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The "thinning" blueline: a Bourdieuian appreciation of police subculture

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ABSTRACT

The notion of a recalcitrant "police subculture" is pervasive in the literature on policing, often invoked to explain many of the ills linked to police misconduct and corruption. This article argues that the failure of reform efforts is the result of interventionist strategies which had sought to change police subculture "head-on" without a corresponding change in the structural conditions in which the policing role is so located, and that these efforts, theoretically, have been informed by a conceptualisation of police subculture as homogenous, monolithic, and static. Using the Bourdieuian concepts of the "habitus" and "field", the view of a "recalcitrant" subculture will be challenged in this article. Using the Singaporean experience as a case in point, it will be shown how changes in the field of policing can bring about changes, intended or otherwise, in the occupational habitus of the police: refashioning the informal repository of knowledge guiding police work.

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Introduction

The concept of police subculture, synonymously referred to as cop-culture, police occupational culture, and informal culture of policing, among others, originally emerged from ethnographic studies of police work, which revealed a system of informal occupational norms and values beneath the rigid and structured facade of the organisation (Chan, Devery, & Doran, 2003; Marks, 2004). This implied that police work was rarely guided by legal precepts but personal discretion in how officers enforced the law. That discretion in everyday policing practices was generally thought to stem from the shared beliefs and values of the police, particularly of the rank and file, who were most likely to encounter members of the public in conditions of "low visibility" (Goldstein, 1960). Thus, police subculture, as a construct, is best observed from the manner in which rank-and-file officers exercise their discretion during their work. As Cohen (1986) notes, it is impossible to decouple police discretion from police work: "… the use of discretion is not an option … it is a necessary, unavoidable part of the job" (p. 27).

What is interesting about police discretionary decisions lies in the fact that they seem to assume particular patterns which runs counter to the "principle of equality before law" (McConville & Shepherd, 1992). These patterns are based on "working rules" derived from the informal repository of knowledge transmitted by veterans to rank-and-file officers, socialising the latter to particular rules, rituals, and recipes to cope with the exigencies of policing (Manning, 1977). Therefore, police discretionary decisions are not "free-flowing" – the peculiar socialisation of rank-and-file officers has endowed their sense-making processes in the field with a particular

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logic. This logic – "a cultural mode of thinking, knowing and doing" (Manning & Van Maanen, 1978, p. 267) – is termed by police researchers as "police subculture." The following discussion unpacks the constitutive elements of this informal repository of knowledge.

Though the concept of police subculture is loosely defined in the literature, attempts have been made to document its essential and phenomenal features (Punch, 2011; Waddington, 1999a). In particular, Chan (1997) noted that the "siege-mentality" and "code of silence" evident among the rank and file were often related to the secrecy and perpetuation of police misconduct. This "code of silence" is accepted as common place all over the world (Loyens, 2009). As Dean, Bell, and Lauchs (2010) note:

> The code of silence was reinforced … through implied or explicit threats of reprisals, exploiting fears of being shunned or labeled … and feeding anxieties about an individual's career prospects. Individuals were called upon to sacrifice their autonomy and personal interests for … the "brotherhood". (p. 31)

Corollary to this proliferation of misconduct was the frequent invocation of the notion of police subculture by academic researchers and commentators to criticise policing practice as a whole. Marché (2009), referencing Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver, and Haberfeld (2000) study on police integrity, surmised that "police culture fosters corruption" (p. 463). This normative implication, combined with the "civil libertarian" concern about the extent and sources of police deviation from the due process of law, led researchers to hypothesise and suggest that police subculture was responsible for the many injustices carried out (Reiner, 2000). Holdaway (1983) expressed this libertarian concern:

> If I desire anything for this book, it is that it may make a small contribution to our search for a more loving and just society and therefore a more loving and just police … (p. vi)

This reformist orientation, as Waddington (1999a) noted, delineated a certain definition of police subculture by portraying some existing elements as "core" – to the exclusion of others. As Chan (1997) succinctly put it, it was the "negativity of the values, attitudes and practice norms" which the concept of police subculture often drew attention to (p. 44). Literature suggested that curtailing these imperatives of police culture involved making key changes to "the informal culture of the police, their practical working rules" (Reiner, 2000). This would redefine the police mandate and institute new forms of accountability. As Brogden and Shearing (1993) indicated, "an attack on the police occupational culture [was] necessary," where the traditional rule-making approach to police reform was complemented by strategies to change police culture from the inside (p. 97).

Framing the research problem

Reforming police subculture, however, yielded little or no substantive outcomes, thus earning the label of being "recalcitrant" and an impediment to police responsiveness to wider community concerns (Chan, 1997). We argue that the failure of reform is the result of interventionist strategies which had sought to change police subculture "head-on" but without a corresponding change in the structural conditions and context in which the policing role is located. We also argue that these reform efforts have been fuelled by a conceptualisation of police subculture as deterministic, homogenous, monolithic, static, and "free-standing" (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993, p. 92), with a concordant neglect of *agency* in police decision-making (Narayanan, 2005). The authors' observations of the changes in the policing environment in Singapore over the last four decades such as the introduction of community policing and the institutionalisation of "whistle-blowing" through the "Help by Ethical Disclosure Programme" have sidelined the much-documented "code of silence" in favour of an individualistic ethos among the rank and file. This shift signifies the adaptive character of police subculture – given its distinct manifestations within particular historical, political, and legal contexts. Relying on Chan's (2007) framework which has been

adapted from the Bourdieuian concepts of "habitus" and "field" denoting the symbiosis between police subcultural dispositions with their larger structural environment, the view of a "recalcitrant" subculture will be challenged in this article (Chan et al., 2003). Using the Singaporean police experience as a case in point, it will be shown how changes in the field of policing *can* bring about changes in the occupational habitus of the police making it "dynamic, malleable and responsive" (Rizal, 2009, p. 4). A brief overview of the traditional conceptualisation of police subculture and its attendant problems are offered before addressing the utility of the Bourdieuian framework to understand the impact of police reforms on police subculture in the Singapore context.

Existing paradigms of police subculture

"Subculture" as a sociological construct links a broad spectrum of thoughts and actions into a coherent whole. Cultural expression, therefore, more than representing a de facto operationalisation of a much broader theoretical construct, *is* a theoretical necessity: as talk in "canteen culture" became the explanation of police action (Waddington, 1999a). On one hand, "police culture" might be conceived narrowly as attitudinal variables that sought to understand and explain police behaviour; on the other, it might be conceptualised as an overarching hypothetical construct that provided legibility and continuity to the spectrum of police thought and practice (Waddington, 1999b). Either way, the construct served to bridge officers' actions and behaviour in one context to another, most notably to illuminate police encounters with members of the public on the streets. In this respect, the notion of police subculture has much conceptual value in explaining police action broadly.

The problem with understanding police subculture this way, however, is threefold: first, it treats police subculture as the primary guide to police action, thus developing and reinforcing the notion of police subculture as a powerful determinant dictating police practice (Narayanan, 2005). This ultimately negates the role of agency in the production of an institutional practice (Chan, 1997). Hence, the nexus between Waddington's "talk and action" is not as tight as one might think. There is overwhelming evidence supporting this premise, as the existing literature directs our gaze to the importance of contextual and situational variables – variables which provoke "deviant responses" from police officers (Black & Reiss, 1970).

Second, the problem with conceptualising police subculture as constituting a set of attitudinal variables is that it treats police subculture as being homogenous and monolithic; implying an unproblematic relationship between subculture and institutional decision-making (Narayanan, 2005). Literature, however, shows that the occupational culture is differentiated and comprises several cultures formed around adjustments to and demands of the job (Fielding, 1989, p. 81). This observation is corroborated by Manning (1977) who argues for the existence of structural and cultural variations *within* police organisations (p. 244). These variations in turn result in an uneven dispersal of knowledge distribution. As a result of all this evidence of diversity, the concept of subculture as a homogeneous and monolithic entity ironically becomes problematic. Recent developments in the UK and US lend credence to this premise given the increasing demographic diversity of police forces. Even though Weitzer (2005) himself notes that for police behaviour, "officers are mainly 'blue', not black, brown or white," (p. 23) he observes that recent studies revealed nuances in the modus operandi between black and white officers. Notwithstanding the generalisability of such studies given their particular research contexts, the fact remains that one should be aware of existing organisational realities which increasingly challenge reductionist assessments of police subculture. In addition to racial diversification, Brown and Heidensohn (2000) have also explored the increasing "feminization" of the police force. Their findings illuminate the particular strategies adopted by policewomen in negotiating their everyday occupational realities. Clearly, these practices demand a more assiduous re-examination of police subculture.

Third, a major problem with conceptually bridging "talk" and "action" is the absence of a historical-structural component (Narayanan, 2005). Exclusively focusing on subculture and its impact on institutional practices without accounting for the structural conditions in which such practices form (according to real "encounters" in the field) is to assume that culture – as a construct and expression – is distinct and detached from its environment. Cognisance is needed with regards to the influential confluence of "macro" factors – such as social, political, and legal climates – *alongside* culture for a holistic understanding of institutional practice. For example, one can refer to works which emphasise how societies with socio-demographic pluralism present particular demands on the police (O'Malley, 1997; Reiner, 1992; Vaughan, 2007), or works which underscore the importance of institutional context in shaping police (mal)practices (Gerber & Mendelson, 2008). Police subculture does not exist in a vacuum; it is located within particular contextual milieus which are subsequently conceptualised as a Bourdieuian "field."

It is to this significant misconception that this article particularly responds to and out of which the need for a reconstruction of the concept of police subculture emerges. Theoretically, the redefinition of police subculture using Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) distinction between "habitus" (culture) and "field" (structure) treats culture and structure as being in a relationship, thus being interactive and relational. Though culture is a principal *guide* to action, conveyed metaphorically through police "canteen" stories, myths, and anecdotes, the eventual institutional response must be seen as a product of the relationship between cultural influence and structural conditions in which the policing role is located with the role of agency sufficiently emphasised.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theory of social practice is attractive in the sense that it deals with the theoretical and empirical (data) "gaps" in the way police subculture has been traditionally conceptualised. Of interest to this research is that Bourdieu's framework allows for the presence of multiple cultures within one organisation as well as the possibility of cultural change (Chan, 2007). It concedes that when the field is changing, the organisational habitus must adjust lest officers whose habitus is the product of different fields feel like a "fish out of water" in the changed field (Chan, 2007, p. 324).

Habitus, field and institutional practice: police subculture reconsidered

Bourdieu's (1977) proposition of methodological relationism, notably through the concepts of *habitus* and *field*, are particularly relevant to the current research. Specifically, the two key concepts of *habitus* and *field* can be used to designate the cultural dispositions of police subculture and structural conditions of policing respectively. Bourdieu (1977) posited that the "field consisted of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital), while habitus consisted of a set of historical relations "deposited" within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). Society was thus conceptualised as an ensemble of relatively autonomous spheres of "play" or fields, all of which possessed a particular set of values and regulative principles that served to structure social agents' everyday lived experiences (Wacquant, 1992, p. 17).

Habitus, on the other hand, was conceived as a *structuring mechanism* that operated within social agents (Wacquant, 1992, p. 18, original emphasis). As the field allowed for considerable uncertainty and strategic interplay; habitus enabled agents to manage the complexities of social life by strategising reactions to the field in a roughly coherent and systematic manner (Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). These strategies are systematic yet simultaneously "ad hoc" because they are triggered by encounters with a particular field. In other words, habitus is "… creative, inventive, but *within* the limits of its structures… the embodied sedimentation of … social structures which produced it" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 19, emphasis mine).

Thus, against all forms of methodological monism that assert the priority of the structure *or* the agent, Bourdieu (1977) argues that the concepts of habitus and field are relational entities. The

field is therefore a *space of play* which allows for the organised improvisation of agents (Wacquant, 1992, p. 19, original emphasis). It is here that Bourdieu (1990) subscribes to the idea of *active* social agents who, working within a particular field, create the space to develop, reinforce, transform, and even resist cultural knowledge as "triggered" by the dictates of the field. An adequate conceptualisation of fields therefore presupposes a notion of agency.

With regards to the topic of police subculture and as demonstrated in the works of Chan (1997, 2007), Bourdieu's conceptual framework is valuable in demonstrating the interactive relationship that exists between police cultural knowledge (habitus) and structural realities of policing (field). Although Bourdieu's theory of practice assumes prominence in the field of sociology, it is not without criticisms. Jenkins (1992) in his metatheoretical exercise provides a critical reading of Bourdieu. By observing Bourdieu's entrapment in an "objectivist point of view" (p. 57), Jenkins argues that contrary to transcending the "dualism" of agency and structure, Bourdieu's project ultimately seeks recourse to the latter in his theoretical postulates of social life – leading Jenkins to accuse him of "epistemological arrogance" (p. 60). While this suggests a theoretical fault line within Bourdieu's writings, this paper defends Bourdieu by re-evaluating Jenkins' criticisms. For example, Jenkins faults Bourdieu's privileging of the "field." While we acknowledge this fact – that of the field's precedence in Bourdieu's writings – we argue that this privileging of fields is not coterminous with denying social actors of their agency (an argument substantiated by our subsequent presentation of data). Jenkins conflates Bourdieu's descriptor of "unconsciousness" for social action with the latter's refusal to imbue individuals with knowledgeability and agentic capacity. However, these are two mutually exclusive elements: the exercise of agency does *not* necessarily require consciousness or awareness (though possession of these might *enhance* individual agency). Therefore, Bourdieu's theoretical work is not as deterministic as Jenkins suggests.

We also question why Bourdieu's theoretical proclivities should be seen as weaknesses in themselves. After all, the exercising of agency does not occur in a vacuum. It is informed by larger contextual milieus. Without specific "rules of the game," it is unfathomable that social actors will be able to exercise their agency given the lack of *basis* for such an endeavour. To substantiate and contextualise this premise further, Skolnick's (1966) framework of the police's "working personality" will be deployed as a lens to further our understanding of Bourdieu.

In explaining the particular dispositions of officers, Skolnick (1966) highlights the intersubjective response towards a "dangerous environment" as *interpreted* by the rank and file. Elements such as "uncertainty" and "suspicion" located within their occupational climate lead to particular dispositional adaptations by officers. Hence, a particular kind of "working personality" can be deduced from the constellation of these adaptive and interpretive processes which signify the rank-and-file's "creative responses" to their working environment. From this, one can observe a symbiosis that parallels the interplay between Bourdieu's field and habitus. More importantly, given that this "working personality" is *derived from* the "environment," Skolnick's own point of departure demonstrates a theoretical affinity with Bourdieu's privileging of fields.

When one appreciates Bourdieu vis-à-vis Skolnick, one is able to see that far from indulging in epistemological arrogance, Bourdieu's privileging of the field is a theoretical *necessity* as the agentic adaptations of the rank and file are derived from shifting environmental contours (i.e., the field). This observation has to be understood in relation to our earlier premise which posited that police subcultural change (habitus) can only come *after* larger socio-structural changes occur (field). To corroborate this claim, the following sections attempt to illuminate such changes which signify qualitative shifts in notions of "danger." In response to these shifts in contextual milieus, the interpretive processes of the rank and file in response to their environment will be highlighted. We argue that these processes suggest a metamorphosis of police subculture in Singapore, thus challenging notions of subcultural recalcitrance. In the later sections, we attempt to elucidate how two major changes in the "field" of policing, epitomised first, by the adoption of community policing, and second, the

institutionalisation of multilayered accountability structures, have resulted in an emerging police subculture which is individualistic, risk averse, and "sterile." This indicates a shift in the informal repository of knowledge among the rank and file.

Methods

The data for this research comes from a qualitative study conducted on the Singapore police in 2013. Given the close affiliation of one of the authors with the Singapore police which enabled access to a pool of informants, open-ended "conversation-style" interviews were conducted with 26 individuals. This number includes officers from the rank and file, senior command, Training Academy, and the various land divisions. Four retired officers were also included in the sample to gain a "historical" perspective of how policing had changed over the years. Informants hailed from a variety of ranks representing both the older and newer schemes of police service. Except for six informants who were female officers, the rest were male. In order to achieve better triangulation of data, the authors consulted multiple voices and perspectives on the challenges confronting policing, such as a survey of the secondary and archival information on the Singapore police. The transcripts of the interviews were coded for thematic and conceptual similarities (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

To corroborate the above and to generate data with greater historical depth, secondary sources were consulted as well. Methods of content and discourse analysis were applied to the following materials: archived police magazines and newspaper articles (from The Straits Times[1]). Given the qualitative orientation of this article, the analysis of sources was extended to a latent content analysis (Berg, 1995). In other words, an initial manifest content analysis was useful in organising the secondary sources based on the authors' larger thematic concerns. However, this process needed to be coupled with an "interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the … data," given that these sources are ultimately signifying documents which contain "deeper structural meanings" (Berg, 1995, p. 176). Therefore, a latent content analysis was a necessary endeavour as it illuminates the historical-contextual significance of the "raw material" the author was presented with.

Findings

The changing "field" of policing in the Singapore police force: emerging milieus of "danger"

First layer of "danger": *towards community policing and a* "two-pronged vulnerability." The national theme of remaining economically and politically sturdy coupled with "massive governmental campaigns waged to rid Singapore of urban slums, squalor, and underemployment" (Austin, 1989, p. 917), facilitated the change and shape of policing style from a legalistic to service style during the early 1980s (Wilson, 1978, p. 172). Apart from developments in political, economic, and social spheres that allowed the Singapore police to settle into a more preventive and deterrent mode of law enforcement, the trend towards community policing by the Singapore Police Force (SPF) can be explained by at least two other developments in the "field" of policing.

The first of these is related to the success of the SPF in curbing the activities of the Chinese secret societies and minimising the problem of police corruption in the 1960s and 1970s, both of which enhanced its public image. Subscribing to the idea that community policing involves the sharing of responsibility for crime prevention between the police and public (Morris & Heal, 1981, p. 42), a favourable police image becomes an important requisite, at least at the level of discourse, to formalising community policing.

The second factor involved the change in the population distribution on the island where shanty-type houses piled together in communities known in the vernacular as "*kampungs*" were

replaced by public housing from the late 1960s. These new living arrangements had a profound effect on the style of law enforcement. With a large proportion of Singaporeans living in high-rise buildings, the SPF was forced to abandon, or at least limit, its former method of random motorised patrolling and replace it with "vertical policing" which involved the movement of patrol officers from floor to floor of high-rise buildings (Bayley, 1989, p. 13).

Instead of relying on various police stations, the SPF decentralised much of its functions and activities through the Neighbourhood Police Post System (NPP). Formed in 1983 as an attempt to replicate the successful Japanese model of community policing based upon the Koban system, the Singapore NPP system is a kind of "mini-police station situated in the heart of a neighbourhood and catering for the welfare of about 30,000 residents" (Quah & Ong, 1989, pp. 275–276). Fundamentally its main objective is to improve police-community relations and to prevent and suppress crimes by means of public support and cooperation. The formation of NPPs and the reorganisation of police patrols namely those on foot, bicycles, and motor scooters was found to enhance the means of surveillance and public security in housing estates. Accompanying this change in policing methodology in view of the structural shift of the population from *kampungs* to Housing and Development Board apartments due to the urbanisation programme that followed suit, was the need to rejuvenate neighbourhood cohesion and informal social control that were associated with the earlier *kampung* way of life. Incidentally, between mid-1970 and 1980, Singapore's overall crime increased, causing many to suspect that the ecological changes and the perceived breakdown of informal support structures had been primarily responsible (Austin, 1989; Ong, 1984).

This apparent deterioration of informal bases of social control in industrialised (in this case industrialising) societies is what Jones and Newburn (2002) termed as eroding *tertiary social control*. Giddens (1990) elaborates on this "disembedding" process, whereby social relations are removed from local contexts due to the increasing mobility of people, capital, and information. Others such as Etzioni (1993) and Putnam (2000) have also argued that with the decline of public participation in intermediary social institutions such as "community groups, secure employment, trade unions, churches and local societies and organizations … citizens are more likely to relate to the social world as individuals" (Jones & Newburn, 2002, p. 140) leading to social atomisation.

The attractiveness of the Singapore model of community policing with its quasi-autonomous and semiformal focus lies in its representation of a "parochial order" where it is able to provide an important convergent point for the "private order" of friendship and kinship on one hand, and the "public order" of the state and its exclusive authority over legitimate use of force on the other (Hunter, 1985). Stronger parochial orders are necessary for more effective social control, including the state and the private order (Jones & Newburn, 2002). The declining efficacy of the private order with respect to eroding informal social control caused by urban renewal since the 1970s was countered by linking informal networks through parochial institutions such as the public schools, community centres, youth clubs, resident committees, citizen consultative committees, town councils, and other "grassroots" organisations (Narayanan, 2000). Community policing thus reimagined the citizens' role and that of the informal social control processes in crime-control and prevention, and in the delineation and advocacy of a multi-agency approach to public safety (Young, 1994, p. 45).

By the late 1990s, the police was of the view that the NPP system which was in existence since the early 1980s had run its course in the face of urban renewal and new challenges to the fulfilment of their mandates (Singh, 2000). This paved the way for the implementation of the Neighbourhood Police Centre (NPC) system of community policing with the first NPC established in the matured housing estate of Queenstown (Low, 2012). It was to be a one-stop total policing centre that provides a full range of police services.

The contemporary practices of community policing today embody a much wider range of initiatives and activities which include resident patrols, citizen crime reporting systems, neighbourhood watch schemes, home and commercial security services, property marking projects,

and a variety of programmes to cater to a more dynamic physical and social environment (Narayanan, 2000). Of importance, at least at the ideological level, is the manner in which community policing is practiced and talked about which allows the state police to maintain its monopoly in the use of legitimate coercive force. To ensure that this is upheld, the emphasis on service is asserted through the creation of the Service Improvement Unit (SIU) and the Service Development Inspectorate (SDI) to create a "culture of service excellence." Their purview consists of auditing service standards of land divisions and investigating the validity of public complaints about service, individuals or system defects, and recommending appropriate remedial actions (Quah, 2005, p. 94).

Key to these imperatives is the Neighbourhood Police Centre Officers (NPCOs) who are expected to perform these duties in their daily interaction with the public, failing which will result in complaints made against them. The expectations and constant evaluation of NPCOs both internally (superiors, SDI, and SIU) and externally (public and media) have created a "two-pronged vulnerability" in police work. As a result, there is the inculcation of a "risk-averse" orientation among front-line officers, forming an essential part of their "new" habitus as they *respond* to shifts in the field and qualitative shifts of "danger" – a theme explored subsequently.

Second layer of "danger": accountability to community, visibility and risk. The new "community-orientated" policing is thus one that not only envisages an establishment of effective partnership with the community but one that also dictates accountability to it (Skolnick & Bayley, 1986). The latter aspect is crucial since it increases public confidence in the police and in turn their legitimacy and that of the state. As Hough (2003) notes, "… the police function depends … on the authority that the police can command, rather than the force that they can deploy … A police organization that fails to secure public trust and establish its legitimacy simply does not function effectively" (pp. 146–147).

According to Chan (1999), the discourse on accountability "embraces a theory that public institutions have failed in … effectiveness and efficiency … to correct this deficiency, they need to adopt the managerial techniques and administrative structures of private for-profit corporations" (p. 254). This observation is a stark attestation of SPF's pursuit of organisational excellence (OE) by modelling itself after competitive, enterprising, and customer-orientated organisations upon realising that "it was no longer feasible to operate as a traditional public sector organization" (SPF Annual, 2008). As such, accountability to customers for the quality of service is enhanced; via the creation of performance indicators. In the SPF, "Key Performance Indicators," such as the Staff Appraisal Report (SAR), are used to assess officers, departments and units (SPF SQA, 2007, p. 35). This pursuit of OE is in tandem with the launching of the "Public Service for the 21st Century, or PS21, in May 1995, to improve the quality of service in the Singapore Civil Service as a whole" (Quah, 2005).

This push for accountability "involves a range of technologies and accounting devices … to measure performance and make decisions auditable;" along with "special agencies which handle public complaints … and … monitor or audit organizational performance" (Chan, 1999, p. 255). As such, on top of routinely keeping records of their activities, individual officers are constantly monitored by tracking systems built into information technology and regularly audited with respect to major investigation, operational readiness, and record-keeping standards (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000).

In the SPF, this translates into the current practice where NPCOs are required to "log-on" to the Cubicon system on their "Mobile Data Terminal" (MDT) at the start of every shift. Besides having a "Global Positioning System" that is linked to a command and control operations room providing supervisors with data on the daily operations of their officers, the MDT also enables the NPCOs to "receive information on incidents and cases and transmit back progress reports in return" (Police Life Magazine, 1996). This is in addition to the patrol log sheet which had to be recorded manually by front-line officers. What in essence these systems of surveillance and information technology reveal about front-line policing is that officers no longer operate in

"conditions of low visibility," an observation made by Goldstein 50 years ago. Evidence of this trend's continuity can be observed from proposals to tighten the nexus between modern technology and policing practices. In the course of writing, the authors have observed proposals to make police officers wear body cameras. A championed premise for this move is the additional layer of "accountability" created which acts as a bulwark against police abuse (The Straits Times, 2014). Hence, when discourses, practices, and technologies of accountability are viewed in totality, the question of who "controls the controllers" can be answered (Punch, 2011). Under contemporary structural, technological, and ideological conditions, the police have become subjects of discipline *in addition* to their traditional role as "dispensers" of it. The implications of this will be explored in the following section as we attempt to elucidate how officers interpret these emerging conditions of risk and visibility.

Community policing, through its presumed benevolence, institutionalisation of the service role and enhanced accountability, has generated public trust in police, which in turn, enabled police legitimacy – "the judgments that ordinary citizens make about the rightfulness of police conduct and the organizations that employ and supervise them" (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 444). Trust in, and legitimacy of, the police are requisites to police reform efforts especially in developing and "soft" authoritarian countries such as Singapore (Rajah, 2012), which was quick to align itself, for both historical and ideological reasons, to the Anglo-Saxon model based on the idea of "policing by consent" after its separation from Malaysia in 1965 (Reiner, 1985). The apparent success of the transition of policing style from a watchman to a legalistic and eventually to a service one in Singapore in a span of just over 40 years could be attributed to the "community model" of policing (Bayley, 1989; Quah & Quah, 1987; Wilson, 1978). Correspondingly, the "cold and authoritarian" image of the policemen who were "arrogant and high-handed" typing officers in the 1960s and 1970s (The Straits Times, 2000), gave way to the personification of the police as "friends in blue" since the 1980s (Quah & Quah, 1987).

Importantly, the Singapore case study discussed here proved that change in the "field" of policing was possible given the right mix of history, politics, economics, and last but not least, state policies and leadership. From the stance of the reconstructed framework on police subculture discussed earlier, and as evidenced by the data gathered in this study, these changes in the "field" have significantly had "altered" the "habitus" of policing. Here, we would like to discuss in detail three themes, namely, a sense of individualism, an attitude of risk-averseness, and an obsessive preoccupation with creating "paper-reality" which have emerged among the rank-and-file police in Singapore.

The new "habitus" of policing: responses to milieus of "danger"

Sacralising individualism, sanctioning solidarity

The observations of, and interviews with, rank-and-file officers revealed that a strong sense of individualism has replaced the once robust code of internal solidarity and loyalty, epitomised by the "bunker mentality" of the "thin-blue line" as officers interpret and negotiate with their changing occupational environment (Scraton, 1988). This individualistic ethos was exacerbated by a system which advocated the rotation of partners in every shift in an attempt to prevent any potential malpractice by officers on duty. This system stemmed from the tacit acknowledgement that the code of silence, solidarity and secrecy, and lying among the rank and file would impede investigation by "those on top" and "those outside" (Punch, 1983). As Van Maanen (1978) posits: "police officers, to be protected from their own infractions, must protect others … [since] no officer, to his knowledge that in his past (and no doubt his future) are certain acts which, if reported could cost him his job and perhaps even his freedom" (p. 119). Particularly prone are officers with fixed partners who would be "indebted to their patrol colleagues" and would form a "two-way obligation."

To mitigate this from happening, front-line officers were assigned different partners every shift at the expense of the bond and loyalty that came with such "two-way obligations." This strategy of ensuring police accountability – an aforementioned current of the "policing field" – encourages a realignment of the police habitus. Given the unpredictability of partnership, coupled with the uncertain dependability of partners, a mentality was bred where officers believed that "they can only rely on themselves and hope the other guy pulls his end of the bargain" (field notes on a "new" Sergeant). Of significance here is the institutionalisation of "whistle-blowing" through the "Help by Ethical Disclosure Programme," which encourages and rewards peer-reporting as ethical (Transparency International, 2006), which further fragmented romanticised notions of solidarity among officers. An officer remarked:

> What the senior police management doing is not good at all for the organization and the culture … we dare not say or do anything in the course of our work. I cannot trust anyone anymore because I don't know when my own colleagues will stab my back and worse get rewarded for it. These days, I keep to myself pretending that I don't know anything. I am counting my days; I have another six years to go before I retire.

> Policing today requires that you remain technically competent. Do your work, fill up the papers and take instructions. I hear from my seniors how we need to work as a team and remain together as a team. Frankly, but I don't believe in this. It just means more drinking and more deviance. I am happy to be a loner in this big bureaucracy (direct entry sergeant).

Concurrently, this lack of solidarity was compounded by an emerging division between the "lauchios" or "orang lamas" (both meaning veterans in the Chinese and Malay languages, respectively) and younger officers as far as the production and control of information is concerned. Many veteran officers were unwilling to share their experiences with the newer officers, thus interdicting the iconic "police canteen stories" altogether. As this "new" sergeant lamented:

> Some FTOs (Field Training Officers tasked to socialize new officers to patrol work) are … difficult to work with. You ask them about how to approach the public or even how to handcuff a suspect but they never tell you in a straight manner, always saying things with tentative "if-s" and "depends". There was one who said that I should not be in the force if I don't know the ABCs of policing … I don't even know what these ABCs are in the first place!

The predicament faced by new officers was the result of policies implemented over the years, though in their favour, to enhance the career prospect in the SPF after "… findings showed that the low entry rank and salary and slow progress rates had put people off from joining the force and did not attract officers to stay" (The Straits Times, 1997). This spurred SPF to develop more "attractive terms of service" (The Straits Times, 1990), such as higher starting rank and salaries, accelerated promotions, retention bonuses, and an improved career development framework. What ensued were initiatives like the "Current Estimated Potential" where an estimate is made, based primarily on educational qualifications, with regards to the highest appointment or rank the officer is likely to hold before retirement (Police Life Magazine, 1998). Such schemes created considerable animosity between the veterans (who do not come under the scheme) and younger officers. As a veteran officer at the Training Academy noted:

> These days younger officers are coming in with their corporal rank … they are better educated and command better salary than us … but let me tell you they are a useless lot – absolutely no initiative and waiting to be spoon-fed. I have "instant" sergeants because of their diploma but they don't know anything. And I refuse to teach them because they are all screwed-up in their heads. It's not fair to us because those days our retiring rank was sergeant or corporal after spending some 30 years in the force. Now they come in these ranks! How the police have changed … to the worst!

The refusal of veteran officers to share their experiences fully and at a "need to know" basis stems from the perceived promotional advantage these "upstarts" have due to their educational qualifications. This individualistic mentality is further perpetuated by the aforementioned SAR system, done half-yearly where officers would be graded and ranked by their superiors based on their appraisals, which has a direct bearing on their bonuses and promotional aspirations. This echoes

Rubenstein's (cited by Manning & Van Maanen, 1978) study where he discovered how "information within the organization belongs to its possessor and is guarded jealously" by the patrolman as they were vital to their performance and success (p. 55). The point of underscoring these fissures and organisational atomisation is not to merely highlight police attributes which deviate from traditional conceptualisations of police subculture. More importantly, one should note that these shifts in police dispositions are coterminous with larger structural–historical changes. This is analogous to the symbiosis between Bourdieu's "field" and "habitus" given that there were structural "triggers" (i.e., accountability mechanisms and bureaucratic reform) which refashioned officer dispositions.

Risk-averseness

The individualistic career-focused disposition of the front-line officers (though not exclusive to them) was identified as a key factor in the cultivation of a risk-averse attitude especially by the patrolmen. This, arguably, was a product of the segmentation of duties within the SPF, namely, the creation of specialist units and departments which has circumscribed patrol work to providing public services, often at the expense of proactive or preventative policing. This redefined role is similar to Van Maanen's (1978) outline on the general duties of patrol work which include dog catching, assisting elderly citizens, breaking up family fights, and finding lost children. Much of the "crime-fighting" element of policing has been removed from the purview of the patrol officers. The creation of the specialist Investigation Branch in each police division with sub-teams like the General Investigation Squad and more specific crime squads dealing with a variety of "specialist" crimes have meant that patrol officers are left to deal with "emergency calls," the bulk of which falls within the category of "social service" – as was the case historically (Bittner, 1970).

The public's expectation of the provision of service by the police emanates from the "Mission and Shared Vision of the SPF" in what Narayanan (2008) termed as the "dramatic departure from traditional policing" (p. 86). In it, the then Commissioner Khoo Boon Hui outlined the service role of the SPF which seeks a more customer- and service-orientated organisation where the "policeman has to transform from a crime fighter to a human relations expert" (The Straits Times, 1992). These general service provisions front-line officers were expected to perform however made them prone to complaints from the public. Such complaints, when reflected on the SAR, have a detrimental effect on the promotional aspirations and bonuses of officers. An officer remarked:

> Complaints can get you condemned. That means no promotion, no frontline duty, no bonus till you're cleared by your bosses. Life as an officer has become so unpredictable because you stand to lose your job if your bosses were to side the asshole public. Worst, they don't even want to hear you out. This boss of mine who is a scholar simply said that he doesn't want any complaints while he is here because it will affect his own promotion! Can you believe it?

The backdrop to this is a changing public that is now better educated, more demanding, and more critical of shortcomings as it has greater knowledge and awareness of policing capacities – notwithstanding the catalytic effect community policing has had on public expectations of the police since the early 1980s. "The public, being better educated, is quick to complain about any perceived tardiness or incompetence," explained Professor Jayakumar, a former Home Office Minister in the 1990s when he urged police officers to "drop old mindsets" (The Straits Times, 1993). Hence, growing educational attainment – a corollary of Singapore's nation-building policies after the 1960s – signifies another shift in the field of policing in Singapore. The confluence between an educated citizenry, a precarious policing context and the induced risk-averseness of officers can be attributed to the particular temporality of Singapore's political economy and the cumulative results of the state's socio-economic policies. In short, police attitudinal and dispositional shifts are informed by larger social, political, and economic currents.

The service orientation of the SPF is signified by the SDI which houses the Internal Investigation Division (IID), a division that "investigates the validity of public complaints … and recommends appropriate remedial measures" (Quah, 2005, p. 94). Compounding the issue is the proliferation of information technology and the availability of the Internet to the Singapore public which have enabled them to express their dissatisfactions with the police but without having to go through the more formal channels.

> Sometimes, I think the public has nothing better to do. We park our car at a loading bay to attend to emergency calls, they complain. We park our car along the road to buy food, they complain. Once I didn't smile to a resident, he complained that I was rude. How to survive as a policeman anymore? (Sergeant, 32)

The uncertainty and anxiety encountered by front-line officers once caused by an occupational environment characterised by "… danger and authority … and the 'constant' pressure to appear efficient" now stem from the fear of public complaints (Skolnick, 1966, p. 44). This corresponds to Chatterton's (1979, 1981) contention that the two primary concerns of officers on patrol are the avoidance of "within-the-job" trouble and "on-the-job trouble." On-the-job trouble arises from environments that officers police and the relationship between themselves and the public. As Chatterton (1981) observes:

> The decisions and actions taken at incidents reflect the concern to control relationships between themselves and the various publics on a division, to maintain their capacity to intervene authoritatively in any incident and to preserve their own and others" belief that they were "on top of the area". (p. 208)

Within-the-job trouble "is bound up with the relationship between patrol personnel and their superiors in the organization" (Chatterton, 1979, p. 49), such that the lower ranks are "concerned that any information about them received by higher level officers project[s] a favorable impression and at least [does] not damage their reputation" (Chatterton, 1983, p. 201). In fact, superiors detest addressing complaints as they too would be accountable to addressing them. Informants remarked that their superiors were quick to judge them and often attributed the blame to the rank and file, resonating with Manning's (1995) observation that "mistakes are often viewed as intentional by senior officers, thus introducing a constant ambiguity in … relationships … between officers and their supervisors" (p. 249).

As a consequence of superiors taking a dime view on complaints and their unwillingness to defend their front-line officers in an adversity, coupled with the uncertainty of being exposed to "on-the-job" trouble, rank-and-file officers had, as the data revealed, become averse to taking risks in their interactions with the public. This attitude is akin to the lay-low or "cover-your-ass" syndrome that "inflicts officers who live … in fear of administrative censure and … avoid … situations that involve risk that might later be second guessed" (Herbert, 1996). As Chan (2007) noted, this is the result of an "adaptive modality [of the] occupational culture that mediates external pressures and demands and internal expectations."

A corollary of this risk-averse behaviour was the lack of motivation for aggressive policing which Brown (1988) delineates as "matter of taking initiative on the street to control crime and the preoccupation with order" (p. 223). The police occupation is no longer viewed with a "sense of mission" as espoused in the literature (Reiner, 2000, p. 121), but as a career to be protected:

> These days, you sign in for work and want to leave without drama. There is no point being a hero. Those days officers look for trouble … now trouble looks for them … I just have a "hands-off" approach now (Senior Staff Sergeant in his 40s)

Even the iconic "police canteen stories" are circumscribed as officers fear that they would be snitched on by their very own because of the institutionalisation of "whistle-blowing" in the force (Fielding, 1989). In the words of a veteran officer of 30 years:

> Our younger officers are not performing up to standards and getting into trouble with the public and bosses … Basically they don't know how to do their job. What they learn at TRACOM (Police Training

> Command) is different from real policing (actual patrolling). Those days my FTOs and sergeants would talk about real-life situations, about people and places and often they rely on personal experiences. But now, talking about these experiences will invite trouble for themselves especially if their actions had been somewhat "ambiguous." You will never know when your own colleague is going to f**k you up! You have to "act stupid" these days in order to stay out of trouble.

This prescription adopted as a coping mechanism to avoid being complained against reaffirms the career-centric, individualistic, and risk-averse attitudes of the front-line officers. Put together, they discourage officers from exercising discretion – the staple that defines the very essence of front-line work in particular and the rank-and-file culture in general.

Discussion

The Singaporean puzzle: police subcultural change in an authoritarian context

As mentioned earlier, reformers and scholars alike have noted a recalcitrance characterising police subculture. Hence, it is interesting to observe a realignment of the police habitus in Singapore. The authors account for this shift by noting layers of "dangerousness" which have emerged from the shifting contours of a Bourdieuian field (of policing). Community policing, technologies, and infrastructures of accountability – these are common denominators in the sphere of contemporary policing which the rest of the world shares with Singapore. What sets Singapore apart from these other societies? Why is the element of recalcitrance so muted in the Singapore context? What is so peculiar about the field of policing in Singapore?

One of the distinguishing features of Singapore society is its authoritarian mode of governance (Rodan, 2008). This results in the elements of state paternalism, surveillance, and discipline being embedded in the everyday lives of Singaporeans. These should be seen as additional contextual ingredients which *interact* with the aforementioned "changes of the field" and *exacerbate* existing formulations of "dangerousness." In other words, for other societies, mechanisms of accountability and community policing create the same fundamental element of "danger" for the rank and file. However, Singapore's mode of governance – which informs the presence of a punitive element – when coupled with these elements, results in a kind of "danger" that is qualitatively distinct given the greater degree of "risk" and "vulnerability" that are generated under an authoritarian context. In this instance, however, the authors are not positing the necessity of an authoritarian state for police subcultural change. Instead, what the authors wish to underscore is the *intersection* of several contextual elements: Singapore's *authoritarian*ism and these so-called *democratic* currents of community policing and accountability. This peculiar blend creates a dialectic which can be uniquely situated in Singapore society. More importantly, this dialectic can be seen as a trigger for provoking police subcultural change in Singapore.

Wither, notions of a recalcitrant police subculture?

Stenning and Shearing (2005) have observed that: "even with the best will in the world, those who seek to reform policing frequently face substantial challenges and obstacles" (p. 171). Out of these issues, the recalcitrance of police subculture is most often portrayed as a significant hindrance to police reform (Chan, 2007). Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theory of social practice is attractive in the sense that not only does it deal with the theoretical "gaps" in the way police subculture has been traditionally conceptualised but – of interest to this research – it also allows for the possibility of cultural change. Thus, challenging the view of a "recalcitrant" subculture. It concedes that when the field is changing, organisational dispositions must adapt lest officers whose habitus is the product of different fields are displaced like "fish out of water" in an evolving field (Chan, 2007, p. 324).

Community-based policing signals a major reform effort to professionalise the Singapore police since the 1980s. Apart from improving the career development framework and the institutionalisation of robust assessment processes and key performance indicators to evaluate the performance of its officers, community policing has two policy thrusts: first, the partnership between the police and public, and second, enhancing accountability of the police to the community. Such developments in the "field" have percolated to front-line and rank-and-file officers – who personify community policing – as they adjust to new ways the "game is played."

Interviews with rank-and-file officers suggest that they tended to interpret the changes using the traditional "street cop and management cop" cultural frame. Many saw these changes as an attempt by the senior officers to delimit the discretionary powers invested in front-line officers leading to their operational capabilities being reduced. Accountability was redefined by rank-and-file officers as a distraction from "real police work" and thus they were keen to find ways to create "paper realities" that would satisfy both their superiors and the public though the existence of highly complex accountability mechanisms certainly set limit to them. It was a necessary "survival" strategy, front-line officers conceded, as it helped to mediate what they saw as a "double whammy;" their structural position made them particularly vulnerable to pubic complaints and yet they were accorded very little protection by their superiors when such complaints were indeed made. Since the defining characteristic of the "game" now is, in the words of an officer, "about covering one's arse [which starts] from the commander to the constable on the street," officers were constantly looking to ways to make sure that they did not get into trouble. The end result is the collective aversion of risk leading to an "atomized" and "impotent" police culture. In other words, police subculture was being gradually displaced as an informal repository of knowledge guiding *everyday* police work. Given the aforementioned changes in the "policing field," the traditional solidarity characterising rank-and-file relations has withered. Instead of seeking recourse to the traditional "stand by your mate" paradigm as an occupational coping mechanism, a "cover your arse" paradigm is gradually assuming primacy. As rank-and-file officers increasingly occupy positions of vulnerability, the refashioning of dispositions is a *necessity* in coping with the demands of the "field." However, one must be cautious when proclaiming such a "paradigm shift" as the extent of subcultural displacement requires some qualification. Recalling Bourdieu's theory of practice which accommodates the notion of agency and the creative nature of habitus, instances of resistance by the rank and file must not be discounted altogether. What the authors wish to emphasise is the *non-unilinearity* of the relationship between the "field" and "habitus." The "habitus" does not passively adapt to the "field's" altered conditions. It resists, adapts, and negotiates with the "field" in a myriad of ways. Therefore, the displacement of police subculture is *not* a total one as individuals are able to "salvage" certain aspects of police subculture with various "creative strategies." The "habitus" can thus remain "stubborn" in certain instances. However, this fact does not contradict the argumentative thrust of this article which challenges the notion of a "recalcitrant" subculture. Even if subcultural inertia does exist, it is circumscribed to segments of the rank and file.

Despite informant sentiments signifying tension within the SPF, this does not mean that the organisation *itself* had become hopelessly ineffective. It is well documented that the Singapore police is generally held in high regard by both the local and international community and much of its legitimacy is derived from the country's relatively low crime rate. Nonetheless, accompanying these changes in the field of policing is the array of new challenges to its legitimacy. One such challenge is the apparent paradox contained in police–public relations in community policing.

Community policing generates trust in the police as both police and pubic are seen as "equal" partners. It makes policing "visible" and thus allowing the public to scrutinise and assess police performance. The unintended consequence of this oversight by the public, however, is that police officers have adopted strategies to avoid what they perceive to be "complicated and potentially backfiring cases" (field notes) where a cautious and risk-averse option is chosen over more aggressive ones. This is, unfortunately, at odds with the public's desire to see a more robust

and outcome-orientated response from the police, ironically placing the officers at the mercy of public complaints for not being able to meet public expectation. Community policing is therefore a double-edged sword. It garners public legitimacy for the police and yet at the same time contributes to an erosion of public confidence in policing. In other words, democratising policing may not necessarily bring about greater legitimacy for the police.

As Bourdieu suggests, the field is not a "dead structure" but one which contains infinite possibilities for *both* continuity and change (Wacquant, 1992, p. 19). At the time of writing this article, the authors took cognisance of an emerging wave of change that might sweep the field of policing yet again in the years to come. This takes the form of the radically altered demographics in the island state with nearly a million (a quarter of its inhabitants) foreigners. Besides bearing some semblance to Reiner's (1992) "post-modern society" – an analytical construct positing the dilemmas of a societal pluralism (p. 776) – the larger significance of this observation is that the habitus of the police *has* to adapt to this challenge. As active social agents, officers have to creatively advance, augment, reconstruct, and even resist existing cultural knowledge as "triggered" by changes in the field. Such a process of remoulding this cultural knowledge is already alluded to given recent considerations by authorities to recruit foreigners into the force (Neo, 2014). By amalgamating a myriad of biographies within the SPF, it appears that the organisation is cognisant of the challenges surrounding dispensing policing as a social good in plural societies (Vaughan, 2007). Even though the influence of these ongoing contextual and structural upheavals on police subculture remains to be seen, it is incumbent that officers try to embrace uncertainty and disruption and "enact" their interpretations into the world and organise it for themselves (Weick, 1995). To this end, the habitus has to be responsive to changes in the field.

Note

1. *The Straits Times* is the national newspaper of Singapore.

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