-ups and conflicts prove how fragile routine interpersonal communication and interactions are. Examining this is a crucial aspect of sociological research, as words spoken and gestures made provide data which is then recorded and interpreted.

In qualitative sociological research, the communication between examiner and examinee constitutes a major component of the research process (Küchler, 1983, as cited in Lamnek, 1993, p. 10).

The examiner's approach to a topic, the course of interaction with the examinee and the resulting atmosphere, as well as the questions selected and the method of data collection used all affect the research questions and the resulting data. All are part of the research process.

Schütz (1978, p. 118, as cited in Lamnek, 1993, p. 23) assumes that sociological research is basically communicative. Examinees are members of society who are capable of orientation, interpretation and developing theories, which not only interpret but also influence circumstances. Thus, my remarks on role perception within the executive force provide a section of the examinees, taking into consideration that the data are controlled, methodically tested and testable constructions of the examiner. Alfred Schütz (as cited in Hitzler & Honer, 1997, p. 8) refers to these as "second degree" constructions, constructions of the examiners, an analytical reconstruction of a "first order" construction, the construction of the examinees.

The initial impressions and observations led to interesting question in my research topic, namely, when does the executive force need to raise a boundary between itself and the outside world or create a protected space for itself? The portrayal of the professional construct of the executive forces shows selected elements of the data collected.

SELECTED RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Role Definition and Requirements of the Police

The professional role of the police is the result of a host of behavioural requirements, which in turn either result from interaction within the authority or are brought to the attention of police officers by the civilian population. Interaction between the population and the executive forces are characterized by a reciprocal exchange of interests. The population expects the executive force to provide a certain degree of security and the police expects the population to adhere to certain rules and laws, all of which results in police activity.

In spite of differing views on how this role is to be carried out and role relationships defined, there is a general agreement in society on how to act in certain situations. This agreement is continually asserted during socialization. According to Strauss (1998) actions result from the interpretations made by the actors involved. During training, police trainees learn to more or less satisfy the behavioural requirements directed towards them. The civil population's expectations with respect to the police as well as the expectations within the executive forced are undergoing a process of change—although common duties and requirements still exist.

The existence of a common kind of 'order' and values and actions resulting from this within the executive forces can be explained by the definition of social order according to Strauss (2007, p. 73). In his view, social order is not a given, but instead must be re-established and maintained on a daily basis. Changes in the social order are characterized by a process of negotiation (2007, p. 73).

The duties of the police consist of: 'adequate action' in situations of conflict, i. e. with strictness, assertion of authority and disciplined conduct, assuming functions of control and punishment if norms are not observed as well as the creation of order and security in the state. One aim of training is to teach an aspiring officer to consciously perceive, detect, check and punish selected violations occurring in societal interactions.

Maintaining Social Order within the Police Force

How does the police force maintain its social order?

1) Ongoing policemen and policewomen learn their role through interaction in their trainings with colleagues and trainers. Training helps trainees to grow into their role. Officers develop a feeling of belonging to the community within their institution, so that they come to see themselves as a collective and identify with the organisation. One part of training adherence to an acceptance of existing hierarchies. As a young police trainee points out: "In the interaction with trainer and trainee colleagues you learn things which you don't find in the curriculum. You get habituate to these models of behaviour. It is like learning to drive a car" (4th Interview, 2003-05-13).

2) To identify with their profession, trainees wear a uniform and other executive symbols and learn conduct common within the executive forces. Military procedure teaches patterns of conduct which will make the officer appear more stern and assertive in future interactions. They must adjust to a tight leadership style, which acts as an example of strictness and control. Superior officers within the police force are expected to exhibit a strict leadership style, in order to keep various personalities together as a group, among other things. The levels of hierarchy between trainees and trainers decrease during the course of training. Progressing into a higher level increases competition on the same levels. Maintaining a hierarchical structure helps the executive forces to form a unit or collective group.

3) The training centre helps to clarify and stabilize the uncertain view the trainees may have of their future profession and moreover helps the trainees to identify with the organisation as well as legitimize its activities. It reinforces training on the proper way to act during conflicts. Furthermore, it creates a feeling of community, which is still important to the executive forces, although somewhat less than it used to be.

Coser (1999, p. 14) characterises institutions, which tend a high commitment and passion by their members, as "greedy institutions."

The training centre, which is difficult for civilians to enter, is used to teach conduct and norms and reinforce the positions of the police officers, who will then represent these in social interactions 'outside.' The seclusion of the training centre makes rules and rituals more convincing and the aspiring officers are motivated to assume their role, which is easier to understand in a closed environment.

4) Police trainees learn their profession by passing their curriculum. They attend courses like law, communication and conflict management, police interrogation, criminology, police investigation, first aid, weapon use and police procedures.

Also ethic in the profession and human rights are scheduled in the curriculum but still with few hours. For example during their education the trainees attend 68 hours weapon usage and in contrast they have 24 hours human rights (Curriculum Police Training, 2003).

Classification of Profession and Existing Values

Cooperation with professional groups in other fields, such as medicine and social work, can result in conflicts when establishing areas of competence. The police assume a position somewhere between the courts, authorities, social institutions and clients. Police officers themselves describe this as a difficult position and themselves as "defenders of the law" and "helpers of society."

Police officers act differently when interacting with people from different segments of society, modifying their own conduct according to the various ways of speaking[3] and modes of expression within the populace.

According to one executive official, training tends to result in three different types: police officer, the counsellor, the social worker and the security engineer[4]. This typology reflects values such as order and security, collegiality and trust, existing in the executive forces and learned during training. The security engineers maintain order and security, requiring values such as collegiality and trust in order to implement assignments, checks and punishments. Confidence is reinforced in order to aid self-preservation and strengthen the organisation (Coleman, 1990, p. 108, as cited in Junge, 1998, p. 26). Objectivity, in the sense of testing one's own opinion as well as discarding prejudices and remaining calm when carrying out official assignments are also seen as important aspects of police activity.

The executive forces feel obligated to provide help when people have reached their limits. Help is offered only within the limits of pre-defined rules of conduct. This is an example of the executive forces exercising their power to define, more or less deciding who is acting according to the norm and who should be helped. Within certain limits, the executive forces have the power to decide, out of a variety of deviations from the norm, which ones should be sanctioned, which are more severe and which less severe. When running checks, they can decide who is deviating from the norm and who is not.

Aside from this power to define, the executive forces can also make use of the second instrument I mentioned, their exclusive power. Applying this exclusive power requires persons within the institution who are prepared to do so. To Behr (2000, p. 109), this represents a kind of warrior masculinity. Values such as strictness, discipline, assertiveness and physical fitness are considered important in dealing with situations of conflict, which is seen as difficult work. The first category, classified by the executive forces as friend and helper, is the category that executive officials like to identify with when it comes to their profession. It acts as a counter-balance to the category of the warrior, which shows that the executive is able to perform unpleasant tasks, and needs people to do this. The values mentioned are deemed masculine and imply a hegemonic model of masculinity. In addition to the demonstration of state authority, the bureaucratic implementation of exclusive power, police activity also aims to represent masculinity. The state itself is seen as a male figure, a patriarchal view.

---

[3] Differences in ways of speaking can also be found between native speakers of the same language. People from different walks of life learn different speech codes which they use in daily interaction. Both Bernstein and Bourdieu have studied various speech codes and the associated hierarchies and structures within a society.

[4] Strauss labels terms as „in vivo codes," when these terms are created by the interview partners.

CONCLUSION

The Study shows that in the representation of state structures, in the sense of repeated interactions and processes, it is possible to explain with Grounded Theory why these structures persist and describe the functions they fulfil. Social order is maintained within the police by training and the values taught during training, seclusion during training and the division into 'inside and outside.' The subjects taught during training impart a code of conduct to police trainees which is deemed necessary in their profession. The police have at their disposal two instruments to carry out their tasks, the power to define and exclusive power. The limits to these instruments are set by the police officers themselves in their daily actions. In spite of changes within the organisation and the increasing number of women in the executive forces, traditionally male values such as discipline, toughness, physical fitness or comradeship are passed on. As a superior officer points out: "When young people start the police training, they often have the imagination of their profession like they see on TV, like '*Rambo*' or '*Columbo*'" (1st FN, 2003).

But also the institution helps to keep this image to a certain level in the training and daily work interaction.

References

Berg, C., & Milchweis, M. (2007). Im Dialog mit den Daten – das eigene Erzählen der Geschichte finden, über die Kodierverfahren der GT Methodologie. In G. Mey, K. Mruck (Eds.), *Grounded Theory Reader* (182-210)*.* Köln: Center for Historical Social Research.

Behr, R. (2000). *Cop Culture – Der Alltag des Gewaltmonopols. Männlichkeit, Handlungsmuster und Kultur in der Polizei.* Opladen: Leske+Budrich.

Coleman, J. S. (1990). Foundations of Social Theory. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Coser Laub, R. (1999). *Soziale Rollen und Soziale Strukturen.* (C. Fleck, Ed.). Vienna: Verlag Nausner & Nausner.

Doy-Eberharter, M. (2003). *Die Exekutive im Spannungsfeld zwischen den Stereotypen „Rambo oder Columbo". Das Erlernen der Berufsrolle der Polizei.* University of Graz.

Hitzler, R., & Honer A. (1997). *Sozialwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik.* Opladen: Leske+Budrich.

Junge, K. (1998). Vertrauen und die Grundlagen der Sozialtheorie – Ein Kommentar zu James S. Coleman. In H.P. Müller, M. Schmid, (Eds.) *Norm, Herrschaft und Vertrauen* (26-63). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Lamnek, S. (1993). *Qualitative Sozialforschung, Band 1 Methodologie.* München: Beltz Psychologie Verlags Union.

Strauss, A. L. (1998). *Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung. Datenanalyse und Theoriebildung in der empirischen soziologischen Forschung.* München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

Strauss, A. L. (2007). Interview mit Legewie, Heiner und Schervier-Legewie, Barbara. Forschung ist harte Arbeit, es ist immer ein Stück Leiden damit verbunden.

Deshalb muss es auf der anderen Seite Spaß machen. In G. Mey, & K. Mruck (Eds.), *Grounded Theory Reader* (69-79). Köln: Center for Historical Social Research.

Authors Biography

Martina Eberharter studied Sociology and Educational Science at the University of Graz (2004). Her main interests are political sociology, gender studies and qualitative methods. She is currently working in the area of continuing education and education counsel. Email martina.eberharter@ikus.cc