



# Bearing the burdens of the bureau: challenges and possibilities for the implementation of policing codes of ethics

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# Research question

What can an exploration of the ethics and identities of serving police officers and professional staff tell us about the challenges, possibilities and dilemmas of working with a code of ethics in practice?

# Existing research on codes of ethics tends to disregard:

- Individuals' history
- Individuals' worldviews/ideology
- The history of an organisation or sector
- Dominant practices and approaches within an organisation
- The relationship between an organisation and the larger socio-political context
- The particular circumstances of an organisation at the time of data gathering
- Other major issues facing an organisation at the time of data gathering and in the past

# Our research scene: PSNI

- Implemented a code of ethics in 2002, as a result of the Good Friday agreement and transition from RUC to PSNI.
- Revised in 2008.
- Clearly a heavy political agenda informing the design and need for the code.
- Code embedded within new recruit training
- The code sits alongside human rights, which is held as a dominant framework for guiding practice and response planning.
- The Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland provides an additional layer of accountability.

# Research design

- Qualitative research based on 37 semi-structured interviews
- Five days of data gathering - March 9 – 13, 2015.
- Interviews with a range of officers and professional staff – but primarily constables.
- Participants were asked:
  - to speak about the reasons they enrolled in the police and their experience of being a police officer in Northern Ireland
  - to whom they felt accountable ethically
  - to speak about the culture and practices of the organization and broader socio-political environment
  - to speak about their attitudes towards the code and experiences of working with the code

# Initial findings: emergent themes

## Existing ethical identifications:

- A family history of public service in the police, military or civil service.
- A 'family' ethos of the organisation in the past - RUC described in familial terms.
  - Senior officers would socialise and teach younger officers informally.
  - Loyalty to family.
- A notion and stories of 'serving' were prominent.
- Sacrifice of significant personal freedoms in order to help "good, honest" people.
  - E.g. No friends, secrecy, considerable personal inconvenience.
- Attitudes shaped by tales of encountering significant risks to personal safety.

# Ethical transition ...



Command?

Public Bureaucracy?

# Code of ethics within an ethos of bureaucracy

- The code is framed officially as a tool of an accountable bureau
- More often than not officers view it as a disciplinary tool.
- Part and parcel of a more distanced, impersonal identification with organisation: depersonalised systems – less personal, more rule-bound (an ethos of the bureau).
- Most officers had stories concerning ombudsman complaints: never discussed with colleagues or line managers.
- Routinised bulletin of offences and punishments would ‘appear’.
- For most, identifications with the code were marginal: the code was viewed as another technology and series of procedures amongst others.



# Grappling with the ethos of bureaucracy

Three types of responses, all inseparable from a perceived larger, more significant shift in organisational ethos and about changing relations between personal, organisational and national ethical responses.

- Accepted in a neutral fashion as an ‘obvious’ part of a modern, accountable bureaucratic organisation. “If you’ve done nothing wrong, you’ve got nothing to fear. It’s obvious.”
- Welcomed as symbolic of the “joy” of transitioning to a country of peace and a new organisation with a changing symbolic environment.
- Viewed as one symbol of a more impersonal, arbitrary and unfair organisation: political meddling; senior officers acting as politicians rather than officers. Depersonalisation accentuates feelings of unfairness.

# Some implications ...

- How much is about implementation, how much about much larger changes in ethos of which implementation of code is part?
- Do codes really need to be central to the identities of professionals in policing?
- Does moving to an ethos of the bureau mean that different kinds of officers need to be recruited?
- Or do they need to be trained differently?
- Exploring a more relational, discursive form of training rooted in principles of good development ....
  - Focus on new recruits or potential recruits
  - Exploration of ethical identity and motives for joining
  - Open, deliberative and democratic discussion of the emerging ethos of policing