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An Analysis of Cynicism Within Law Enforcement

ABSTRACT - An investigation and analysis of the concept of cynicism as part of a social process involving other sociological variables within two law enforcement agencies was undertaken. The major theoretical contention of this study was that within the law enforcement setting one consequence of employing certain organizational control mechanisms has been an accompanying generation of social strain relative to such control mechanisms. The Niederhoffer scale was employed as an objective measure of cynicism. Extended interviews were conducted with those who scored high on the cynicism scale. Two major sources of social strain were indicated by the interview responses: (a) the area of promotion and the related power struggles; (b) the area of judicial processes and recent court decisions.

ERVIN G. BUBLITZ*

The concept of cynicism has been employed historically by a few sociologists in discussing the role of law enforcement officers; but the meaning of the concept and its specific relationship to other critical variables within the law enforcement setting have not been explicitly investigated nor analyzed.

This study is justified on the basis of three concerns: (1) national interest in the development of vital knowledge for the improvement of law enforcement, (2) concern with the broader theoretical concept of social control at the organizational and role levels, and (3) the integration of the concept of cynicism into a theoretical conceptual scheme that will allow for greater understanding and generalization relative to its subsequent development and causal patterns.

Research has indicated that within formal organizations, actors or groups of actors have experienced differing degrees of social strain. Smelser (1963) observes that the literature abounds with words synonymous with or related to social strain, but that the term social strain remains broad enough to include a wide variety of experience. In Smelser's presentation, strain was generated due to the actor or a group of actors experiencing ambiguity, uncertainty, conflict, or relative deprivation with regard to the normative structure and the specific role structure of an organization. In this research, the theoretical perspective explicitly set forth four major sources of potential social strain; namely, norm definitions, role definitions, sanctions, and supervisory practices.

Etzioni (1965) has stated that all formal organizations generate a control structure over their members and that such a hierarchy of control is central to the organization. Etzioni explicitly cited the thesis that most organizations cannot depend on the voluntary compliance of members relative to the normative structure and that both the activation of supervision and sanctions were necessary in order to produce desired conformity. Etzioni cited instances of increased strain and tensions with regard to the involuntary orientation of members with regard to standards and norms set forth by the organization.

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Katz and Kahn (1966) have cited system strain as a characteristic of any formal organization. Such internal strain, according to the authors, may be traced to (a) conflict between norm definitions or role definitions at the individual or group level, (b) relative deprivation based on differential hierarchical gradients of rewards due to ranking, and (c) role ambiguity relating to the lack of definition and information.

Kahn and his associates (1964) found that role conflict and role ambiguity generated by social control structures of organizations resulted in low job satisfaction, low self-confidence, low confidence in the organization, and a high degree of tension buildup. The study explicitly defined role ambiguity and role conflict in terms of the lack of clearly stated and conflicting norms relative to supervisory practices, opportunities for advancement, the scope of delegated responsibility, and organizational expectations. The researchers stated: "Supervisory responsibility emerges as a major organizational determinant of role conflict. Either the supervision of rank and file employees or the supervision of people who are themselves supervisors appears to have substantial effects on the degree of role conflict and the amount of experienced tension. In combination direct and indirect supervisory responsibility produce very substantial role conflict and tension."

McNamara's (1967) research indicated that the legal norms relative to the law enforcement setting were a major source of uncertainty. General lack of consensus existed among recruits, along with a high degree of uncertainty regarding the basic principles of law and how such legal norms were to be applied. Further, McNamara discovered that with increased field experience, the police officers perceived their legal authority as insufficient. The semimilitary aspects of supervision, discipline, and extended departmental rules and regulations at the organizational level tended to be defined as areas of conflict.

Reiss and Bleack (1967), while investigating the Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., police departments, discovered that officers perceived decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court as a critical area of conflict. According to study "Five of every ten officers see the rulings regarding the legality of search of persons as making problems for them in their work; only 48 percent see problems with respect to confessions. But 70 percent of all officers see the rulings on interrogation or questioning of suspects as affecting their work."

Further, the Reiss and Black research indicated that opportunities for promotion, evaluative examinations, and supervisory practices were documented as sources of officer dissatisfaction and potential areas of social strain.

A few studies have referred to the development of the cynical perspective within the law enforcement setting; however, these studies failed to develop an adequate definition of cynicism or to place the concept of cynicism within a theoretical framework.

Banton (1964), in a cross-cultural study comparing police organizations in Britain and the United States, referred to the existence of the cynical perspective in this manner: "In some of the cities in the Northern parts of the United States, the police departments have been demoralized by political control, poor leadership, and low rates of pay. The life of many districts seems competitive and raw; individuals pursue their own ends with little regard for public immorality, and the policeman sees the ugly underside of outwardly respectable households and businesses. Small wonder, that many American policeman are cynics."

In a national study, involving more than 4,500 respondents, Watson and Sterling (1969) recorded numerous written and spoken statements from law enforcement personnel reflecting tension buildup and frustration. Findings were summed up with this statement: "The bitterness and defensiveness evident in these written comments are striking. One cannot escape the conclusion that some of the officers hold attitudes which are unhealthy and alarming....From these written comments, from a general reaction of these men during class discussions, and from the sentiments expressed in private interviews, it appears that many of these officers exhibit characteristics similar to those shown by a persecuted minority. They are very sensitive about criticism. They seem to fear that everyone is against them, including their commanding officers....It should be noted at this point that the defensiveness, bitterness, and cynicism revealed in the comments are not by any means universal."

Niederhoffer's research (1969), the first project of any consequence investigating cynicism within the law enforcement setting, involved a sample of 220 New York police officers. The study specifically analyzed cynicism and related it to such variables as length of service, rank, and education. Niederhoffer found that cynicism clearly increased until the seven to ten year period of law enforcement involvement. After that, cynicism scores dropped during the eleventh to fourteenth year period, and remained rather stable from fifteen to nineteen years.

Niederhoffer predicted that patrolman would score higher on the cynicism scale as compared to superiors. It was reasoned that since superiors, namely sergeants and lieutenants, had experienced promotion and prestige, their cynicism scores would be lower than those at the lower levels of the structure. The thesis set forth by Niederhoffer was that "promotion decreases the amount of frustration, among superiors would be lower than those at the lower levels of the structure. The thesis set forth by Niederhoffer was that "promotion decreases the amount of frustration, among superiors when compared to patrolman who have failed the test promotion. In comparing cynicism scores of superior officers with the same mean cynicism scores for all patrolman, Niederhoffer found a slight difference in the predicated direction, although it was not statistically significant.

With regard to education, the study indicated that patrolmen with a college education tended to score higher on

the cynicism scale due to a greater discrepancy between expectation regarding official activities and promotions and actual achievement. If these expectations failed to be achieved by the educated officer, a greater degree of frustration would consequently be experienced.

Niederhoffer's research provided the basis for a more extended and comprehensive study of cynicism within the law enforcement setting. It was his research and analysis that suggested that the formal organizational structure, the decisions of the Supreme Court, and the social construction of a particular law enforcement subculture influenced the development of the cynical perspective.

Toward a Theory of Cynicism

Based on the theoretical works of Etzioni (1965), Katz and Kahn (1966), Levinson (1964), and Gouldner (1954), the following postulates were formulated:

1.-Every society, organization, or group generates a degree of social control that is in turn validated by value definitions.

2.-Every society, organization, or group socially constructs and employs mechanisms of social control in the form of norm definitions, role definitions, sanctions in the form of rewards and punishments, and supervisory practices.

3.-Groups and individual actors adapt differently to norm definitions, role definitions, sanctions, and supervision. Individual actors or groups of actors may adapt to the social situation in the following ways: (a) The individual or group may experience conflict, ambiguity, uncertainty, and relative deprivation associated with norm definitions, role definitions, sanctions, and supervisory practices resulting in social strain and withdrawal from the role. (b) The individual or group may positively and willingly confirm to the norm and role definitions and also positively experience sanctions and supervisory practices resulting in reduced social strain. Such experiences are conducive to the development of a noncynical perspective. (c) The actor may reluctantly conform to norm and role definitions and experience conflict, ambiguity, uncertainty, and relative deprivation with regard to norm definitions, role definitions, sanctions, and supervisory practices resulting in the accumulation of social strain. Such experiences are conducive for the development of a cynical perspective. Cynicism then is here defined as the buildup of resentment and hostility due to the continual re-experiencing of frustration and strain. Thus, the development of the cynical perspective depends on the social experiences of the actor. The Niederhoffer cynicism scale was employed as the operational definition of cynicism.

Analysis of Cynicism

Two law enforcement agencies, namely a large metropolitan police department (MPD) and a state highway patrol (SHP) from the same state, agreed to cooperate in this research.

In comparing the objective cynicism scores of the two agencies significant difference was found between the MPD and SHP. Applying an analysis of variance, the results indicated a very significant difference in cynicism scores between the two agencies. The value was significant at the .001 level, indicating a very significant difference in recorded cynicism scores between the two agencies.

Since the statistical evidence indicated a significant difference, it was necessary and logical to investigate the two a-

gencies in terms of significant differences regarding the mechanisms of social control and the potential sources of social strain; namely, norm definitions, role definitions, sanctions, and supervisory practices.

First, it may be noted that the SHP had less differentiation with regard to role definitions and less of a hierarchical structure than the MPD. These differentiated activities were noted in the role definitions as set forth by each organization.

The state trooper's role activities were primarily defined in terms of traffic control, accident investigation, enforcement of the traffic code, and related functions. The concept of division within the SHP has little meaning in terms of specialized differentiation but rather refers to geographical areas. Role activities within the SHP in general were rather homogeneous, related mainly to motor vehicle traffic problems. Such restricted role activities and role definitions resulted in possibly generating less uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflict, compared with role activities and role definitions of the MPD.

In contrast to the SHP, the MPD has very specialized and highly differentiated activities such as assignments in vice control, gambling, prostitution, narcotics, sex crimes, and others. The differentiated and specialized activities of the MPD may have created a greater demand for control that may, indeed, be conducive to the actor experiencing greater conflict and uncertainty, resulting in greater social strain.

Such differences in the role activities and role definitions have implications for the significant differences between the two agencies regarding measures of objective cynicism scores. MPD officers were involved, to a great extent, in dealing with different types of social interaction demanded by the two agencies involving different norm-role structures.

The distinctions between the two agencies regarding differential role activities were illustrated explicitly by one of the interview statements of the MPD supervisors: "The decisions they (SHP) are making are strictly as a traffic unit; traffic decisions don't require the type of decisions that the police officers are making—decisions on family fights, trying to gain knowledge of arrest, search and seizure on every case; when he is taking somebody into custody, whether he has the right to do this, whether he is violating someone's rights. All of these things are paramount to our city police officers; there are just more questions to be answered per any given situation than with the Highway Patrol." Thus, the likelihood of role uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflict experienced by an officer of the MPD tended to be greater than that experienced by a trooper in the SHP relative to the norm-role structure and the very nature of the social situation.

Additionally, as indicated by the significantly different objective responses to questions regarding supervisory practices, disciplinary action, evaluation of achievement, and the latitude of responsibility delegated to the field officer, the two agencies tended to differ in styles of supervision and officer perceptions of supervision.

The following objective points were presented in questions as measures in specific areas:

- **Perception of Supervision:** "Supervisors in the police department are extremely helpful toward patrolmen." "Supervisors will provide all assistance they can with police problems."

- **Perception of Disciplinary Action:** "In general, disciplinary action in the department is fair and just."

- **Perception of Supervisory Evaluation:** "In general, supervisors evaluate their men on the basis of achievement."

- **Perception of Autonomy for Individual Action:** "Each police officer is not given enough latitude by his superiors to handle the police problems in his area of responsibility." "Policemen often fail to take necessary police action due to a feeling that superiors will fail to support their actions."

A chi-square analysis yielded significant differences between the two agencies. SHP troopers perceived their supervisors as being more helpful and willing to provide assistance with enforcement problems, compared with the MPD officers. Also noted were significant differences between SHP trooper and MPD officer perceptions of disciplinary action and supervisory evaluation. SHP troopers were more likely than the MPD officers to view disciplinary action as being more fair and just and to believe that they were evaluated to a greater degree on the basis of achievement. SHP troopers also were more likely to view their supervisors as giving them responsibility and latitude for handling enforcement problems and decisions. Thus, the MPD officers, according to the objective responses, were more likely to view autonomy for individual action and independence as being insufficient. In order to support the objective chi-square analysis, extended interviews with supervisors were conducted. These tended to confirm and support the objective findings. Interviews with supervisors indicated that each agency activated a different type of control structure.

Sources of Social Strain

In a content analysis of interview of the MPD, officers scoring high on the cynicism scale resulted in the following interview statements relative to disciplinary action and supervisory evaluation. Noted were a number of sources of social strain related to the officers experiencing uncertainty, ambiguity, conflict, and relative deprivation.

(MPD OFFICER D) "I think that a good share of strain and frustration comes in the area of supervision and who is to follow certain rules and regulations. Certain people who are what's called on the inside the "in-group" — these individuals in the "in-group" can violate certain rules, certain policies, and no questions are asked. The other individuals outside of this "in-group" can and do, depending on the severity of the violation, suffer considerably by either assignment, transfers, time off, ridicule, and promotions. Where it's been obvious throughout the years to some extent, anyway, that it is who you know whether you get a promotion; and in most cases there's always in existence two groups and if you didn't belong to one or the other you were out entirely; and if you belonged to the "in-group" you got a promotion. As far as personalities are concerned, there are a great many instances where personalities play a big part in how you get rated, how you get your assignment; your performance has very little to do with it unless your personality fits in with those in authority at the particular time goes along with it."

(MPD OFFICER O) "There is a real lack of opportunity to move upward more rapidly. The promotional system is not really fair and the merit system is a farce."

(MPD OFFICER I) "The problem of getting promoted is knowing the right people and being in their good graces. The merit rating and Captain's Board are a big joke."

(MPD OFFICER S) "My major frustration since I have been in this department is the fact that in order to

more or less insure your advancement in the department you have to associate yourself with certain groups in the department--we could say cliques--which do have a great bearing, I feel, on the opportunities for advancement. Primarily, I feel that the tests on the grading setup for promotion have been devised so as to reflect personalities--being judged by a Board of Captains ends up somewhat as a personalities contest . . . Also, in the manner of discipline, there is really not a policy or standardized system of disciplining officers of the department."

The interviews with the MPD officers scoring high on the cynicism scale indicated that these officers were concerned with the loss of legal authority and court processes and their statements reflected a degree of ambiguity and conflict regarding their legal authority and the courts.

(MPD OFFICER A) "There is no question that the courts have almost made it impossible to do good police work. Then if you do get a conviction, they only put the bastard on probation or only lock him up for a couple of years."

(MPD OFFICER F) "The biggest strain that I do feel upon myself, however, at this time, would be the fact that 90 percent of police work is futile due to the fact that civil rights and various decisions of the court have made it virtually impossible for a police officer to do an adequate job or to warrant a conviction of a criminal regardless of the tactic he uses."

(MPD OFFICER G) "Police authority has been undermined by the Supreme Court and all of their decisions against good law enforcement."

(MPD OFFICER I) "The Supreme Court makes it very hard to do a good job. The search and seizure laws need to be loosened in particular."

(MPD OFFICER M) "As far as conflicts such as courts . . . The main difficulty is with the courts due to their inconsistent ever-changing policy as far as conflictions and their interpretations of the law."

(MPD OFFICER R) "They ought to lift restrictions that hinder good enforcement or procedures in areas of search and seizure."

(MPD OFFICER D) "There's no doubt that the Supreme Court decisions have hampered, in most cases, the officer's ability to follow serious cases such as homicide, rape, armed robbery for the simple reason that we have to be an attorney for the defense of the suspect rather than a police officer for the defense of the public."

(MPD OFFICER F) "It is generally the ruination of the Supreme Court so long, of course, as they turn the law over to the lawyers and it affects all police work, patrolment, and what have you."

(MPD OFFICER N) "Right now one of the biggest sources of frustration that I can see is the lack of cooperation as far as the courts and the attorneys are concerned. Primarily because there's so much wheeling and dealing going on, you don't really get a trial. A person may go free because of wheeling and dealing rather than because of the fact that we haven't prepared a case properly or because we have a poor case or because of any other reason. There's just a deal made out between attorneys before the case ever comes to court. In other words, you don't know whether a person is guilty or not guilty. It's just what kind of a deal the attorneys can get for him."

(MPD OFFICER O) "The courts and lawyers don't do anything but screw up good laws anyway, with all their

wheeling and dealing."

(MPD OFFICER P) "The thing that really bothers me is the bail system and being too easy on repeaters."

The interview statements of the MPD officers indicated that the perceived loss of legal authority was one of the major areas of officer frustration and social strain. In general, the interview statements also indicated that officers were quite disenchanted with court decisions and court processes.

In general, the findings relative to cynicism and its development supported the theoretical position as set forth in this study. The mechanisms of social control, namely norm-role definitions, sanctions, and supervisory practices, were areas relevant to the generation of social strain, a condition conducive for the development of cynicism. The analysis of objective questions and interview findings indicated that those officers who had scored high on the cynicism scale had experienced ambiguity, uncertainty, conflict, and relative deprivation resulting in the development of social strain within the law enforcement setting.

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