Moving from Warrior to Guardian: Informal Learning in Police and Community Relations

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores the informal learning experiences of police officers that contributes to patrol officers' learning, knowledge, and skills in developing and sustaining community relations within urban contexts.

*Keywords***:** informal learning, police training, community relations, urban contexts

A recent 2021 Gallup poll suggests that 56 percent of white adults have confidence and trust in police officers, while only 27 percent of black adults have confidence (Jones, 2021). This distrust in the policing system is rooted in an embedded culture of racism and misconduct within the culture of the United States, to which the profession of policing has contributed (Lavalley & Johnson, 2020).

As a solution to the community police divide, there has been an interest within the policing profession to change the organizational culture from warriors to guardians. The warrior culture embraces the idea that police officers are in a never-ending battle to preserve order in a world of good versus evil, criminal versus the innocent. Within this culture, officers may justify the use of honorable violence. Alternatively, guardian culture embraces the concept that police officers are a part of the community and emphasize empathy and the preservation of human life over different ideals (Stoughton, 2017).

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) organized a forum of 50 experts in the field of police standards, hiring, and screening officers (Morison, 2017). They identified seven guardian-like qualities officers should possess: integrity, service orientation, empathy, communication, human relation skills, self-control, team orientation, and problem-solving skills. These abilities could be cultivated through some formal training programs. However, police officers may develop these skills through informal learning methods. Charman (2017) asserts that "A significant section of the literature on learning focuses on formal learning. Nevertheless, in the context of policing, it is vitally important to consider the growing interest in informal learning within the workplace as a key, if not the key, influence on the behavior and performance of workers" (p. 91).

This research explores the informal learning experiences of police officers that may contribute to their approach to community relations. Specifically, it answers the research question, "What informal learning experiences contribute to a patrol officer's knowledge and skills in community relations within an urban context?"

Informal Learning

Informal learning is the spontaneous, unstructured learner that occurs at home or in the neighborhood, in the workplace, or within other informal settings (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). It can be any activity that involves the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill outside formal education (Livingstone, 1999). Schugurensky (2000) suggests three main types of informal learning: self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization or tactical learning.

Self-directed learning is learning that the individual facilitates without the assistance of formal educators or instructors such as a teacher, trainer, or coach. It involves the individual being conscious and intentional about their learning processes. It is not passive learning but is about "the learner taking control of her or his own learning" (Merriam, 2017, p.24). Bussu (2016) investigated the problems encountered by Italian Judicial police officers, such as gathering evidence and conducting interrogations. Italian officers relied heavily on their sense of responsibility and awareness of their self-development of their skills and attitudes to be competent within these areas.

Incidental learning occurs when the adult learner does not intend to learn something but they have become aware learning has occurred (Schugurensky, 2000). This type of learning often occurs through the observation of other officers. A self-report survey of 588 frontline police officers conducted by Brunetto et al. (2016) suggests that when formal police training is perceived as inadequate, officers apply incidental learning from observing supervising officers and their peers and fill in their learning gaps.

Socialization or tactical learning is the internalization of the values, attitudes, behaviors, and skills, which are neither intentional nor conscious because they occur within everyday life. Social role theory explores how an adult's role may impact their relationships and activities. Police officers also learn about their roles within the police force through organizational socialization. Ouellet et, al. (2019) found that unethical policing behaviors can be learned from misbehaving peers through informal socialization. If the unethical behaviors of these officers were not addressed, the problems persisted in the police department.

Method

To answer the research question, "What informal learning experiences contribute to a patrol officer's knowledge and skills in community relations within an urban context?" qualitative data collection consisted of unrecorded unstructured interviews and recorded semi-structured interviews with police officers, police leaders, and police trainers.

Participants

Participants included ten police officers, eight police leaders, and six police trainers, who work within diverse urban communities within Ohio. Table 1 outlines the participant demographics of the study. Most participants were recruited by responding to an email their police chief sent to officers who understood the importance of community relations. Participants took part in a phone or in-person interview, which was recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved two coding cycles (Saldana, 2016). The first cycle, involved taking short phrases or words within the participant's language and recording them as code. Next, gerunds ("ing" words), which highlight an observable or conceptual action, were coded as data. Then initial coding was employed by breaking down the data into discrete parts, which were compared and contrasted.

The second coding cycle involved categorizing codes from the first cycle of coding based on their thematic and conceptual relationships. Next, axial coding was used to describe the categories' properties and dimensions and how the categories' properties and dimensions of the codes related to one another. Last, theoretical coding was used in which the categories are compared to one another to how they link to the emerging core category. The core categories then were used to help form the framework of the emerging theory.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the interviews regarding the informal learning experiences of police officers. The themes included life experiences, other professional experiences, interacting and observing other officers, and self-directed learning.

Life Experiences

The participants discussed the importance of prior life experiences, ranging from their childhood to adulthood experiences, and how it influenced their approach to community relations. A white male freelance trainer talked about the importance of life experiences, factoring in how it makes them better officers. "When you get somebody that comes into the profession a little bit later in life, maybe…their thirties or…early forties. Is it the life experiences they've had? Maybe they've had multiple jobs… they've been married and divorced…have kids, but all this kind of help round them out…it helps with their decision-making. It helps with their temperament…" The trainer's perspective of an officer highlights the socio-cultural factors of adult development (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). These social roles may influence their learning (Reitzes, 2003) and their approach to community relations.

One black female officer with 23 years' experience highlighted how her role of being a parent influenced her approach to community relations and how she used that experience to understand that people sometimes misbehave, but that does not make them bad persons. "I'm speaking from a parent… point of view now because I had two children and, um, each child is different, you know, and it's always underlying problems or other things that makes people misbehave. It's not always, um, they just bad, you know."

A black male officer with over 11 years in the police department spoke about his experience growing up within the foster care system and how it made him identify with the people within the communities he serves. It also allowed him to see the more system perspective of society than perceiving that the individual is always at fault. "…growing up impoverished…helped me identify with… the people, the children that I encounter that are in the inner city and the more impoverished areas and understand…where they're coming from…sometimes…it's not their fault. This is the product…of their environment."

Other Professional Experiences

Another theme that emerged from the data was how officers other professional experiences influenced their approach to community relations. These additional professional experiences included the military, non-profits, entertainment, education, and the medical field. Officers that had these varieties of experiences, according to a white male police leader with 20 years on the force, "handle things very differently, with their tactics and things like that. They bring that to the table." Similarly, a police leader with over 30 years of experience discussed how an officer used his skills as a magician to build a rapport with children. "He was a magician. And then during that [magic] show, he would also interject, things that were safety-related for kids."

One black female police leader with 12 years of experience discussed how she "always worked in the community" since her undergraduate experiences as a house manager for a halfway house and a public assistance worker. When she transitioned to the role of being a patrol officer, she "knew all you have to do is meet with young people…when these young folks were presenting all these problems…they're just kids…living in poverty and they're not making noise and making trouble just because they want to be badasses it is because they're not engaged."

Other officers shared how they learned from their experience within the military to understand cultural differences. "…when I was in the military, we had to learn…the cultural differences with [Arab] Muslims. Same thing where we're at now because we have a mosque in our city…there are certain things that you can't do like…show the bottom of your foot to somebody…" However, one white male police trainer with 32 years of experience also discussed the challenges of hiring an officer with military experience: "… they're military guys…they are good at taking orders, but…they read and enforce the law by the letter…sometimes there is a gray area…sometimes they don't see the gray area." This gray area the police trainer was referring to is the ability of an officer to use discretion when interacting with the community (Lipsky, 2010).

Learning from Other Officers

Another theme that occurred was how officers learned from one another. A white patrol officer with one year of experience discussed how during roll call, his department would talk about what was going on during the day. During these meetings, officers have the ability to "...discuss those different calls that we've had." He brought up the perception that it is a "human thing where people feel the need to discuss different situations" and how they may approach the situation differently. He emphasized that it probably is not in the day-to-day protocol of the department but that human beings like sharing their perspective on things.

A white police leader with 13 years of experience discussed how he learned from his peers: "…go talk to somebody, whether it's a professional or your peers… There's some man or woman who completely respected and probably more responsible…you can…ask him or her anything, and they're going to tell you from years of experience…what they've seen in their career." A white male patrol officer with 15 years of experience highlighted how he learns skills from other officers within with police department. "Some [officers] are very skilled in certain areas. Some are not skilled in certain areas… And I'm not ashamed to admit that I continually seek their advice on how to get better... And then there's officers here, who…learn from my ability to use verbal de-escalation…it kinda goes both ways."

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning was the last theme. A black male police trainer with over 30 years in the profession reflected on his experience as a patrol officer and how he observed senior officers and chose what behaviors he would like to emulate. "I paid attention to the world around me… to those senior officers or supervisors, and I was able to take what was useful and had enough sense to discard what was not useful…So I think my upbringing, coupled with the lessons learned from those senior officers…allowed me to become a well-rounded officer."

A white male police leader with 20 years of experience emphasized the importance of officers being self-directed learners. "…if you [a police officer] don't know an answer to something, you need to be able to tell them [a community member]. I don't know the answer, but I'm willing to find out or I'm willing to reach out to somebody that can tell you that's huge… Um, citizens appreciate that. Officers appreciate that too."

Self-directed learning also involves officers learning from their mistakes. A white male police trainer with 33 years of experience emphasized, "You [an officer] learn as you go, you make mistakes, you go and you learn from your mistakes and you get trained…you receive education and you learn from the older officers there [in the police department]." Similarly, a black female police leader with 15 years of experience emphasized the importance of lifelong learning. "…lifelong learning is so important…because the constant developments in the

law…you have a citizen who is better informed and educated about the law than you are there with a badge and gun. That's not okay."

A white female leader with over 20 years of experience highlighted the importance of police officers having the internal motivation to develop relationships within the community. "…officers should be out of their car knowing their feet and they should know the people that work there [in the community], other people that live there and they should really make an effort to do that because you're only as good as the people that you know in your community."

Implications and Future Research

The themes found within this study align with the informal learning literature (Schugurensky, 2000). Officers may draw from their life experiences, previous professional roles, self-directed learning, and learning from officers when interacting with the communities they serve. Understanding the importance of these informal learning experiences can help police departments recruit, train, and retain officers that understand the importance of community relations and embrace the guardian culture. Future qualitiative and quantitative research can further explore the informal learning themes from this current research to discover new approaches for policeforce training, which may lead to police developing measures to support the development of police as guardians for the communities they serve.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Group	Ranks	Experience	Gender	Age	Race
Police Leadership Total: 8	3 Chiefs & Deputy Chiefs 2 Commanders 3 Lieutenants & Sergeants	20 to 35 years	2 Females 6 Males	35 to 55 years	2 Black 5 White 1 Did Not Specify
Police Trainers Total: 6	2 Freelance 2 Open Academy* 2 Closed Academy*	20 to 35 years	6 Males	50 to 60 years	3 Black 3 White
Police Officers Total: 10	8 Patrol Officers 2 Detectives	1 to 35 years	8 Males 2 Females	30 to 60 years	4 Black 6 White

Note. Open academy includes programs that have open enrollment; anyone can apply to be trained within that academy. Closed academies are specific to an individual police department; officers must be hired by the police department to be trained in that academy