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Al Mazruii, Mudhar, [Edwards, Jason](#), [Armstrong, Kerry](#), & [Davey, Jeremy](#) (2015)
Policing of road safety in Oman: Perceptions and beliefs of traffic police officers. In
2015 Australasian Road Safety Conference, 14 - 16 October 2015, Gold Coast, Qld.

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Policing of road safety in Oman: Perceptions and beliefs of traffic police officers

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Abstract

With increasing motorisation, road safety has become a major concern within Oman. Internationally, traffic policing plays a major role in improving road safety. Within Oman, the Royal Oman Police's (ROP) Directorate General of Traffic is responsible for policing traffic laws. Many common enforcement approaches originate from culturally different jurisdictions. The ROP is a relatively young policing force and may have different operational practices. Prior to applying practices from other jurisdictions it is important to understand the beliefs and expectations within the Directorate General of Traffic. Further, there is a need for individuals to understand their role and what is expected of them. Therefore, it is important to explore the agreement between levels of the ROP to determine how strategies and expectations transfer within the organisation. Interviews were conducted with 19 police officers from various levels of the ROP. A number of themes and findings emerged. Individuals at the upper level of the traffic police had a clear knowledge of the role of the ROP, believed that traffic police know what is expected of them, are well trained in their role and can have a very positive influence on road safety. These beliefs were less certain lower within the organisations with traffic officers having little knowledge of the role of the ROP or what was expected of them, felt undertrained, and believed their peers have little positive impact on road safety. There is a need to address barriers within the ROP in order to positively impact road safety.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) reported that road traffic injuries are the eighth leading cause of death globally, and the leading cause of death for young people aged 15–29. WHO (2012) also reported that more than a million people die each year on the world's roads, and the cost of overcoming the results of these crashes is estimated in the billions of dollars. Although, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries (e.g. Oman, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait & Bahrain) are rapidly developing new high standards of roads, they still have among the worst rates of road fatalities.

Oman has one of highest rates of road fatalities and injuries in the world. In November 2012, the World Health Organization ranked Oman third globally in terms of road crash fatalities, with 31.1 fatalities per 100,000 people. Over the 10 years to the end of 2013, the annual number of road fatalities in Oman increased from 578 to 913 (Royal Oman Police (ROP), 2013). By comparison, in the 12 months to the end of March 2012, Australia (with a population almost five times higher than Oman) reported 1310 road fatalities (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, 2012).

Within Oman, the ROP is tasked with managing road safety and undertaking traffic law enforcement. The legislative policy and power ascribing road safety to police is approved by His Majesty and issued to the General Inspector of Police and Customs. The traffic law was established by Royal Decree number 37 in 1973, and several modifications have since followed. The current operational Traffic Law and Executive Regulations was issued in 1993.

There is an established and growing body of international research highlighting the factors that influence traffic policing (McTiernan & Levasseur, 2013; Sharma & Burnett, 2012; Baker, Schaudt, Freed & Toole, 2012 and Ciuta et al., 2012). However, there has been little academic research into traffic policing in Oman and, importantly, no identifiable research into policing strategies and practices in Oman. Although over six million traffic offences were issued in 2014, there were still 757 fatal crashes causing 913 deaths and a further 10,000 injuries (Directorate General of Traffic, 2014). Thus, despite a high level of traffic enforcement, it has insufficient impact on road user behaviour. There is a need to examine traffic policing in Oman.

Recent evidence suggests that deterrence based approaches are valuable in improving traffic policing in a number of areas, including speeding, seat belt usage and fatigue (Bates, Soole & Watson, 2012). Many researchers have argued that policing strategies built around deterrence theory are essential for effective management of specific driving populations (Armstrong, Watling & Davey, 2014). As such, deterrence theory remains a cornerstone of many contemporary initiatives to reduce fatalities on public roads and to create effective enforcement strategies and practices (Davey & Freeman, 2011; Al-Azri & Al-Manari, 2011).

Every organization has structural and resource elements which can influence its achievement (Prebble, 2012). As such, it is important to understand how organizational factors influence the performance of the ROP and the manner in which officers undertake their responsibilities.

Moore (1995) developed the strategic triangle Model to explore the achievement of public organizations. Alford and O'Flynn (2009) stated that the basic structure of the original model contained three main elements. These were (1) 'public value', which represents the purpose, aims, goals and responsibilities of the organization; (2) 'authorizing environment', which refers to the legitimacy and support that serves to achieve the public value; and (3) 'operational capability', which reflects the resources used to achieve the public value of the organization. When considering this model, it is evident that there is a need to understand the overall objective, or public value, of the ROP. Royal Decree 35/90 states that the objective of the ROP is primarily to maintain security and public order. This can primarily be achieved through deterring road users from breaking traffic laws. When this is applied to road safety, it can be seen that the overall aim of traffic policing (their public value) is ensuring the security of road users and the orderly use of the road. There is also a need to understand factors that influence of the traffic law in providing support and legitimacy to policing activities. Finally, there is a need to understand the capability of ROP to achieve their organizational goals with respect to traffic policing. Thus, using the strategic triangle model, it is expected that if members of the ROP have a strong understanding of their overall goals, have an authorising environment that supports the achievement of these goals, and has sufficient capability, they will achieve a high level of performance in terms of achieving road safety and orderly use of the roads through implementing deterrence.

Semler's alignment model (1997) is commonly used to investigate and identify organizational efficiency. The model was introduced in 1988 by Nadler and Tushman, who believed that all the aspects in the organization must fit together. This model was based on the premise that there is a positive correlation between the degree of congruence within the organization's components and their efficiency. Semler (1997) suggested that the alignment model could be used to examine an organization's design, strategy and culture to achieve desired aims. Well-designed organization's should aim to align their structures and systems, strategy and culture with the overall vision of the organisation, ensuring efficient performance (Hart et al., 2003). In the present context, the alignment of organisational structures and systems within the ROP is important to ensure the use of operational capability to achieve the public value of the organisation. Thus, the alignment model serves to aid investigating the influence of the organizational structure of the ROP on their achievement.

In line with the previous discussion, this research seeks to achieve a greater level of understanding of the influence of authorizing environment and operational capability of the ROP on the achievement of their public value. This study will also help to identify potential organisational barriers and facilitators to traffic policing in Oman, and provide a baseline to develop future policing initiatives.

Material and Method

Design:

The study was comprised of semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interviews were directed to three levels of the police organization in Oman (e.g. executive level, supervisory level, operational level).

Participants:

A purposive sampling approach was used in data collection. A purposive sample is a non-representative subset of some larger population, and is selected to serve a very specific need or purpose (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Participants were selected according to their positions in the ROP and their job descriptions. Two police officers were from the executive level, seven police officers from the supervisory level, and ten police officers from the operational level. While the sample size may seem small, in the top two levels, interviews were conducted with over 75% of the officers in these positions. The interviews in the third level were conducted until the research reached apparent saturation.

Interview Protocol:

Three different interview discussion guides were developed by the research team. Each interview discussion guide was designed for a level of ROP's organization. The discussion guides consisted of 9, 15 and 22 items (executive, supervisory and operational levels respectively) and aimed to gather participant's perceptions regarding the components of the strategic triangle and alignment models, and their effect on ROP achievement of road safety. The interview guides were initially written in English and then translated into Arabic. The Arabic-language guide was then reviewed by several native Arabic speakers for clarity and comprehension.

Methods:

Pilot interviews were conducted to ensure the appropriateness of the questions and if any modifications were required, as well as to provide an estimate of the duration of interviews. A participant information form was administered during the commencing of the interviews to ensure informed consent. Face-to-face interviews then followed in Arabic (most of the interviewees speak only Arabic).

The interviews started with the highest level of the ROP (e.g. executive level). Once the interviews were conducted, data was analysed and, where appropriate, additional questions were added to the interview protocol for supervisors. This process repeated for the supervisory and operational levels. Each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes. While some interviews took place at the Traffic Safety Institute in Muscat, most of the interviews took place at the interviewed officer's traffic departments. The principle author, who is a member of the ROP, had an existing relationship with the majority of the interviewees, which might have influenced the collected data. To avoid such influences, participants were informed of the purpose of the research and encouraged to answer honestly without fear of repercussion (this project was also subject to ethical review to ensure no coercion was present in the methodology). After conducting every interview, prior to the analysis,

the collected data was reviewed by a number of traffic police officers and the research team, and the interview protocol was revised and updated.

Thematic analysis was employed to first categorise responses using the theoretical constructs and then to identify subthemes within the data. As suggested by Muller, Maclean & Biggs (2009), the responses to key questions and direct quotes are provided to give a direct voice to the participants and clarify their individual perspective.

Results

The participants were generally quite responsive to all questions and highlighted some significant factors that influence the policing strategy and practices. The results were categorized according to the components of the used models (public value, authorizing environment, operational capability etc.). For the reporting of quotes in the results, and to protect participant confidentiality, participants are identified as "P#".

There were mixed response towards the perceived public value of traffic policing. Officers at the executive level revealed that saving lives and setting rules and regulations forms the main objective of traffic policing in Oman. Executive officers indicated that all traffic officers were aware of the ROP's goals with respect to traffic policing. In contrast, traffic officers at the lower two levels suggested that the role of traffic police officers was unclear. Despite the controversy in understanding the public value of the ROP, there was some congruency between officers that enforcement through issuing traffic offences represented the primary task of traffic police. In general, responses like "*I have to issue the biggest number*" (P15), "*issuing fines is my job*" (P14) and "*we are prized if we issue fines*" (P13) indicated that issuing fines was the main applied method to achieve the public value with respect to traffic policing. The following are representative responses:

I don't know what is the role of ROP ... I know that I have to issue traffic fines ... this is my role (P18)

We have been told that we have to issue fines ... no one ever explain to me the role of ROP ... I think the role of ROP with respect to road safety is to issue fines (P17)

What I know is issuing fine is the priority of my senior officers ... so this is what I do all day (P11)

With respect to the authorizing environment, the supervisory officers' identified problems related to policy making, strategies and traffic law. The majority of the supervisory officers indicated that the level of deterrence in the existing regulations was too low. It was indicated that traffic sanctions were not severe enough to deter road users from violating traffic laws and regulations (these sanctions are prescribed by the law and traffic police officers have no choice regarding fine severity). In the same way, the majority of officers explained that swiftness had been neglected by the traffic law, in which traffic offences are to be paid at the time of the annual renewal of the vehicle's registration. A number of officers commented that if the rules do not deter drivers, then there is no use applying them. The following two excerpts demonstrate officers' perspectives regarding traffic law:

Traffic law does not have severe punishments ... we apply its rules, but that does not achieve road safety (P5)

Road safety requires severity ... we do not have this in our policing practises (P9)

With regards to the ROP's operational capability, executive police officers claimed that the majority of traffic police officers are capable and have the needed skills, knowledge and abilities to undertake effective traffic policing. Executive officer indicated that the nature of training programs given to traffic officers gives them confidence in their skills and abilities. On the contrary, the majority of traffic police officers at the supervisory and the operational level reported that traffic police were not equipped with the needed skills, knowledge and abilities to undertake their responsibilities. These officers indicated that they also lack the needed tools that facilitate the achievement of the public value of ROP with respect to traffic policing. Officers indicated a need for weighing scales, radar guns, breathalyzers and tyre measurement devices. In further contradiction to executive officers, the majority of traffic officers in the supervisory level indicated that current training programs have no influence on their skills or abilities. Finally, supervisory and operational traffic police officers stated that new recruits in the traffic force have a negative influence on road safety.

ROP expects us to create safe road environment, but they do not provide us with the needed sources ... we require something more than vehicles, fuel and a set of rules (P7)

To achieve that expectations of ROP, we need well- qualified human resources, financial resources and authority ... we do not have that (P3)

With respect to the perceived achievement of the public value (that is, the achievement of road safety), executive police officers believed that the majority of road users follow traffic rules and regulations. However, supervisory and operational officers revealed that road users risk their lives and the lives of others through their driving behaviours. Some of the supervisory officers elaborated that their operational officers implement reactive policing rather than proactive policing. They added that, particularly with policing of heavy vehicles, officers seek to increase fine numbers rather than strategically creating a safe road environment through targeted enforcement. It was understood that the daily practises of traffic police officers did not cover all aspects of road safety. There was a congruency between the participants that their daily policing activities were not suitable to influence the behaviours of drivers. Responses like “we need to do more policing” (P10), “what we are doing is not enough” (P19), “it is just like if we do nothing” (P18) and “our policing should be more active” (P13) indicated that traffic police realized the need to further develop their policing practises. In addition, the majority of supervisory and the operational officers indicated that an insufficient understanding of traffic law reduces their capabilities to achieve high level of traffic policing. The following excerpts identify these perceptions.

I hope that road users cooperate with traffic police officers and obligate to rules and regulations ... they can influence and improve public safety more than our police officers ... we cannot assign a police officers with every driver, but we are working to make every driver a police officer (P1)

Drivers keep in making the same fines ... they do not know why some actions are illegal ... traffic police officer never provide awareness to the drivers, simply because they do not know how... Most of the traffic police cannot identify the violations of heavy vehicles (P13)

The interviewees highlighted a number of organizational factors which help to explain the current level of achievement. As stated before, there was disagreement regarding the quality of training. The executive officers responded that ROP has designed a variety of effective traffic training programs. In contrast, officers at the supervisory level indicated that the nature of the provided training programs is insufficient and does not help to improve the skills of traffic police officers. Further, many operational officers indicated that they would be willing to attend the provided courses but were not allowed to do so by their supervisors, due to reasons including the length of

the course period, workload and a shortage in human resources. In addition, the way in which policing practices and activities are designed was a potential barrier to achievement. It was understood from the participants' responses that the current policing strategies fail to accommodate for heavy vehicle safety. Responses like "*we cannot stop them*"(P16), "*they made that same violations again and again*"(P14), "*new procedures should be followed*"(P13), "*our strategies are not even useful to stop the violations of light vehicles*" "(P17) and "*I think our practises and strategies are out of date*" (P12), indicated that new strategies should be implemented that are applicable to all vehicle types. While executive officers stated that they design traffic related activities with the participation of supervisory officers, these officer denied that this was the case.

The majority of the participants also highlighted that the executive officers focused on punishment more than rewarding or positive motivation. While supervisory officers insisted that they value using positive motivation to achieve the public value of traffic policing, operational officers indicated that their supervisors did not make efforts to motivate their officers to undertake their responsibilities in an effective way. Operational officers suggested that even having their work acknowledged could have positive impact on the willingness of police officer to undertake traffic policing in a proper way.

If they want us to work they have to motivate us ... for me 'thank you' or 'you have done a good job' is more than enough ... we don't even get these encouraging words (P18)

I worked in an enforcement team for nine months ... when we accomplished our mission, they told me to go back to my division without a word of thanks (P16)

We work to serve our country, but still senior officers have to appreciate what we are doing (P13)

It was interesting to note that the culture, traditions and habits of officers have a negative influence on traffic policing. Supervisory officers suggested that the culture and tradition of being friendly and helpful negatively influences road safety. For example, it was indicated that operational officers turned a blind eye to the violations of road users as a way to help them. In addition, operational officers stated that traffic policing practices were only designed for light vehicles. For instance, some of the operational officers elaborated that the insufficiency of traffic policing practices is the key element that influence their willingness to address heavy vehicles. Finally, operational officers explained that in order to achieve the desired public value, all ROP personnel (i.e. general duties police as well as traffic police) should be involved in traffic policing practices, as highlighted in the following quotes.

The problem with traffic police is that they cannot distinguish between policing and their tradition ... that is why we do not let them work in their governorates (P9)

We expect that heavy vehicles' drivers follow the safety procedures of their companies ... that why we usually do not deal with them (P15)

Traffic policing is the responsibility of all officers in ROP ... everybody think that traffic police can manage the situation by themselves (P12)

Discussion

To date, there is a gap in knowledge of traffic policing in Oman and the influence of organisational factors on traffic policing strategies and practices. The study utilised Moore's (1995) strategic triangle model and Semler's (1997) alignment model to explore the perceived public value (primary

purpose) of the ROP's traffic police, the extent to which they achieve this public value, and the legal and organisational factors that influence this performance.

The first key theme that emerged related to police officer understanding of the public value of Royal Oman Police with respect to road safety. While the primary purpose of the ROP is to ensure security and order (road safety in this case), it was evident that not every member of the ROP knew the overarching objectives of traffic policing. Participants from the executive level assumed that traffic police officers were aware of the expectations and goals of the ROP, however, this was not the case in the other two levels. Without knowing the primary goal of traffic policing, officers are unlikely to see the benefit of what they are asked to do, and thus less compliant.

With regards to the authorising environment surrounding the ROP, it was evident that the existing traffic laws do not provide sufficient legitimacy and support to ensure deterrence of unsafe road behaviours. The majority of participants agreed with the need for severity and swiftness of sanctions, but felt that it was lacking in the current traffic law. As such, there is a lack of legitimacy and support in the current traffic law to facilitate the achievement of the public value of the ROP (to ensure safety of road users).

Regarding the operational capability of the ROP, there were conflicting responses from participants in both the executive and supervisory levels about the skills, attitudes and knowledge of traffic police officers. According to participants from the executive level, officers were well qualified to undertake their responsibilities. In contrast, the participants at the supervisory level stated that most of traffic police officers need to develop the level of their skills, attitudes and knowledge to be able to undertake the policing of road safety. Thus it was indicated that there was insufficient operational capability to achieve the public value of the ROP with respect to road safety.

Given the lack of agreement regarding the purpose of traffic policing, weaknesses in the traffic law, and lack of sufficient capability, it can be expected from the strategic triangle model that the ROP would have limited success in achieving their public value (road safety). This was supported by the responses of participants. While participants at the executive level believed that traffic police officers were positively influencing road safety, participants at the supervisory and operational level indicated that policing either fails to influence road safety, or has a negative effect. This highlights the need to address police capabilities and the level of deterrence in the current traffic law.

Within the current research the alignment model was used to identify organisational structures and systems which serve to facilitate or hinder the ROP in achieving road safety. There were a number of organisational issues raised by participants. The supervisory and operational officers indicated that a low understanding of their responsibilities and unavailability of well-structured policing strategies presented clear barriers to policing of road safety. This indicated that there were communication issues within the ROP. According to the alignment model, a firm understanding of the vision, values and purpose of the organisation and effective communication and both important to ensure organisational efficiency. The extracted data showed that it is necessary to establish a clear role of traffic police officers with respect to road safety in order to achieve their public value.

In the same way there was a congruency in the need of developing the training of traffic police officers. Despite executive officers indicating that the current training was effective, participants at the supervisory and operational level indicated that training was insufficient and inaccessible. The findings underscore the on-going need to develop training programs and requalify traffic police officers at the aspects related to road safety. Together, these issues in communication and training indicated key weaknesses in the factors of the alignment model, reducing the alignment between the vision, values and purpose of the ROP and police behaviour and achieving road safety.

Further Directions and Conclusion

The findings of the analysis highlighted a number of key directions for future research. There is a need for exploring the process of creating and communicating traffic policing related goals in order to achieve the core objectives of traffic policing. In the current traffic policing strategies and practices, traffic policing goals are unclear to officers, and this appeared to negatively influence the achievement of road safety. There is also a need for research to examine the training of traffic police officers to better qualify traffic police officers to achieve their public value with respect to traffic policing. Further, there is a need to continue investigating the impact of the ROP organizational structure and systems on road safety in Oman in order to identify approaches to improve policing of road safety.

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