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The Person-Role Fit in Policing:
The Current Knowledge and Future Research

George Kelling and Mary Ann Pate
Police Foundation

Work is one of the central activities of life, a source of self-esteem and satisfaction, and a main object of motivation. Consequently it exerts an influence upon the mental and/or physical condition of those engaged in its performance. While some research has been done on the impact of work on the individual, much remains unknown. In recent years, research has been directed toward social behavior at work. Most recently, such research has focused on problems of youth disenchantment with the work ethic, managerial discontent, and what was perceived as the "blue collar blues." Beyond this there has been little systematic research into job stress, satisfaction, characteristics of the worker, characteristics of the job, health of the worker and job performance. We know little about these individually and even less about the complex interactions among them.

As in most other career areas, there is as yet very little knowledge within the police profession about the impact of police work on the officer who performs it. Kroes, Margolis and Hurrell¹ have concluded two studies in this area, one of patrol officers and one of police administrators; the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has included policing in its study of job demands and worker health. The Dallas evaluation office of the Police Foundation, with the Dallas Police Department, is producing preliminary data from a series of studies which investigated job satisfaction and its correlates among the department's officers. Others, including McNamara, Skolnick, Reiss and Sterling, have also done preliminary work in this area.

But it is fair to say that relatively few studies have been published which systematically deal with police officer evaluations of their work. And those that do tend to treat the topic briefly and descriptively. Few if any extend the concern for job satisfaction to the issues of mental and physical health.

STRESS AND POLICING

Given the high degree of public concern over policing and the ways in which police services should be delivered, the paucity of data on stress, behavior and satisfaction in policing is surprising. One must conclude that while the public is concerned over how the police behave, there is little concern as to how the police feel as a result of their assigned role, and as to how these feelings correlate with behavior and with emotional and physical well being.

Study of the existing literature tends to support the suspicion that policing, or at least certain segments of police work, is a stressful occupation. Kroes, Margolis and Hurrell cite the fact that the suicide rate for police officers was twice as high in 1950 as it was for lawyers and judges, the two other prominent components of the criminal justice system.³ Finding few of what the

authors considered to be important physical hazards in the police workplace - that would account for this, they speculated that the difference may be due to the level of psychological stress inherent in police work.

While police officers confront stressors common to many work groups, they also face stressors not commonly experienced by others, including frequent and intense alienation from the client group they serve. Large numbers of people typically react to police officers not as individuals but stereotypically, and on the job and off, officers are expected to accept prejudice, fear, suspicion and open hostility from much of the community they serve. In addition, the role of the police in modern society has never been clearly defined, leading to mismatched expectations, ambiguity and conflict not only between the community and the police but also within policing itself.

Some maintain that the constant exposure to the threat of physical danger and/or death constitutes a major stress factor in policing. Zaleznik, Ondrack and Silver, in their 1970 study of social class, occupations and mental health, reported evidence of a causal link between physically hazardous conditions or work (their examples being soldiers and mine workers) and symptoms of mental illness.⁴ Yet Kroes *et al.* found that the major source of stress listed by officers were those incidents which tended to affront the officers' professional self-image (e.g. poor equipment, poor relations with supervisors, lack of administrative support, poor community relations, etc.). The actual threat of physical danger rarely surfaced, and seemed not to constitute a major source of stress.

OCCUPATIONAL STRESSORS

In the Work in America report, the authors noted that in the area of heart disease (which accounts for about one-half of all deaths in the U.S. annually), such factors as diet, exercise, medical care and genetic inheritance may account for as little as 25 percent of the risk factor. On the other hand, the work role, work conditions and other social factors were suspected of contributing heavily to the "unexplained" 75 percent.⁵ Along this line, Kroes and Margolis, citing work undertaken by the Institute for Social Research, indicate that the following occupational stress conditions are generally correlated with coronary disease:

- "role ambiguity" - having unclearly defined objectives, being unable to predict what other expect one to do, only vaguely understand the scope of ones responsibility;
- "role conflict" - being torn by conflicting demands, feeling pressure to get along with people, having differences with one's supervisors;
- "role overload" - having too much or too little to do, or too difficult or too easy a level of work assignment;
- "responsibility for people" - feeling responsible for the health and well-being of others, for their work performance, career development, and job security;

--"poor relations with others" - not getting along with supervisors, peers or subordinates; and

--"participation" - having influence on decision-making process in one's organizations.

Other significant occupational conditions identified as stressful included changing work shifts, unnatural work-rest regimens, frequent geographic moves, and inequities in pay and job status.

While such stressors are common to numerous occupations, they are even more readily identifiable in policing:

Role Ambiguity: consider the police officer called to intervene in and diffuse a domestic quarrel; what is his role? should he criminalize the event? does he have any legal basis for intervention? how will the parties react to his intervention?

Role Conflict: consider the officer assigned to protect children who are being bussed to school under court order; does this conflict with his own beliefs? how does he react to confrontation with neighbors with whom he agrees?

Role Overload: consider the uneven nature of police work, where up to 60 percent of an officer's time is typically free from discretionary use, and where there are periods of both intense activity and extreme boredom, especially for those on the "dog watch," or midnight to 8 a.m. shift;

Responsibility for People: consider the public's expectations concerning police services, crime protection, dispute intervention and the other life-preserving duties we expect the police to perform on a routine basis;

Poor Relations with Others: consider the white police officer assigned to patrol a black neighborhood openly hostile to him and to his organization;

Participation: consider that the patrol officer typically plays little if any role in the department's decision-making process, despite the fact that such decisions directly affect the officer's job and living routine; on the other hand, consider the decision-making the officer is called upon to engage in while on duty, typically without clear guidelines or adequate supervision, e.g. how and when should force be employed? will the decision be supported by the administration? by the courts?

Changing Work Shifts: consider that most departments constantly rotate their work shifts, which for some officers seriously disrupt both work and home regimens, and typically result in physiological and psychological stress;

Inequities in Pay and Job Status: consider the generally low

status and pay of police officers relative to the work they are asked to perform and relative to the other occupational groups within the criminal justice system.

Such stressors carry significance on their own. But in combination they can reduce the frustration tolerance necessary for handling other job stresses. The problem of role ambiguity and conflict, for example, permeates every facet of police work and stems from a deeper issue, notably the lack of a well-defined role for the police in a modern and urban democratic society. As Garmire notes, the results of the failure to develop reasonable expectations about what the police should and/or can do has prompted the police to attempt to perform conflicting roles that, the author maintains, cannot be effectively integrated into a single agency.⁶

Continuing on this subject, Rubin cites a study of stress among Miami police officers which found that the multiplicity of roles officers were expected to perform contributed significantly to stress and fatigue. The study concluded that given the ambiguities, inconsistencies and conflicts between the many socially and legally sanctioned police roles, and the differing role expectations as a result (e.g. peace keeping, community service, crime fighting, etc.), police departments should be divided among several sections, each of which would address a clearly defined primary role. Officers could then be recruited and trained to function in one or another of these well-defined and differentiated roles.⁷

THE PERSON ROLE-FIT

In so central an institution as work, the "person-environment fit," or the degree to which the skills, aspirations, motivations and other social and psychological characteristics of an individual converge with the characteristics of the role that individual performs is an area of great importance to researchers, particularly in determining the effects of a person-environment "misfit" upon not only the individual but also upon the individual's family, social interactions and upon the organization as well.

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the person-role fit, what Sarbin and Allen term the "self-role congruence," or the "degree of overlap or fittingness that exists between requirements of the role and qualities of the self."⁸ The person-fit involves the fit of the specific role to be performed within the organization to both the skills and the personality of the role player. The greater the fit, the more satisfied and more productive the worker is assumed to be. The lack of fit on either dimension can result in stress, dissatisfaction, boredom, alienation, low productivity and ultimately adverse physical and mental health. (Again, however, findings in terms of job satisfaction and performance have been mixed. In some studies, notably those of Brayfield and Crockett, 1955, and Vroom, 1964, it was found that while scores on job satisfaction correlated positively with measures of productivity, the correlation was very small. And other studies have found a range of correlations, some positive and some negative.⁹)

RESPONSES TO A PERSON-ROLE MISFIT

The possibility of a disadvantageous person-role fit may be sensed even before an individual joins an organization. If detected through any of the

organization's screening devices, the individual may be refused entrance to the position in question. If detected by the individual, he or she may simply fail to apply for the job. This can happen even when the organization views the potential applicant as a desirable employee. Police departments often experience this situation in attempting to recruit minorities, women or otherwise "new style" officers into what is still perceived to be an "old style" department.

Once a part of the organization, role occupants may respond to a developing person-role misfit through any number of self-initiated activities, including leaving the organization, becoming apathetic, creating unions, or attempting upward mobility to avoid the problem area. Or the role occupant may adjust to the role requirements through personality changes so that he or she matches more closely the expected characteristics of the role. But such solutions are often accompanied by undesirable byproducts, and can result in low productivity, poor work quality, high absenteeism and turnover, and possible aggression against the organization.¹⁰

Police Departments have typically responded to the problem of a person-role misfit by relocating the individual within the department. But an increasing number of departments are now attempting other approaches to this problem, and are undertaking impressive efforts to better match the skills of the individual with those required by the tasks to be performed. Some departments are analyzing the tasks involved in their day to day operations to determine which skills are actually necessary for successful performance of those tasks. The results of the analyses are then used to restructure the departments' entrance requirements and admission procedures. Others are attempting to change the characteristics of the police role through experimentation with team policing, decentralization, shared decision making and other forms of job enrichment. When alternative roles are unavailable or when organizational change cannot provide an immediate solution, some departments offer in-house psychological counseling services for their members.

At the point of entry, the Dallas Police Department has developed an approach which identifies candidates best suited physically for those tasks the department has identified as necessary for the successful performance of the police function. Rather than imposing arbitrary height and weight requirements, the department now uses task-specific requirements, i.e. those based on the length of arms and legs required for driving a patrol vehicle, for using a weapon properly, etc. Recruits are then selected on the basis of their potential for being able to master and successfully perform those tasks.

The Dallas department is also beginning to examine the fit between personality characteristics and the organization's environment. With assistance from the Police Foundation, the department is attempting to identify, through supervisors evaluation of several aspects of attitude and performance, the personality characteristics of those officers who perform most successfully within the organization. At the same time, the department is administering personality batteries to recruits, and in the future will look for relationships between the performance of these officers and the personality characteristics they exhibited at their time of entry. Within the next five years, the department should be ready to identify more successfully than in the past the types of individuals most likely and least likely to perform satisfactorily within the departmental environment.

No matter how sophisticated the selection process, there will always be those who develop role adjustment problems after entering a department. While a typical reaction has been to transfer such individuals into other roles, some departments are now attempting to help those experiencing behavioral difficulties to perform more effectively in their current roles. The Kansas City Police Department, with assistance from the Police Foundation initiated a peer review process for officers identified by large numbers of citizen complaints, charges of brutality and other manifestations of adjustment difficulties. A non-punitive, confidential and voluntary review process modeled after a similar program in Oakland, California, peer review employs a balance of peer assistance and peer pressure to improve or otherwise change behavior. Panel members themselves are officers who have encountered difficulty in past stress situations, and are trained by a psychologist in techniques of interaction, problem identification and resolution.

In the case of recruits, the panel begins an immediate assessment of behavior rather than waiting until new officers are on the street. After the recruit has been assigned a field training officer (FTO), the objectives and goals of the review process are explained to the FTOs, who are then asked to systematically evaluate the performance of their recruits. The recruits' reactions to police work, their understanding of what fellow officers expect in the way of performance, and their knowledge of how different police situations should be approached.

The Dallas Police Department has initiated a Psychological Service Unit to achieve basically an identical objective -- improvement of officer behavior within a current role framework. Staffed by civilian psychologists and patrol officer with a masters degree in clinical psychology, the unit serves officers referred to the unit by either their supervisors or the Internal Affairs Division, as well as those who voluntarily request the service. In terms of problems stemming from person/role misfit, this approach is only a palliative. Yet it does possess obvious intrinsic benefits, and represents an import step in policing.

The lateral or vertical movement of workers within an organization provides a further opportunity for mismatches between people and jobs. In this respect, the Kansas City department has initiated an "assessment center" approach to the promotion of patrol officers to the rank of sergeant. Candidates for promotion are evaluated in terms of their capacity to perform tasks representative of the supervisory role. In effect, the "pencil and paper" examination is replaced by a method which more accurately measures an individual's ability to fill and perform within a specific role. The Dallas department is planning to adopt this system as part of its promotional process and to adapt it to the recruit selection procedure as well.

Obviously, none of these developments will eliminate all kinds of role-related stress in policing. For example, three other types of role conflict exist as important sources of stress:

- intrasender conflict: in which the individual who defines a role for the role occupant holds incompatible expectations about that role (e.g. a supervisor expecting an officer to enforce the law while simultaneously ignoring an infraction or accepting a bribe);

- intersender conflict: in which the occupant's role is defined by multiple groups (e.g. an officer attempting to respond to differing expectations held by supervisors, fellow officers, community groups, etc.);
- inter-role conflict: in which multiple roles must be played within the same time period.

Such conflicts are compounded by the role ambiguity problem cited earlier, and often by the failure or inability of a role occupant to clearly perceive the expectations associated with the role. In policing, such confusion can result from numerous stimuli, including television's grossly inaccurate portrayal of the police, from an unrealistic portrayal of policing by recruiting campaigns, or from a lack of communications between an officer and supervisor. Much of this conflict will be resolved only when society and the police jointly develop a set of workable and realistic objectives for the delivery of police services, and develop roles compatible with those objectives. As Rubin notes, the first step is clarification of the roles to be performed. The second is then a closer matching of the individual's characteristics with the characteristics of the more simplified and specialized role, resulting ideally in a more satisfactory "person-role fit."

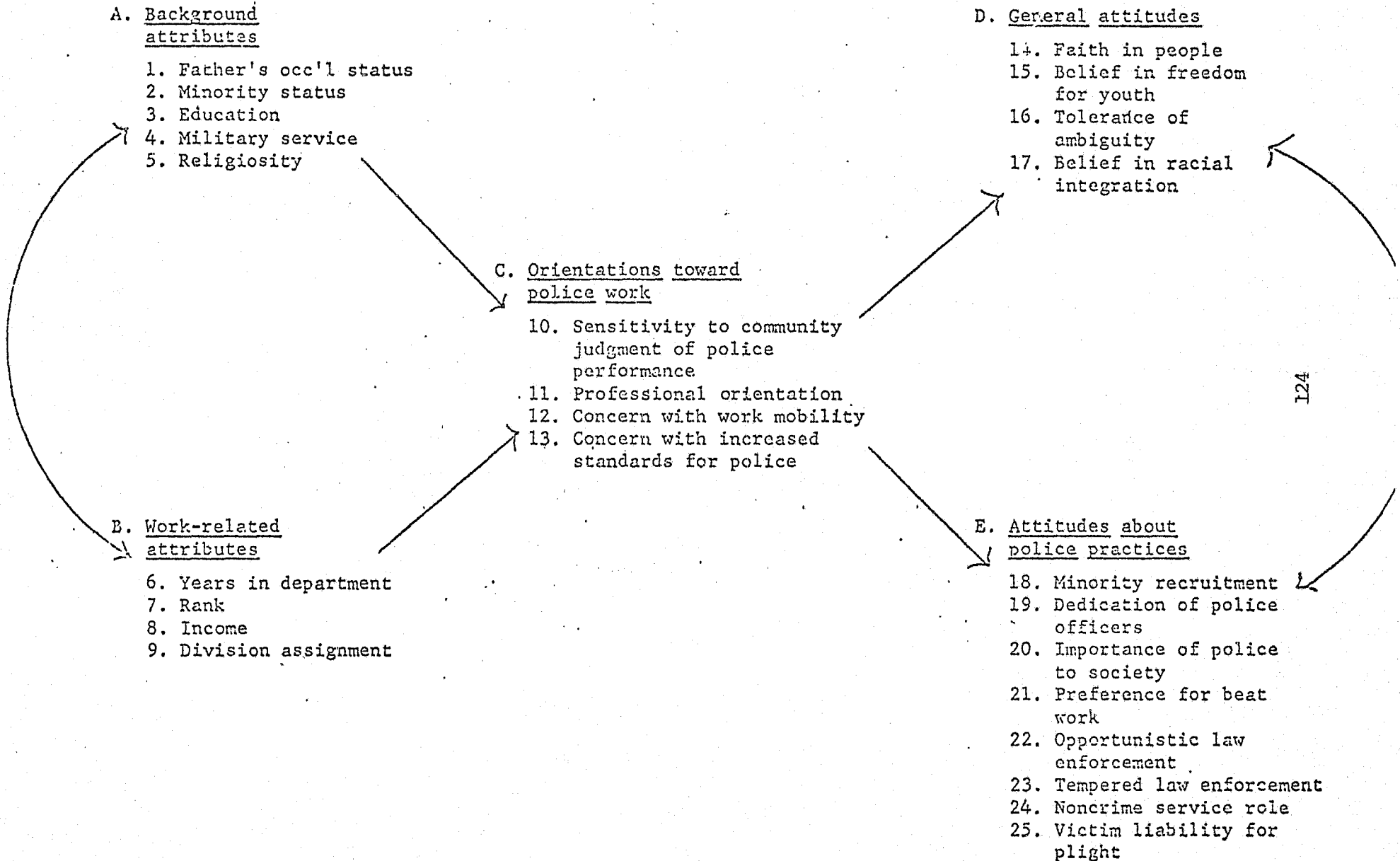
PERSONNEL CHARACTERISTICS, JOB SATISFACTION AND THE PERSON-ROLE FIT

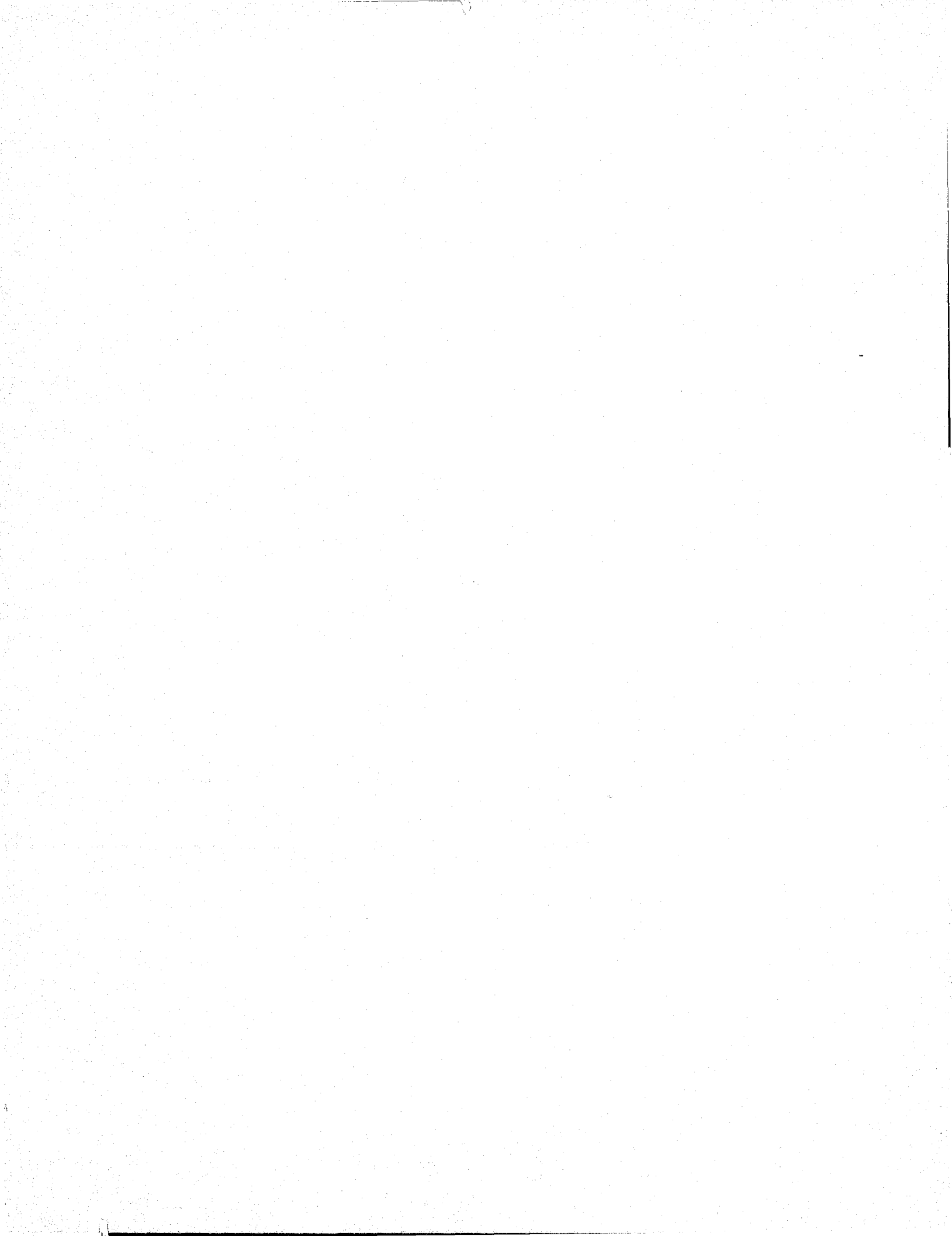
As mentioned earlier in this paper, the Dallas Police Department and the Police Foundation are attempting to assess which personnel characteristics appear to fit best with various police roles. The first studies in a planned series of investigations into this question have recently been completed. Both were based on the results of a Human Resources Development (HRD) questionnaire administered in 1973 to 1339 officers in the Dallas department. And both were designed to probe various indicators of early socialization and early adult experience as well as occupational socialization and other work-related factors, including job satisfaction. The first study investigated the relationships between the attitudes of police officers and their orientations toward police work, their social backgrounds and work-related attributes. The second investigated the nature of and conditions influencing the level of job satisfaction expressed by the officer surveyed.

Findings from these studies are now in draft form, and must be considered as preliminary and viewed with appropriate caution. Yet both yield important observations in the area of officer attitudes and job satisfaction. The first study, of work orientations and attitudes, attempted to determine which attributes would predispose police officers toward a set of attitudes that has been advocated for the community-oriented officer (including faith in people, high degree of tolerance of ambiguity, endorsement of minority recruiting, belief in the justifiability of tempering law enforcement, etc.). The attributes (including father's occupational status, level of educational attainment, amount of experience on the force, level of income and orientations toward the police role) deemed capable of leading the officer toward endorsement of one or more of the desirable attitudes were chosen for examination because their potential importance is frequently noted within the police community. (Figure 1),

Figure 1

An Analytic Model for Studying Attitudes of Police Officers





Briefly, a substantial spread of explanatory sources of causation emerged, and virtually ruled out any single-factor theories. For example, it was concluded that nonwork socialization (background attributes) are sometimes more important and sometimes less important than work socialization (work-related attributes) depending upon the attitude in question. In no instance was an attitude determined exclusively by either nonwork or work attributes. The study found that most attitudes seemed to be products of combinations of variables from the nonwork and work milieu, operating through the work orientations.

The second study, of officer satisfaction with the job, was an extension of the first, and while its findings are even more tentative, an interesting pattern was detected. In this analysis, nine factors pertaining to satisfaction with a specific facet of police work or conditions of work were identified:

- satisfaction with immediate supervisory;
- satisfaction with police task;
- satisfaction with promotional opportunities;
- satisfaction with top management;
- satisfaction with departmental recognition for accomplishments;
- satisfaction with job security;
- satisfaction with salary;
- satisfaction with job autonomy; and
- satisfaction with personal advancement.

As in the first study, early socialization and adult experience, as well as occupational socialization and work context factors, were presumed to affect one another and job satisfaction (in chronological sequence).

In summary, the second study found that background held little explanatory power in terms of work satisfaction, and that of the background factors: older workers expressed greater dissatisfaction with job tasks, personal advancement and job autonomy, while also indicating greater satisfaction with supervisors, top management, the recognition received for work, and salaries. Experience on the job seemed to be associated with dissatisfaction (as was age), while rank was slightly associated with job satisfaction (primarily in terms of self-advancement and perceptions of promotional opportunities). Levels of income was not found to be a predictor of satisfaction in any consistent dimension, nor did race seem to have any major effect.

The most influential of the orientation-attitudinal variables, however, was that termed "faith in people," or the degree to which the officer sees people as trustworthy, ethical and concerned for the welfare of other. Officers holding this view were found to be generally more satisfied with their work. In addition, those expressing a high degree of sensitivity to community judgement, a tolerance for ambiguity and a belief in racial integration also seemed to exhibit a greater degree of satisfaction with their work (Figure 2). In effect, those officers exhibiting what might be termed a "non-constraining" perspective were generally more satisfied.

The exception, however, involved officers indicating a belief in freedom for youth (the degree to which youth behavior should be controlled, etc.). Officers with higher degrees of belief in freedom for youth tended to exhibit less satisfaction with the various facets of police work, registering the highest negative indication in the "police task" category.

FIGURE 2

Effects of Work-Related Attributes, Work Orientations, and General Attitudes Upon Job Facets*

	Job Facets								
	Supervisor	Police Tasks	Promotion Opportunities	Top Management	Recognition	Security	Salary	Autonomy	Personal Advancement
Work-Related Attributes									
Years in Department		-	-			-			-
Rank			+				+		+
Income	-								
moonlights Job						-			
Works in Investigation							+		
Work Orientations									
Sensitivity to Community Judgement		+	+	+	+		+		+
Professional Orientation	+	+						+	
Concern for Work Mobility				+	+		+		
Concern for Increased Standards	-		+	+	-	+			
General Attitudes									
Faith in People	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Belief in Freedom for Youth	-	-			-			-	-
Tolerance for Ambiguity	+	+		-		+		+	
Belief in Racial Integration		+	+	+		+	+		+

*This table shows only if the orientations and attitudes had a statistically significant effect upon the job facets and the direction of that effect. It does not indicate the degree of significance nor if the effect was significant at the .05 or .01 level. A positive (+) indicator means that the presence of the factor positively affected the job facet (e.g. tolerance for ambiguity resulted in a positive view toward supervisors) while a negative (-) indicator means that the presence of the factor negatively affected the job facet (e.g. belief in freedom for youth had a negative effect upon the view toward supervisors).

Again, the findings are tentative, must be viewed with caution, and confirm the complexity of the topic under examination. Yet there are obvious linkages between attitudinal variables and job satisfaction and it may be the case that the matching of a person's characteristics to tasks will come to be viewed as an essential element of job placement procedures.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Additional research is currently underway in Dallas to link personality attributes of individual officers with job performance. Other studies are attempting to investigate the link between background and work-related attitudes (including job satisfaction) and job performance. The combination of the findings from such research will help determine whether predictable linkages do in fact exist between personality, background, work-related attitudes and job performance. If such linkages can be ascertained, then personality attributes and/or attitudes could be used to identify the potentially productive or unproductive performer.

If, for example, it is found that personality is related to job performance, then mechanisms could be developed to screen out those candidates indicating a high probability of poor performance in a specific role. If attitudes, which are admittedly more changeable than personality characteristics, are found to be related to performance, it would be possible to isolate potentially poor performers by periodically measuring employee attitudes. Simply being aware of the existence of such a linkage would help determine in what ways, if any, attitudes should be influenced during the process of early job socialization in order to optimize the person-role fit.

Such research presupposes accurate measures of police performance and adequate sources of data. For the most part, these simply do not exist within policing. Most departments have not yet developed methods to accurately gauge the performance of their officers. Most police administrators will admit that the traditional methods used to rate supervisory personnel are often cursory and arbitrary. The file records of an officer's commendations and complaints may measure more or less than the officer's actual performance. And such measures, usually the best available to researchers, are often inadequately recorded, incomplete or out-of-date. Considerable work is necessary if we are to establish valid performance criteria and, subsequently, ascertain the relationship between performance and personality characteristics and attitudes. Our ability to measure the latter two is currently far more advanced than is our ability to measure the former. Still also in embryonic form is the research needed to identify the numerous specific tasks performed by police officers and the research needed to identify organizational characteristics which may predict officer health, satisfaction and productivity.

However, little has been done in policing to determine whether one can identify and isolate a "healthy, satisfied and productive" worker. For example, is the satisfied patrol officer also the productive officer? Or is the productive officer also likely to be healthy? If the answers to these and other related questions are in the affirmative, then we must determine the personal and organizational predictors of this condition. If the answers are negative, then we must learn what it is about policing, about the organization or about the types of individuals recruited into policing which makes this desirable mixture unlikely.

Current exploratory research seems to indicate that policing, or at least certain aspects of police work, is stressful. Yet beyond this, little is really known about the causes or effects of this stress, or even about the outcomes of programs designed to isolate and deal with it. Research in this area is in exploratory stages and thus tentative. Many of our conclusions are therefore little more than speculation. Because of this, we must be careful to plan and initiate remediation efforts only after existing programs have been thoroughly evaluated. And we must be sure that careful and rigorous evaluation is built into every new program. The issues are anything but clear, and impulsive programmatic efforts based upon incomplete, misinterpreted or misunderstood data run the risk of compounding rather than clarifying the problem.

One conclusion is irrefutable, however. Far more research into every aspect of the question is necessary. The model required for this effort is disturbingly complex, requires an immense amount of both theoretical and empirical work and is in only its earliest stage of development. Yet the effort is crucial if the police are to provide healthy and effective services to the community, and if policing is to be a field within which individuals can work with health and satisfaction.

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