Commentary on: "A Grounded Action Study on the Role of Police" (Martina Eberharter)

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Eberharter's (2009) article summarises a one-year study titled *The Police—Caught between the stereotypes of 'Rambo' and 'Columbo.'* This research focuses on the process of training that Police in Austria (both those based in cities—the *executive force*—and the rural police) undergo, learning to become members of the police community and adopting "attitudes, values and norms" (p. 80) particular to the institution. Based on the method of Grounded Theory, this research focused on how police officers develop and maintain their position within this institution throughout the process of their work in practice. It questioned how police perceive their profession. Another research question considers what norms and values police learn during training and in practice. This article overall provides an insight into the process of development that police experience. Twelve individuals (six female, six male) who hold various posts within the police were interviewed. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 60. The researcher also carried out observations in a police training centre and "on the street" (p. 81).

Given that one aim of this article was to highlight insights that can be gained through considering the reciprocal nature of the data collection and analysis, detail of the actual methodologies adopted were surprisingly sparse. One found oneself questioning why the researcher opted to conduct 12 interviews and further, what was the reasoning behind interviewing six male and six female members of the police force. It would also have been useful to know exactly what approach had been taken in conducting "qualitative interviews" (p. 81). Were the interviews semi-structured, structured or/and episodic? The reader is left also in want of further details about the participants. What exactly were their posts? It would be useful to learn of the hierarchical positions of the participants, given that this is a focal point of the study. Moreover, omissions were also evident with regards to the data analysis. Did the researcher adopt a thematic or content analysis of the data and how did the author go about doing this? Were all the participants in training or did they discuss the training process in retrospect in the interviews? The process of training has likely changed over time, and so these are important aspects of the sample to take into consideration. Concerns aside regarding the level of detail given of the methodologies adopted, it is apparent that the approach the researcher adopted relinquished illuminating insights into the perceptions and experiences of police as members of an organisation that sets itself apart from all others.

On reflecting on the methodological process of the research, Eberharter is essentially describing a process of transition that the author experienced while conducting the field work and points out that police too undergo a similar process on joining the police force. The physical process of entering the police training centre, which involved interactions with the guard who required to see proof of identification of all individuals wishing to enter the premises, gradually became a practice that felt totally familiar, as oppose to unusual. This reflects the theory of Social Representations which attempts to capture

how people come to make their world meaningful (Moscovici, 1984). Social representations determine how we act and the way we see the world but at the same time are determined by our communications and interactions (Purkhardt, 1993). Though this was not made explicit, it is evident that Eberharter is referring to a level of familiarity that the author increasingly felt within this context that is likely similar to the individuals in training to become police. Eberharter explains that daily conflicts highlight the fragility of interactions between members of the police. Given the importance of interaction to the findings of this study, the article would have benefited from elaborating on interpretations of the data. Examples of such conflicts for instance would have been appropriate.

Eberharter found that initial observations led to the question, "when does the executive force need to raise a boundary between itself and the outside world or create a protected space for itself?" (p. 82). This research question has the potential to elucidate interesting insights into the importance of the *other* for the development of the identities of police within their community. It is worth querying however, Eberharter's reasoning behind questioning *why* such boundaries arise, as opposed to *how* or *when* the executive force raises a boundary between itself and the outside world. Cultural identity develops and takes different forms of expression depending on the cultural 'other' whom one is contrasting oneself with (Abbey, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Gone, Miller and Rappaport (1999) define cultural identity as "a form of conscious, reflexive and evaluative self understanding pertaining to that facet of the self which knowingly commits itself to the shared values and practices of a particular cultural group" (p. 381). It is worth noting that, similarly to this study, other research has focused on how the identities of individuals in organisations such as the military (Agostino, 1998; Hale, 2007), schools (Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Swain, 2006) and fire fighters (Baigent, 2001) develop in relation to *significant others* (Hale, 2008).

It is also interesting to consider Eberharter's evocation of the importance of the dynamics of the relationship between police and civilians' perceptions of each other. The author describes the reciprocal nature of the interaction between civilians and the police, whereby "the population expects the executive force to provide a certain degree of security and the police expects the population to adhere to certain laws, all of which results in police activity" (p. 82). Given this, insights could be gained by focusing on the perceptions they have of each other, for example through interviewing civilians as well as the police. Interviewing civilians could enable the researcher to explore the extent to which civilians have similar perceptions of the police as the researcher.

Eberharter evoked that a crucial aspect of training is learning to behave in a way that is expected of police trainees by senior staff. The discussions here prompt one to question how exactly the training process establishes this? Who are the individuals who manage to succeed in their training? And what qualities are evident among individuals who opt to join the police force in the first place? To an extent, in relation to these concerns, Eberharter goes on to consider how 'social order' is maintained within the police force. Firstly, the training that one undergoes under the instruction of trainers and in conjunction with fellow trainees imparts a comprehension of how they are to behave and thus become members of the police force. Learning to adhere to hierarchies and developing a sense of belonging to the police community are among key aspects of the training process. Hierarchical structures have been touched on in other research such as

that of Baigent (2001), Kilduff and Mehra (1996) and Connell (1987), but particularly in relation to gender.

Playing a part in the development of these hierarchical structures are artefacts such as the uniform and "executive symbols" (p. 83) which one can assume are symbolic objects such as badges and epilates. Further elaboration would have been welcome on Eberharter's mentioning, "maintaining a hierarchical structure helps the executive forces to form a unit or collective group" (p. 83). Explanation is needed around the statement, 'Coser (1999, p. 14) characterises institutions, which tend [to have] a high commitment and passion by their members as "greedy institutions"' (p. 83). One is left completely in want of clarification with regards to what is meant by 'greedy institutions' here. Moreover, it is interesting to learn that a sense of community is important for the executive forces, though less so than it used to be, but one is left wondering why this is the case.

Eberharter touches on the importance of policemen and policewomen visibly representing the police community outside the physical parameters of their training centre. The training centre is "difficult to enter" (p. 83), thus the physical barriers are apparent. Similarities are evident again here with those in military training (for example, Hale, 2007; Hockey, 1986). An important aspect of training is separating trainees from resources that previously had enabled them to maintain their identities as civilians. There was again room for elaboration here with regards to the importance of location and space. Casey (1993) suggested that, "where we are—the place we occupy, however briefly—has everything to do with what and who we are (and finally, *that* we are)" (p. xii). Benson (2001) maintains that, "a primary function of the psychological system which is commonly called 'self' is to locate or position the person for themselves in relation to others" (p. 3). It is therefore useful to understand self as a locative system. In abstract terms, who I am is where I am (Benson, 2001). Harré (1993) considers the self to be a location and not a substance or an attribute. But he also asserts that "it is not having an awareness of an entity at the core of one's being" (p. 4). So in the case of this research it is important to emphasise the utility of acknowledging the eminence of location in the development of the identities of policemen and policewomen.

Eberharter explains also that one participant had identified "three different types" of (presumably) policemen. The four characteristics or roles the author goes on to outline are the "police officer, the counsellor, the social worker and the security engineer" (p. 84). It would be interesting to learn exactly what Eberharter means by "types" here. Is the author identifying characteristics that enable policemen and policewomen to carry out their work but that also separate these individuals from those of other organisations?

The article lastly focuses on power and gender. The author conveys the importance of gaining within the executive police, qualities such as "strictness, discipline, assertiveness and physical fitness" (p. 84) which better enable one to manage conflict situations. These qualities also contribute to the development and maintenance of the masculinities of members of the police force. Moreover, constructions of hegemonic masculinity are especially relevant given the power dynamics evident in Eberharter's findings. This article would however have benefited here from a brief definition of hegemonic masculinity.

In the conclusion, Eberharter returns the reader to the title of the research project, finishing with the quote: "When young people start the police training, they often have the imagination of their profession like they see on TV, like 'Rambo' or 'Columbo'" (p. 85). Perceptions that individuals have of the police force doubtless have telling implications for their experiences of the training process that then ensues. It is regretful that Eberharter did not however touch on any thoughts as to how this might actually impact on such individuals' development as policemen and policewomen.

Overall, this article summarises a study that has focused on an area with great potential for exploring the development of individuals within communities such as the police force. The importance of training for establishing and maintaining qualities essential for the effective functioning of the police force is evident. Also apparent is the utility of considering the relevance of interactions with civilians; the significance of the *other*. The reader is however left in want of elaborations around much of these topics. Very few quotes were drawn from the findings to exemplify and ground Eberharter's interpretations. The analysis could also have perhaps gained from the in-depth nature of the methodologies used by breaking down the training process in more detail, thus further addressing much of the research questions. This article would also have benefited from comparing the perceptions and experiences of policemen and policewomen with that of individuals in other organisations, relating these findings with that of numerous other research in this area (e.g., Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Swain, 2006; Baigent, 2001). This article on the whole, does highlight insights into the perceptions and experiences of police as members of an organisation that sets itself apart from all others and paves the way for further in-depth research in this area.

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