

Rural Officer Habitus and Attitudes Toward Proposed Changes to Law Enforcement

Jason Contessa, MA
Roanoke (Virginia) Police Department
1552 Terrace Rd SW
Roanoke, VA 24015

Jesse S.G. Wozniak, Ph.D.
West Virginia University
307 Knapp Hall
29 Beechurst Ave
Morgantown, WV 26506

Contact author: Jesse S.G. Wozniak: +1 304 293 3074; jesse.wozniak@mail.wvu.edu

Abstract

The field of policing has increasingly come under public scrutiny due to the events surrounding the deaths of citizens at the hands of officers. While this has spurred a call for changes to police training and practices, conspicuously absent from the conversation are the voices of officers themselves. This study addresses this lacuna by examining the attitudes and opinions of rural law enforcement, challenging the notion that the findings of studies concerning urban police can be generalized to rural departments. We argue that opposed to individualistic “rotten apples” theories, rural police behavior is best understood as patterned by the habitus of officers. This study explicates how the field experienced by rural law enforcement interacts with and modifies their response to the hypermasculine training and increasing militarization of American policing to produce an officer habitus distinct from that of their urban counterparts.

Keywords: FTO, habitus, militarization of policing, policing, rural



Introduction

The past several years have seen increased polarization regarding law enforcement in America. On one side, there are those who argue police are not being held accountable for their actions, are too brutal and violent, and act in racially discriminatory ways. On the other side, there are those who claim many members of society fail to accept responsibility for their actions and attempt to blame the police, and that police are heroes who put the lives of others before their own. This polarization has been enflamed by recent cases where citizens have died during police-citizen interactions, drawing national and international attention. Cases such as that of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice have made household names of the victims as they became centerpieces of calls for reform and change.

The focus on these cases produced a slew of suggestions to change policing policies and procedures, such as updating and increasing levels of training, increasing the number of officers of color, having police officers wear body cameras, and demilitarizing the force. Many actors, from public officials to media commentators to community members, have speculated on these issues, but rarely heard in the discussion has been those who would be most directly affected by any changes: officers in the field.

This study aims to address this lacuna by focusing on one of the least studied aspects of American policing, that of the opinions and attitudes of rural law enforcement. This study helps expand the literature on rural law enforcement while challenging the idea that we can generalize the findings of studies conducted on large, urban departments to smaller, rural ones. We argue that as opposed to individualistic “rotten apples” style theories often favored by law enforcement and their supporters (Goldsmith, 2001; Ivković, 2009), it is instead the habitus of the rural officer that best explains their attitudes and opinions toward currently polarizing issues. Building upon the work of Chan (2004), we demonstrate how the field experienced by rural law enforcement interacts with and modifies their response to hypermasculine training and increasing militarization of American policing to produce a distinctly-rural officer habitus with important distinctions from their urban counterparts.

Policing Rural America

In examining the scholarly literature, it is clear studies interested in rural law enforcement are drastically less frequent than studies of their urban counterparts (Barrett, Habersfeld, & Walker, 2009; Kuhns, Maguire, & Cox, 2007). Indeed, one of the most common complaints found in studies of rural policing is the paucity of work on the subject. This despite the fact “approximately 80% of the 17,000 local police agencies in this country are located in small towns and rural communities” (Bartol, 1996). While police research has been ascendant in the last half century, the majority of this work has been on the culture and methods of police officers

in urban environments, ignoring the possibility of a different habitus developed by rural officers (Schafer, Burruss, & Giblin, 2009). Much of the findings of that research have been generalized to rural agencies, with little thought given to potential differences (Wolfer & Baker, 2000).

A recurring problem cited in the literature on rural policing is that the experiences of urban police are assumed to be universal and thus able to be simply mapped onto the experiences of rural law enforcement (Barrett et al., 2009; Kuhns et al., 2007). For instance, researchers interested in community policing strategies have often assumed rural agencies experience the same distrust and suspicion from citizens as do their urban counterparts, despite the substantial body of evidence that the relationship between rural police and their constituents is significantly different (Weisheit, Falcone, & Wells, 1994). Similarly, many researchers make the mistake of assuming the general duties and responsibilities shouldered by rural law enforcement are directly comparable to urban police, again despite the growing evidence rural police encounter significantly different challenges and reward structures (Barrett et al., 2009; Schafer, Burruss, & Giblin, 2009). What these many studies miss is that rural police are not simply undertaking the same tasks in a different location, but rather that they are operating in an distinctively different field and developing a distinctive habitus, as “a rural area is not simply a physical place but a *social place* as well” (Weisheit et al., 1994, p. 564, emphasis in original).

Thankfully, this overgeneralization has not gone completely unchecked. A number of scholars have demonstrated that the workloads of rural officers are often quite different from that of urban law enforcement. Christensen and Crank (2001), for example, found that while the “cultural themes” of the police organization in rural settings mirrors that of urban police, the meanings rural law enforcement attach to those themes tend to be different. This stems not only from the different context in which rural officers operate, but also the different organization of rural law enforcement departments. While on paper rural agencies share the hierarchical nature of urban agencies, the small number of personnel employed tends in practice to flatten the hierarchical structure. While urban police rarely interact with a superior above the rank of captain, the small size of rural departments means personnel of all ranks know one another on a personal basis. Sanders (2012) demonstrates rural police chiefs are less concerned with formal, quantitative measures of officer performance, instead focusing on more personal qualities of loyalty and maturity.

In another important distinction from their urban counterparts, Payne, Berg, and Sun (2005) demonstrate how rural officers must become “generalists” capable of fulfilling a wide variety of functions. This is reflected both in the formal organization of such departments, as they are much less likely to have specialized units such as a homicide or drug crimes division, as well as in the expectations placed on individual officers. Rural police are generally expected to spend more time informally dealing with and attempting to solve the problems of their constituents, relying less on arrest or dispersal of parties. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for citizens to contact rural

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police on their personal phones rather than calling 911, and rural officers are often expected to take part in resolving disputes and arguments even when off duty (Payne et al., 2005).

Rural law enforcement devote more time to crime prevention activities, due to the lower number of calls and increased amount of “unassigned free time in each shift to spend on conducting building checks and patrolling hot spots” (Rhodes & Johnson, 2008, p. 192), and spend significantly less time on non-crime service activities, such as investigating noise complaints or dealing with unruly individuals in public spaces, and other such incidents much more common in urban areas (Liederbach & Frank, 2003). Furthermore, the types of crimes rural police are responding to have been changing dramatically over the past 20-30 years, as this period has seen an increase in the reports of gang activity and violent crime in rural areas (Kuhns et al., 2007), as well as the production and distribution of more debilitating and harmful drugs moving into rural areas, with a sharp rise in methamphetamine, heroin, and cocaine usage (Brock, Copeland, Scott, & Ethridge, 2001; Linnemann & Kurtz, 2014).

The relationship rural law enforcement has with the communities it polices is also significantly different than urban law enforcement. Officers in rural communities are far more likely than their urban counterparts to personally know a significant number of community members, and interact with them in a variety of other settings, such as school, church, and civic organizations (Weisheit et al., 1994). Further complicating matters for rural officers are a lack of anonymity; officers and suspects are far more likely to already know one another either (Kowalewski, Hall, Dolan, & Anderson, 1984; Liederbach & Frank, 2003). When someone is arrested, it does not take long for the rest of the community to know the details. As such, both offender and officer can face degrees of disapproval and stigma for their role in the incident (Anderson, Swenson, & Clay, 1995; Braithwaite, 1989).

Finally, rural law enforcement departments are significantly more likely to have funding issues compared to their urban counterparts (Oliver & Meier, 2004; Sandy & Devine, 1978; Kuhns, Blevins, & Austin, 2012). It has been estimated that per-officer expenditures in rural areas are less than half the levels of per-officer spending in major urban centers (Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1995), and these lower levels of expenditures have an impact on a wide variety of law enforcement functions, ranging from effectiveness in fighting crime and providing service to citizens (Ramsey & Robinson, 2015) to the perceptions of rural residents toward their aptitude and ability to provide safety (Kuhns et al., 2012).

Although rural officers develop a distinct habitus, there are certain aspects of their field which mirror their urban counterparts: specifically, a privileging of masculinity and a paramilitaristic orientation, inculcated through both formal training and informal mentoring. The police academy exposes cadets to the norms that determine acceptable and unacceptable police behaviors, which effectively re-socializes them to conform to a policing-centric worldview

(Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Conti & Nolan, 2005; Huisman, Martinez, & Wilson, 2005). This perspective involves an “us vs. them” mentality that is meant to remind cadets that they will become “guardians” who must rid society of deviants (Marion, 1998; McNamara, 2002).

Importantly, rural and urban police experience quite similar academy training, often attending the very same academy as one another. Yet a long line of literature has demonstrated that such formal training has less impact on officer attitudes and behaviors than does the more ubiquitous informal training and socialization officers receive throughout their careers (Balko, 2013; Barrett et al., 2009; Chan, 2004; Goldsmith, 2001). It is in this more informal, day-to-day socialization in which we witness the development of the distinctly rural habitus among officers. While informal socialization occurs throughout an officer’s career, an important aspect of an officer’s continued formal socialization is through their exposure to and mentorship from Field Training Officers (FTOs). While there is only a small literature concerning FTOs, what does exist suggests they have a major impact “in transforming recruits’ attitudes, beliefs, and performance” (Sun, 2003, p. 25). Indeed, several scholars suggest FTOs have such an impact on officer behavior that their mentorship is key to any effort to impact officer behavior or effect changes in the infamously obdurate police subculture (Cooper, 2008; Waldeck, 2000).

The police academy is central in pushing cadets to develop very specific masculine characteristics (Cordner & Cordner 2011; Franklin 2005; Prokos & Padavic, 2002). Cadets are taught to be tough, domineering, and aggressive, and are trained to combat the dangers of the job by becoming physically fit, developing fighting skills, and mastering the use of firearms. Indeed, the academy has been found to not only ignore the enduring problematic hypermasculinity of policing (Wozniak & Uggen, 2009), but to exacerbate it (Cooper, 2008). Through the training process, male recruits are pushed toward this hypermasculinity and resultant sexist world view through male peer support, regardless of their prior views toward women (Franklin, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, the most common factor cited by female police officers as to why the gender imbalance within policing persists is the notion that department cultures and police academies are highly unwelcoming to women (Cordner & Cordner, 2011).

Police training is typically structured in a para-militaristic style (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Although American policing has long borrowed from militaristic structures, the lines between police officer and soldier have been significantly blurring in the past few decades (Kraska & Kappeler, 2015). This militarization can be traced back at least to the 1960s, when following a series of race riots throughout the United States, the Kerner Commission was formed to understand and address the causes of this unrest and prevent future occurrences. While the commission produce a variety of recommendations, the most heavily-embraced was a need to increase the fire power wielded by police (Stretesky, 2002). Although initially focused on urban departments, this increasing militarization quickly spread to rural departments as well (Kraska & Cubellis, 1997). Finally, the militarization of U.S. law enforcement ramped up significantly post-

9/11, during which over \$35 billion has been granted to law enforcement to purchase military gear (Balko, 2013). The normalization of the use of force has become institutionalized, taught to, and defended by police officers. In reviewing police academies and the training of new recruits, Marion (1998) found that firearms were emphasized as “the most necessary and popular area of training.”

One of the most visible signs of this militarization is the increasing proliferation of Police Paramilitary Units, or PPU. These units are theoretically comprised of officers which have undergone specialized military training to be used in high-stress, dangerous situations, yet they are most commonly used in the execution of search and arrest warrants (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997; Kraska, 2007). These units have spread to small rural departments (Kraska & Cubellis, 1997), with a large majority of rural departments maintaining a PPU, and unfortunately, these rural units receive significantly less training than their urban counterparts. This surge in PPUs and expansion of their normal uses has led to the increase in support of solving problems through force with agencies of all sizes (Balko, 2013; Kraska & Kappeler, 2015).

Police attempts to dispel the public’s concern regarding these issues typically takes the form of an appeal to the “rotten apples” theory (Goldsmith, 2001; Ivković, 2009). This strategy attempts to push the blame away from the institution of policing and onto individual officers (Williams, 2004). In relation to this defense, many police argue the institution has made progressive leaps over the years in how new recruits are chosen and accepted into the organization. Complex psychological testing has led to higher caliber applicants, which administrators argue has cut down on the use of overly-brutal tactics (Reifert, 2002). Yet while progress has been made, rural policing continues to display a variety of problems that cannot be explained by the attributes of individual officers. Rather, it is necessary to understand how the institution and culture of rural policing produce officer behavior through the construction of a unique rural policing habitus.

Habitus and Police Culture

Janet Chan (2004) conceptualizes police culture through applying Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) relational theory to the field of policing, utilizing Sonja Sackmann’s (1991) work on cultural knowledge to explain variations in police culture and behavior. Bourdieu’s (1977) framework explains the practices of a specific culture through the interaction of a person’s cultural dispositions, or habitus, and the structural positions of the field they work in. Bourdieu’s theory is summarized through the equation: [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice.

Habitus can be described as the dispositions and tendencies a person has, which are long-lasting and have the ability to be used in a plethora of situations. Capital is some form of wealth, whether financial or social/cultural, that can be used to increase one’s status. Finally, field

describes the social space the person is acting within (Maton, 2012). Chan (2004, p. 330) describes policing as comparable to other fields in that it exists within “a social space of conflict and competition which is structured by hierarchies of rewards (capital) and sanctions (negative capital).” The rules that exist within the field of policing guide police actions and can either get them closer to or further away from their goals.

When a recruit enters the academy, they are introduced to a highly militaristic and masculine organization (Campbell & Campbell, 2010; Cooper, 2008; Franklin, 2005; Kraska & Kappeler, 2015); it is during this time the recruits’ values begin to be replaced with those deemed most important by the Academy. After graduating, especially when spending time with an FTO who “shows them the ropes,” the values, perspectives, and ideology of policing are more firmly embedded into rookie officers (Cooper, 2008). This is a key moment in the development of the rural officer habitus, for while academy training is often standardized, FTO training is uniquely tailored to the specific departmental culture in which the officer will be working. As the academy’s brief teachings are reinforced and amplified during field training, officer habitus develops, typically focusing on hypermasculine values such as toughness, physical prowess, and a demand for respect. Capital for police officers comes in the forms of praise from department administrators and other officers, assignment to specialized units, promotions, and salary increases. The policing field is one that embodies the “us vs. them” mentality in which cops are pitted against criminals and in order to win “the game,” officers must earn “points” by detaining, arresting, and sending criminals to jail. Attempts to alter or change the field mentality from a “war on (crime, drugs, etc.)” to a “problem solving” focus is met with resistance (Pelfrey Jr., 2007), something that has been influenced by the masculine values and militaristic structure.

Chan employs Sackmann’s work on cultural knowledge to further explain the habitus of police officers. Sackmann (1991) posits that cultural knowledge can be classified into one of four dimensions. The first, dictionary knowledge, defines things and events within an organization. In police work, officers often have to make sense of complicated situations in a relatively short period of time, so they devise ways of categorizing the environment they work in and the people they may encounter within that environment. The second dimension is directory knowledge, which explains how things are done within an organization; this directs officers about how their everyday work is supposed to be done. Third is recipe knowledge, which applies the first two in order to explain what should and should not be done in certain situations. Chan explains this as police values and states that this dimension “provides recommendations and strategies for coping with police work” (Chan, 2004, p. 337). Finally, the fourth dimension, axiomatic knowledge, infers why things are done the way they are in an organization.

Bourdieu (1977) employs a concept similar to Sackman’s he terms a doxa. Examples of this in policing would be the classification of police work as “protecting and serving” or “maintaining public order.” Sackmann (1991) also states that her dimensions of culture allow for

multiple cultures to exist within a single organization. She explains that while administrative members of an organization may have a consensus of axiomatic knowledge, one should not assume that the workers of the same organization hold the same consensus. This is important, as patrol officers may share different opinions or attitudes on the proposed changes to policing than their administrative counterparts. While an administrator may focus on the financial costs of a change, patrol officers might be more inclined to focus on the practical aspects of the change.

Data and Methods

To identify prominent contemporary issues and develop the interview guide, the first author conducted a quantitative content analysis of news media. Newspaper articles were collected through the Lexis Nexis database, searching for terms related to recent prominent citizen fatalities and the movements they inspired. Search terms included the names of those involved in prominent situations (e.g. “Michael Brown,” “Darren Wilson,” “Eric Garner,” “Tamir Rice,” etc.), associated slogans (e.g. “Black Lives Matter,” “Blue Lives Matter,” etc.) and finally, more general categories (e.g. “police shooting,” “police use of force,” “police reform,” etc.)¹ Articles were collected over the year following the death of Eric Garner on July 17th, 2014, one of the first of the current wave of prominent citizen fatalities that sparked protests of law enforcement, resulting in a total of 126 articles after duplicate articles were removed. The most prominent theme which emerged from the analysis were racism or bias within police forces (155 distinct mentions), followed closely by the need to upgrade or change police training and policy (110 distinct mentions), and enforcing the use of body cameras by police officers (89 mentions). These were followed by mentions of police brutality (83), having officers more involved in improving community relations (78), reviewing officer conduct (65), and de-militarizing police forces (22). It is important to note that although de-militarization was only mentioned specifically 22 times, the photos of law enforcement paired with these articles often depicted them as military forces in riot gear and carrying assault rifles.

The results of this analysis guided development of the interview guide regarding the experiences of law enforcement officers, criticisms of American police forces, and commonly proposed changes and solutions. To gauge the perspective of rural law enforcement officers, the first author contacted agencies throughout the heavily-rural state of West Virginia (see Figure 1) via phone to inquire about their interest in being part of the study. Departments were selected based on the size of the population they serve, with the U.S. Census Bureau defining “rural” as regions inhabited by 2,500 people or less. While the population density of each department’s jurisdiction varied, all respondents worked in agencies serving counties defined by the Census Bureau as “mostly rural,” meaning 50-99.9% of that counties residents reside in a rural area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

A total of 21 law enforcement officers from 14 different agencies across the state of West Virginia participated in this study. All participants were male, with twenty identifying as white, one as biracial. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 66 years old with an average of 40.86 years old. Interviewee ranks consisted of five patrolmen, four sergeants, three lieutenants, one captain, one deputy chief, and seven chiefs of police, with experience levels ranging a few months on the force to 37 years. On average, the departments these officers worked for had a total of a half-dozen officers, in some cases producing a ratio of roughly one officer for every 1,000 citizens. Interviews were conducted in squad cars or offices and lasted an average of thirty-seven minutes apiece. All interviews were recorded with respondent permission before being transcribed for analysis. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, there were no pre-developed schema for the analysis, but rather data were open coded inductively, allowing themes presented by respondents to emerge organically (Glaser, 1992).



Figure 1: State of West Virginia

The Views of Rural Law Enforcement

Race and the Public

On the topic of racism within police forces, officers did not try to deny that it exists; “certainly it does,” said Officer Jones². As officer Dangle put it, “I think it’s small. You’re gonna have some in any job...there is gonna be some type of racism or prejudice, you can’t always stop that.” Here respondent attitudes were similar to those of their urban counterparts (Goldsmith, 2001; Ivković, 2009), expressing strong support for the “rotten apples” understanding of police bias, arguing racist officers make up a small percentage of police forces and these are officers are “bad seeds” and they “want them out as fast as possible.” Respondents used examples from other professions to bolster their viewpoints, arguing that when a clergyman abuses children, or a doctor has been found guilty of malpractice, we do not condemn other clergymen or physicians. Some officers talked about the dangers of a backlash; for example, Officer Dangle argues “as far as officer performance, I think, I fear, that officers are going to concern themselves with the liability.”

In many ways, these discussions of racism within the ranks bore a distinct resemblance to Sikes and Matza’s (1957) classic work on techniques of neutralization. In addition to the denial of responsibility and denial of injury evidenced by the many responses similar to Officer Dangle’s quoted above, in which respondents minimize the presence and impact of racism in law enforcement, the most common thread among respondent answers was that of condemning the condemners. As detailed below, many respondents turned the discussion of race and police away from the police themselves to focus on the role of the public and the media. A common theme was that police are not actually the problem, but rather that they are being used as scapegoats by unruly citizens unwilling to take responsibility for themselves or their children and media sources looking to sensationalize the behavior of officers for the sake of discrediting law enforcement.

When officers were asked how they would prevent or deal with racism within their department, most focused on screening applicants better and addressing issues swiftly on an administrative level. Participants were also asked about their opinions on hiring more officers of color, to which many responded that they would love to have more officers join the force, regardless of race, sex, or creed. In the small towns in which they operate and the demographics of their areas, however, they admitted that it was not always an easy thing to accomplish. Trying to explain why there is a lack of diversity in other departments, Officer Stabler said, “The job of a police officer is not as attractive to some people, due to societal upbringings and whatnot.”

Respondents tied both of these topics to what they see as troubling changes in wider society. Chief Jeffries made a point to focus on younger people, saying “I don’t know if it’s a

generational thing or if it is a product of our society at this point, but we are starting to see a decline in respect for any authority figure.” Officer Dangle made the same point, arguing that a sense of entitlement was to blame: “people who’ve had their parents bail them out of trouble all their lives and then, when they suddenly get in trouble, it’s somebody else’s fault, not theirs.” Officer Weigel agreed, arguing that many have been “accusing the police of their own wrongdoing.” All officers all touched in some way on the idea that to them, people have forgotten how to treat each other and see nothing as their own fault. Officers took examples from their own experiences with disgruntled citizens who had been approached for minor infractions which then escalated because of their resistance to law enforcement.

These complaints about the general public were often paired with discussions about how the media has portrayed law enforcement in the past two years. The officers unanimously agreed that the media’s portrayal of law enforcement is one-sided. “They get word of an incident or situation and before the facts are gathered, there are conclusions being made,” said Officer Dangle. Several officers argued the recent emergence of social media has made matters worse. Officer Kimball believes “social media is a tool for people who are anti-law enforcement. People jump to conclusions too fast lately and immediately jump to conclusions before there’s an investigation.” Respondents expressed a desire to remind the public that just because there is a clip of an officer being forceful with a person, does not mean the force isn’t warranted. Officer Lake points out “these videos only show a piece of what happened and a lot of the time whatever occurred before is left out or not even on tape.”

This criticism towards the taping of law enforcement boosted the support of body cameras by the officers interviewed. A majority of the departments in this study had purchased body cameras for their officers or were currently testing various models. While potentially serving the public’s interest in monitoring officer behavior, respondents see them as tools to cut down on the “bull-crap accusations” that they face. Respondents shared several stories about how complaints were brought against the department or officers that came down to the officer’s word against the complainant. In one account, Officer Stabler described a situation where officers broke up a fight in the street and were then accused of hitting one of the combatants, a teenage boy, in the head with a nightstick. The cruiser dashcam caught a brief moment of the incident when “two young men come rolling across the front of the car throwing haymakers at each other.” Once they had been pulled apart, the young combatant began motioning aggressively towards the officers. He was hit behind his knee in order to restrain him with handcuffs. The complaint was dismissed, but a lawsuit was brought against the department. It is situations like this Officer Stabler explained which “leave a bitter taste in the policeman’s mouth,” one they hope to remedy with the use of this new technology.

The Role of Training

To remain certified, West Virginia officers must complete a set amount of in-service training each year. When asked about what kinds of training they thought would be most beneficial, the most common response from respondents were courses focused on domestic violence, investigations, updates to the law, and defensive tactics.

When the concepts of sensitivity training, ethics, and improved communication skills were proposed, there were mixed reactions. Officer Garcia explained that how officers handle calls “is largely affected by their experience.” Officer Jones agreed saying, “You can talk about it until you are blue in the face, but you’re not going to learn like that. You have to get time in under your belt.” Officer Novack, a proponent of “verbal judo,” thought that this sort of training could help younger officers develop skills faster, especially if they are not used to dealing with people who are acting irrationally. Chief Amaro commented, “It’s a police officer’s job to de-escalate situations, but you aren’t always able to talk someone down and sometimes you have to resort to force in order to keep the situation under your control. Having both types of training are necessary.” Officer Kimball felt that officers already did fine when approached with such situations and that sensitivity training was not something officers needed. “When I roll up to a call, I’m trying to deal with it in a respectful manner. The sensitivity is everywhere. When someone starts to get in my face or put their hands on me, we are beyond sensitivity,” he stated, “As far as sensitivity training, I think it’s the public that needs a little sensitivity training.”

A point multiple respondents stressed was that officers end up having to deal with many stressors they believe general public cannot comprehend. Working homicides, child molestation cases, and domestic violence calls on a daily basis has worn down some of the older officers and shocked the younger recruits. Respondents highlighted the effects of how the small number of personnel in rural departments means officers are involved in every aspect of these cases (Payne et al., 2005), from responding to the call, carrying out the investigation, interrogating suspects, and testifying at the trial. “We are generalists,” explained Officer Rollins, “We don’t have the luxury of larger departments’ specialized units to break up the workloads.” Chief Amaro built on this point, explaining how one of his officers had just spent “from noon on New Year’s Eve [Thursday] until that Sunday afternoon” solving a burglary. The large amounts of stress that are put on these rural officers whittles away at their morale as well as contributing to a more cynical view toward wider society.

Police Militarization

Finally, the topic of de-militarizing police forces was addressed, and all officers interviewed were unanimously opposed to this idea. Each expressed some variation of the idea that they would rather “have it and not need it, than need it and not have it.” These rural officers

explained that recently they had seen a spike in situations where having just their sidearm would be inadequate. Officers talked about the increased prevalence of threats against local public areas, like schools, and the production and distribution of drugs. “I believe that the public is more armed...than the police,” Officer Benson argued, adding “we carry ARs in our trunks and we are still outgunned by the general public.” Officers spoke about how common it is for citizens in rural areas to have hunting rifles and other higher caliber weapons. “The shotgun, which used to be our bread and butter, it’s just not effective anymore. It can’t compete with the automatic weapons criminals get their hands on nowadays,” according to Chief Jeffries. In their opinion, they should be able to match that threat with the appropriate response and equipment.

When asked about what sort of equipment their departments possess, many explained that they have mostly acquired riot gear and rifles through government surplus. This equipment consists of older models that were to be decommissioned or destroyed and was purchased by their department at significantly reduced prices. These officers understood the image that some of their equipment gives off, especially in the public’s mind. “They give that authoritative presence, you know, and I think that intimidation is good,” Officer Garcia commented, adding “the gear can be intimidating, but it’s protection for the officer.”

However, respondents also emphasized that this equipment is not always as it appears to those outside the force. The officers whose departments provided them with a rifle explained that most of these AR-15s or military rifles aren’t for rapid fire and many are incapable of going fully automatic. Instead, the rifles were primarily obtained for any long-range hostile situations. Chief Jeffries offered a hypothetical situation where a rifle is a better piece of equipment than the standard issue sidearm: “if we had an active shooter at the local high school and an officer has to take a shot down a hallway that’s 50 yards or across the gymnasium or a parking lot. That officer may only be qualified at 20 yards with his sidearm, is that safe?”

Beyond firepower, all the respondents thought that having at least one up-armored vehicle would be a great thing to have for a situation like approaching a meth house. Officer Munch explained how having a vehicle that can deflect bullets from automatic rifles and shotguns, so that they can drive right up to the front door to deploy, makes it a safer situation for everyone. However, only one department actually possessed a decommissioned military vehicle and it was not used for that purpose. “We are never going to use that Humvee for anything other than getting around in the snow,” Chief Jefferies explained. It was common for the department to be called on during heavy winter storms and the vehicle was used to reach citizens in need in a rural, mountainous state in which road conditions are often less than ideal in fair weather.

An important note made by all respondents, especially administrative staff, concerned funding levels. In line with previous literature on the financial status of rural law enforcement (Oliver & Meier, 2004; Kuhns et al., 2012; Weisheit et al., 1995), many respondents spoke of

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how funding levels limited what changes they were capable of instituting. When talking about sending officers off for continuing, in-service training, many highlight that the costs are not inconsequential. “I’ve got to pay all the expenses, whether that class is a free class or not, if there is travel expenses involved, per night, tuition, and then I have to pay somebody to cover his shift,” explained Chief Clift, “So it’s an expense to send an officer to in-service training.” The same goes for obtaining equipment; “these cameras here, a single camera is not cheap,” said Chief Tuturola, “Plus, you got to get all your databases that you put on the computers, I mean, it’s not a cheap thing to do.” When attempting to acquire new tech, departments can apply for grants through the federal government, but if this is not successful, they have to go to their city council, which often cannot provide the necessary funding. Chief Jeffries explained, “If I go to my city council asking for \$5,000 for new technology and they say ‘we don’t have the money,’ then that’s that.” Some departments have responded to this problem by purchasing cheaper, less reliable cameras from their local large retail stores.

Development of Rural Officer Habitus

Rural officer habitus involves two major formal influences: the academy and field training. Recruits attended West Virginia Police Academy for 25 weeks before becoming certified as law enforcement officers by the state. Chief Jeffries explained that the academy is designed in a paramilitary fashion with the purpose of preparing recruits for their career, especially the stresses that come with the job. Yet the majority of officers interviewed suggested major changes should be made to the academy process, especially concerning academics.

Officer Munch, a former US Army soldier, informed me that “the West Virginia Police Academy is ten times harder” than his Army Basic Training. Other officers explained that they had few classes regarding practical law enforcement knowledge, like scenario- based training or writing reports. Instead, as is common in many police training academies (Conti & Nolan, 2005; Marion, 1998; Wozniak, 2017), the focus is almost exclusively on physically fitness, learning defensive tactics, and firearms training. As Chief Amaro explained, the academy has several simulators for different situations, like DUI enforcement and pursuit driving, but his recent recruits told him that they did not use either during their time at the academy. In his words, “they spent more time mopping the floors, carrying rocks, and getting the guts beat outta them.”

Ideally, when recruits graduate from the academy, they begin their field training and are paired with an FTO to continue their development. Interview respondents echoed the literature on FTOs (Cooper, 2008; Sun, 2003; Waldeck, 2000) that this is where the majority of an officer’s knowledge about law enforcement is learned and where the officer habitus is first cultivated. However, the ideal order of academy followed by field training is not always the norm. The demand that rural departments face in regards to personnel (Payne et al., 2005; Weisheit et al., 1994) sometimes requires them to hire someone and immediately put them out on

patrol. According to Chief Jeffries, “West Virginia is unique in that I can hire you today and you can put your badge and gun on and you can go out there and work up to the point where you go to the academy.” During this time, young officers go through field training and learn as they would if they had started the training after graduating the academy. The problem, according to respondents, is that after spending so much time at the academy, they tend to forget everything they learned during their field training. Alternately, the personnel and/or financing may not be there for their continued training after the academy, as Chief Tuturola points out “a lot of people don’t have FTOs and that’s a problem because [recruits] need to be trained right, especially with interacting with the public.”

Several respondents further noted that if a recruit goes through the academy and then is paired with an unmotivated or unqualified FTO, they can develop into an inadequate officer. Furthermore, because of the limited budgets and personnel in these departments, it is not unheard of for an officer to have no formal FTO guidance or field training, instead relying on informal training from department leadership and senior personnel. Indeed, the FTO program was a part of rural law enforcement that many respondents highlighted as in desperate need of improvement. In one department, Officer Glen reported making it his personal mission to rebuild the Field Training Program from the ground up, saying “I wrote a brand-new field training officer manual and was sent to school to be a certified field training officer. Now, every time we get a rookie, they come with me.”

Reflecting the academic literature on the topic (Cooper, 2008; Sun, 2003; Waldeck, 2000), officers reported that when they went through field training after the academy, their habitus was strongly shaped by their FTOs and new department. However, respondents also noted that a highly-influential factor in their law enforcement education were those who informally trained them, most notably, their direct superior and chiefs. In this manner, respondents’ practical education exhibited more of an apprentice style; Chief Clift argued, “If you have a good lieutenant and a good chief, they will teach you a lot.” This is something that distinguishes the culture of rural policing from that of urban policing. In a rural department, officers spend a lot of time working alongside the upper-level brass, including their chiefs. Contrast that with urban policing, in which departments are much more stratified and it is rare that officers would speak with, let alone regularly interact or learn from, any officer about the rank of Captain. In line with previous research (Sanders, 2012), respondents argued that their rural departments are made up of tight-knit groups of officers all working the same beat, where rank is little more than a title.

Social capital within the police world takes two forms: formal, which include such things as promotions, raises, and official accommodations, and informal, such as praise from co-workers and administrators, thanks from the public, and community recognition. When asked what types of rewards or recognition they most valued, many respondents answered with a light-hearted statement about not doing the job for the money. The possibility of being promoted was

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never mentioned, and the possibility of recognition through accommodation letters or ribbons were only mentioned by the Chiefs.

In line with the findings of Sanders (2012), informal sanctions proved to be significantly more important to the rural officers in this study. Officer Rizzo explained that “[police] are not rewarded in a definition most people would consider rewarded. I’ve never gotten anything extra being a police officer. When I see a good citizen in society who thanks me or I deal with one who’s kind, polite, and generally courteous to me rather than being belligerent, cursing, and wanting to fight me, that’s the real reward of being a police officer.” Other respondents spoke highly about receiving a pat on the back from other members of their department, having citizens stop them on the street to say thank you, and having someone pay for their lunch or cup of coffee. Officer Benson claimed the best reward he had ever received was being stopped by a woman who thanked him for arresting her husband. Since his arrest, he had turned his life around, gone to school, and now is successfully supporting his family. Stories like these were many of the reasons that these officers got into law enforcement. They explained that being able to help or protect people and, more importantly, help or protect their community, is what they wanted out of their job.

This speaks to the unique role rural law enforcement occupy in relation to the communities they police (Anderson et al., 1995; Kowalewski et al., 1984; Liederbach & Frank, 2003). American policing is typically conceived of as somewhere between two ideal types – that of the “Us vs. Them” view, in which law enforcement views society as a constant confrontation between the good (themselves) and the bad (criminals), and that of community-oriented policing, in which law enforcement works with the people they police to build a better community and proactively resolve issues. While no department sits fully at either extreme of this spectrum, this study reveals the unique combination of these ideal types that exists within rural law enforcement.

Respondents focused on the idea of keeping the community safe for those who live there, displaying a strong level of identification with those they police while being keenly suspicious of those viewed as outsiders. For example, Deputy Junior was adamant about being sure to “keep out those who come here because they think it will be easy for them to get away with crime.” Many respondents spoke of the work their departments undertake to build ties with their constituents, especially in working with the youngest members of the community. By reaching out and fostering good relationships with the youth, respondents expressed hope they could build a good report between younger generations and law enforcement. They want to teach them that they are “not people to be feared, but friends that can help them,” as Chief Clift put it. Through these relationships, respondents claimed youth have been able to come to them when they think a classmate is heading down the wrong road, enabling officers to address problems before things

become too serious. Respondents also mentioned trying to work with the members of the public who have had minor run-ins with the law instead of just arresting or ticketing them.

However, respondents were also sure to make known that they will not be tolerant of more serious crimes, such as drug sales and distribution. Many focused on the dangers of outside forces that can potentially harm their friends, neighbors, and fellow rural dwellers, seeing problems in their jurisdictions as stemming from people not from their communities. It was these potential threats to their community that seemed to incite a more formal means of law enforcement from the officers. As such, despite their strong ties to the community, respondents still displayed strong elements of the “Us vs. Them” worldview. Yet while for urban police the “us” typically refers exclusively to members of law enforcement (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010), for those rural officers in this study, the “us” was expanded to include those they saw as part of their rural community.

Discussion and Conclusion

While the respondents in this study, much like many law enforcement officers throughout America (Goldsmith, 2001; Ivković, 2009), favored individualistic “rotten apples” style theories in explaining police behavior and their responses to the various contemporary polarizing issues surrounding American law enforcement, the present study demonstrates that to be an inadequate explanation. Rather, these phenomenon are best explained by the unique field of rural policing and resultant unique habitus developed by those within the field of rural law enforcement. As such, this study contributes to the growing body of literature seeking to correct the “urban bias” (Kuhns et al., 2000, p. 431) of policing studies by examining the unique social location of rural police and law enforcement.

Of course, rural law enforcement shares a number of similarities with their urban counterparts, which our findings reflect. This is especially true in their training, as much of what was found in interviews with rural officers reflects the literature on urban policing, which should not be surprising given the relative uniformity of academy training experiences. Specifically, the academy’s problematic eschewing of instruction on basic policing practices (Conti & Nolan, 2005; Huisman et al., 2005; McNamara, 2002), the inadequacy or absence of field training programs (Cooper, 2008; Sun, 2003; Waldeck, 2000), the centering of hyper-masculine orientation and tactics (Cordner & Cordner, 2011; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Wozniak & Uggen, 2009), and an increasing militarization of the force (Balko, 2013; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Kraska & Kappeler, 2015).

Much like their urban counterparts, rural officer habitus is heavily influenced by both the formal and informal training recruits receive; the construction of the academy in the style of a paramilitary institution instills the idea that these officers need to be tough, dominant, and

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physical in order to do their job. Being put under high levels of stress throughout the twenty-five weeks they attend conditions officers to think that their job requires them to be constantly fighting. Furthermore, the lack of purely academic activities at the academy does not properly prepare recruits for their everyday duties. A potential counterbalance to current the training regime is the effect of field training on the recruit; however, this often carries its own set of problems. If a department's field training program is up to date and is run by motivated FTOs, an officer may be much less likely to develop a problematic habitus (Sun, 2003; Cooper, 2009). But if a department's field training program is not regulated properly and FTOs are unfit to teach the core values of policing, a recruit can become a problem for the department and the community. Yet, as this study demonstrates, the often-limited budgets of rural departments means there may not be any available FTOs to build upon a new officer's training, and the personnel crunch experienced by many departments may mean an officer is on duty before receiving training of any kind.

These concerns of budget and personnel speak to some of the important differences in the field experienced by officers in rural departments. Our findings echo those of previous scholars who have found that the budgetary issues experienced by rural law enforcement have significant effects on the field they experience (Weisheit et al., 1995), from issues of capacity to the perceptions of those they police (Ramsey & Robinson, 2015; Kuhns et al., 2012), strongly shaping the habitus of rural officers. Furthermore, similar to the work of Payne et al. (2005), the respondents in this study reported the nature of rural law enforcement requires them be "generalists" who perform a much wider variety of law enforcement and service functions than their urban counterparts, as they lack the personnel and budget required for the kinds of specialized units and positions found in urban departments.

As is clear from the interview data, this generalist orientation means questions of rank are far less pertinent to these rural officers and thus these officers are less motivated by the possibility of career advancement through moving up the official hierarchy. In this way, our study is in line with the work of Christensen and Crank (2001), who argue that while the "cultural themes" of law enforcement in rural settings mirror that of their urban counterparts, the context of their work leads them to attach different meanings to those themes. A significant way the habitus of rural officers differs from their urban counterparts are officer perceptions of the capital they can obtain and their rules of the field. Respondents consistently point out earning respect from the public and a "thank you" from citizens are the best rewards for doing their job. The more formal rewards of accommodation, promotions, and salary increases were rarely mentioned by interview respondents.

However, this flattened hierarchy does not necessarily mean that all officers share the same outlook on various aspects of the field, but instead, differing outlooks were more due to the age and experience level of the officer rather than their formal rank. This study extends Chan (2004)

and Sackmann's (1991) work on cultural knowledge through opinions of officers, which can be seen in the differing attitudes these rural officers hold towards certain ideas and procedures. In regards to axiomatic knowledge, when questioned about the use of psychological testing after certain events, older, higher ranking administrative officers believed it was a good policy to have, while younger, patrol officers viewed it as more of a "veil" to keep the public happy rather than provide support officers need. Similarly, in regards to the existing training regime, more seasoned officers praised the academy, while younger officers were more likely to question or discredit it.

Yet possibly the biggest way in which the generalist orientation and smaller departments of rural law enforcement differentiates the field and habitus of the rural officer from their urban counterparts is in their relationship to the communities they police. In line with prior research (Anderson et al., 1995; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Weisheit et al., 1994) respondents reported close identification with the people within their jurisdiction. A majority of these officers have lived in the town they are working in their entire lives and reported a strong focus on making it a better, safer place for its inhabitants. As was made clear through interview responses, the rules of the field of rural policing for these respondents are dictated by effectively protecting the community from *outside* forces attempting to do harm. Respondents reported regularly eschewing formal legal reprimands for members of the community while expressing harsh condemnation of "outsiders" who violate the law. This marks an important distinction in the "us vs. them" habitus of rural police compared to their urban counterparts. While in urban law enforcement the "us" typically refers exclusively to law enforcement and police display strong suspicion of the general public (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010), for the rural officers in this study, the "us" included the residents of their jurisdictions, with the suspicion of "them" reserved for those from outside the community.

While this is an exploratory study and the sample size is too small to generalize our results to rural departments as a whole, it contributes to the growing body of literature arguing for a more nuanced and contextual understanding of rural law enforcement, pushing the field to recognize the important ways in which it differs from the ideals, norms, and practices of urban law enforcement (Barrett et al., 2009; Kuhns et al., 2007; Weisheit et al., 1995; Wolfer & Baker, 2010). Building upon the central argument we have advanced here, namely the existence of a uniquely rural policing habitus, there are a number of fruitful directions for further research to more fully examine the field and habitus of rural policing. One possible project would be to follow a class of cadets, including both those destined for rural and urban departments, through their academy and field training experiences. Such data would allow the researchers to examine the development of the urban and rural habitus in real time. Specific to rural departments, another line of research could examine the much-more flattened hierarchy and subsequent differing views of reward structures found in rural departments. While promotion and rising up the ranks is typically a prime motivator of urban police, the idea that these don't factor as much

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into the career-planning of rural police is a central aspect of their unique habitus. Research which could instead pinpoint those reward structures most motivating to rural police would go a great length toward helping us understand the rural officer habitus. Similarly, our study and others point to a different relationship between rural officers and those they police, and further evidence is necessary to fully understand how that shapes the field of rural law enforcement. Finally, studies examining the more generalist orientation of the rural officer, as opposed to the more specialized roles inhabited by their urban counterparts, can help us understand how the very tasks expected of officers contribute to their unique habitus. As this study demonstrates, the habitus and field of rural law enforcement is distinct in a number of important ways, and we call upon other researchers to continue to examine and expand upon these important differences.

Endnotes

¹ Eric Garner was choked to death by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo in New York City on July 17, 2014. Michael Brown was shot and killed on August 9, 2014 by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Tamir Rice was shot and killed Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann on November 22, 2014 in Cleveland, Ohio. These three events sparked massive social outrage and spurred the development of social movement organizations such as Black Lives Matter.

² All names of respondents have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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