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Trials of loyalty: Ethnic minority police officers as ‘outsiders’ within a greedy institution

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Abstract
In this article we interrogate how ethnicity interfaces with the police culture in a major Swedish police force. While addressing administrative levels, in particular police security officers’ screening of new recruits, we focus on the role that loyalty plays in defining how ethnicity interacts with mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion in the structures of rank-and-file police culture. The police authorities, perceived as ‘greedy institutions’, demand and enforce exclusive loyalty. We argue that ethnic minority officers are rigorously tested as regards their loyalty to their fellow officers and to the police organization, and the demands made on their undivided loyalty and the misgivings as to their unstinting loyalty act as barriers to inclusion in the organization.

Keywords
ethnicity, greedy institutions, loyalty, police culture, processes of exclusion, voice

Introduction
In this article we will interrogate how ethnicity interfaces with the police culture in a major Swedish police force. While we address administrative levels, in particular police security officers’ screening of new recruits, we focus on the role loyalty plays in defining how ethnicity interacts with mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion in the structures of rank-and-file police culture. Within the Anglo-American sphere of policing, there has been a concerted drive to recruit minority officers in order to better reflect the populations they are policing (Cashmore, 2002; Foster et al., 2005; McLaughlin, 2007; Walklate, 2000). Sweden is no exception, and the police authorities have instigated various programmes to encourage ethnic minority officers to apply to the police academies.
Although these programmes have met with only limited success and the police force in Sweden is still heavily dominated by ethnic Swedish officers, the ambition is to increase the numbers of ethnic minorities within the force. Loftus (2008) emphasizes the pressures the police forces in Britain are under to manage the questions of diversity in new ways, which has resulted in a top-down drive in Britain, as in Sweden, to produce cultural change and enforce tolerance towards minorities within the police force and non-discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities among the citizenry (see Holdaway, 1997; Marks, 2000). Despite the top-down directives of police management and their obligatory police ethics programmes, we have found that ethnic minority officers in Sweden are still often met with suspicion, as well as subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination (Uhnoo and Peterson, 2011). In particular, we found that their ‘loyalty’ to their group and the police organization was put into doubt. Much in line with Loftus’s research, we found that ethnic minority officers risk being repositioned as ‘outsiders’ within (Loftus, 2008: 769).

Brown (1988) succinctly describes how loyalty towards colleagues protects those who share in the police culture from the strains and hazards of their working environment, such as potential on-the-job dangers and the unique coercive powers officers possess, and from the strains and hazards of their organizational environments, that is, their ambiguous role as crime fighters, service providers and order maintainers and the potential punitive scrutiny of their superiors.

As a reward for ‘unstinting loyalty’, police officers are offered protection, honour and emotional support. When doubts are cast on officers’ unstinting loyalty, they are a priori excluded from this support net.

Paoline (2003: 203–4) depicts the traditional occupational police culture as ‘widely shared attitudes, values, and norms, which serve to manage strains created by the nature of police work and the punitive practices of police management and supervisors’. He subsequently emphasizes that the cultural mandate of loyalty is a function of both the occupational and the organizational environments. Officers must depend on one another. Hence, the norm of loyalty to the peer group is a powerful imperative. Loyalty is the underlying codex for the police culture. We will argue in this article that ethnic minority officers are rigorously tested as regards their loyalty to their fellow officers and to the police organization, and the demands made on their unstinting loyalty and the misgivings as to their unflagging loyalty act as barriers to inclusion in the organization.

Theoretical framework

The police as a greedy institution

Lewis Coser (1974) developed a conceptual framework for understanding institutional demands of ‘total commitment’ in his classic work Greedy Institutions. Although
individuals in today’s differentiated society move from one sphere of life to another and each sphere is relatively limited in the claims that it can make on the individual’s loyalty and commitment, some modern institutions are ‘greedy’:

Yet the modern world, just like the world of tradition, also continues to spawn organizations and groups which, in contradistinction to the prevailing principle, make total claims on members and which attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality. These might be called greedy institutions, insofar as they seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and they attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries. Their demands on the person are omnivorous. (Coser, 1974: 4)

In this article we argue that police organizations possess the characteristics Coser identifies as typical of greedy institutions. For an institution to fit Coser’s framework, members’ involvement must interfere with and take precedence over participation and loyalties to other groups and organizations (Segal, 1986). Our research question is then how the structural mechanisms of the police organization and especially the police culture are able to harness the ‘total commitment’ of police officers. Coser shows that, in contrast to the ‘total institution’ identified by Goffman, ‘greedy institutions, though they may in some cases utilize the device of physical isolation, tend to rely mainly on non-physical mechanisms to separate the insider from the outsider and to erect symbolic boundaries between them’ (Coser, 1974: 6). We maintain that the police culture provides the non-physical mechanisms that separate the insiders – police colleagues – from the outsiders – the citizenry who might make claims that conflict with their demands as to loyalty.

**Police culture**

Extensive research has distinguished the components of police culture. It can be understood as ‘a set of shared informal norms, beliefs and values that underpins and informs police outlooks’ and behaviour towards the citizenry they police as well as their fellow officers (Loftus, 2008: 757). Paoline (2003), who has organized this research, provides a coherent analytical framework. He argues that police culture comes in part from the occupational environment, which consists of the officers’ relationship to the citizenry. He has found that the two most-cited elements of this working environment are the presence or potential for danger – officers’ preoccupation with the danger and violence that surround them – and the unique coercive powers and authority they possess over citizens (see also Skolnick, 1966). Further, police culture comes from an organizational environment characterized by two key elements: punitive supervisory oversight and the ambiguity of the police role. Both of these elements, just like the elements in police officers’ occupational environment, create stress and anxiety. The way in which police officers then cope with these strains and hazards is, according to Paoline (2003), found in the prescriptions of the police culture. He identifies two widely cited coping mechanisms for helping officers regulate the occupational environment: suspiciousness and maintaining the edge. He also identifies two coping mechanisms for
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protecting them in their organizational environment: ‘lie-low’ or ‘cover-your-ass’ and a strict adherence to the crime fighter image, thereby eliminating the ambiguity of their multiple roles. These mechanisms prescribed by the police culture work to minimize the stress and anxiety that are created by these environments and guide both their attitudes and behaviours. Paoline (2003) points out that the coping mechanisms of the police culture are transmitted through a socialization process across occupational generations, first in the Academy and later throughout officers’ tenure as an officer. Van Maanen (1975: 215) succinctly described this socialization process: ‘The police culture can be viewed as moulding the attitudes – with numbing regularity – of virtually all who enter.’ Paoline continues:

The problems officers confront in their occupational and organizational environments, as well as the coping mechanisms prescribed by the police culture, produce two defining outcomes of the police culture: social isolation and group loyalty. (Paoline, 2003: 203)

Social isolation, a product of police officers’ occupational environment, tends to separate police from ‘non-police’, creating an ‘us versus them’ attitude towards the citizenry. This separation between police officers and the citizenry strengthens the bonds between police officers and makes possible strong group loyalty (see also Savitz, 1970: 694; Van Maanen, 1975: 218). Thus, the defining outcomes of the police culture – social isolation and group loyalty – are intimately intertwined. Social isolation generates intense group loyalty, and group loyalty counteracts social isolation.

**The nature of loyalty among police officers**

According to Ewin (1990: 2), loyalty ‘plays a very important part in our moral lives, and it will play an important part in a police force in enabling significant virtues to flourish’. Loyal officers perceive the tasks of their office not simply as an externally imposed job but as integral to their personal responsibility. Further, loyalty will matter to a group such as the police more than it matters to most. ‘If one is to go out in the company of a partner to face considerable dangers, for example, one needs to know that that partner will treat one’s interest as his or her own, that his or her courage will come into play when one is threatened’ (Ewin 1990: 3). Quite simply, without ties of loyalty and trust between fellow officers, police work would be much harder to do. In this sense, loyalty is a ‘good thing’ and an integral factor in good police work because it produces a high degree of teamwork. Nevertheless, loyalty appears to lend itself readily to excesses, ‘such as chauvinistic loyalties leading to unjust discrimination against people who are not in the group and to insensitivity to the feelings and legitimate interests of those people’ (Ewin 1990: 41).

Savitz (1970: 699) maintains that the police perceive the citizenry as capricious, uncooperative and unreliable. They tend to perceive the police force as a bureaucratic structure, which does not properly protect its own. Therefore, latent structures develop that place the highest premium on loyalty among fellow officers. The shield of secrecy is the personal and conscious concealment of information not only from the public but also from supervisory and administrative levels within the organization. The dark side of this shield is that it protects officers guilty of misconduct and corruption. Adherence to the
principles of secrecy and the unwritten code of conduct ensures mutual aid, meaning the expectation of maximum assistance from everyone to anyone in trouble. Loyalty has a utilitarian function within police society and its emotional base lies in the personal interactions of its members (Lodge, 1978: 240). Individuals bring their histories to their loyalties (Fletcher, 1993). Loyalty is associated with a feeling of ‘we-ness’ and its intensity varies according to the spatial distance between the individual and the group, the interaction frequency of group members, the functional needs of group members and, in the case of the police, mutual support and protection from punitive supervisors (Rosenau, 1967: 414).

One becomes loyal to an organization or to a group, or to both, through the membership process but, more importantly, as a result of identification with the group (Fletcher, 1993: 66). Entry into the group and subsequent identification with the group is partly mediated by the characteristics of the group. Costa and Kahn (2003) argue that diversity in the group, and ethnic diversity in particular, can make high levels of identification and participation in the group more difficult and weaken the sense of loyalty among members. Feelings of loyalty are most readily achieved in homogeneous groups of like-minded members. Group loyalty requires interactions with fellow members, but commitment to interacting with fellow members varies with the group’s ethnic composition (Costa and Kahn, 2003: 540). The Swedish police force, although it has become more gender equal, is still ethnically highly homogeneous. On the one hand, the ethnic homogeneity of the Swedish police obstructs the entry of ethnic minority officers into the group; that is, they are met with more suspicion by their fellow officers (Uhnoo and Peterson, 2011). On the other hand, ethnic minority officers have more difficulty in identifying with the other group members, the ethnic Swedish majority.

**Background and data**

In early autumn 2010 Swedish Radio aired a critical programme on ‘racism within the police’. Two police employees within the Västra Gotaland Police District, both with an ethnic minority background, testified anonymously in the programme to widespread discrimination and abusive jargon directed at ethnic minorities. In the wake of the ensuing media debate, the Police Commander of Västra Gotaland’s Police District appointed an external inquiry into the situation for the district’s ethnic minority employees. We were contacted to conduct the evaluation, and this article draws on the data collected for this larger research project (Uhnoo and Peterson, 2011).

We interviewed subjects recruited through the Police District’s internal website. We explained the purpose of the inquiry and encouraged police employees with an ethnic minority background to participate. We emphasized that the evaluation would be used to better the situation of ethnic minority police employees. We guaranteed their anonymity and invited participants to read the report prior to its release. We were contacted by 20 officers who agreed to participate, 11 men and 9 women, of whom 7 were civilian police employees and 13 were sworn officers. This article is based on data collected from the sworn officers, comprising 5 women and 8 men. The officers had a varying number of years on the force and varying positions within the force. All of the interviewees had an ethnic minority background, for instance, they were born in a non-Scandinavian country.
within or outside of Europe, born in Sweden with one or both parents from a non-Scandinavian country within or outside of Europe, or adopted. We recognize that our sample is relatively small but would suggest that it is large enough for our analytical purposes, given the small number of sworn officers on the force with an ethnic minority background. In 2009, 14.6 percent of civilian employees but only 4.6 percent of the sworn officers had an ethnic minority background. This is in a region where 38 percent of the population in the urban centre have an ethnic minority background.

What is interesting in regard to our discussion in this article is that the overwhelming majority of the interviewees agreed to participate in the study in order to provide what they felt was a more accurate picture of the situation for ethnic minority officers in their police district and thereby to counteract the accusations of racism and discrimination expressed in the media. Although they were not uncritical, they above all wanted to provide us with a more nuanced perspective than had been aired in the radio programme. In a sense they more or less agreed to participate in the inquiry out of loyalty to their colleagues and the police organization, which they felt had been unjustly treated. We note that the sample may be biased to the extent that more critical ethnic minority officers are underrepresented.

**Loyalty enforced and monitored**

**Social isolation**

Coser (1974: 6) writes that ‘greedy institutions are characterized by the fact that they exercise pressures on component individuals to weaken their ties, or not to form any ties, with other institutions or persons that might make claims that conflict with their own demands’.

The police officers we interviewed expressed a strong sense of ‘we’ in contrast with the ‘them’ outside of the police force.

We have an extremely strong esprit de corps, which is very positive, but even in a way negative. A ‘we’ and ‘them’, we are those employed by the police authorities and them are everyone else outside. (Policewoman with more than 20 years on the force, from Eastern Europe; her emphasis)

This esprit de corps, a characteristic of the working environment, is the underlying mechanism within the police culture that isolates officers from their surrounding environment. However, we found that the police authority can more directly make demands upon new recruits to cut off contact with individuals or groups that they fear might make conflicting demands on their personnel. To a large degree this is the result of the police authority security staff’s demands on new recruits. Ethnic minority officers are subject not only to the exclusionary practices embedded in the police culture of the lower ranks, but even to exclusionary procedures and directives from the top levels of the police organization (McLaughlin, 2007).

The police authorities in Sweden can enforce loyalty among new recruits. The following vignette illustrates this function of the police security screening. We interviewed
a young rookie from the Middle East who had been confronted with the ‘problem’ that he had helped the son of close family friends seek help for his drug abuse and related criminal behaviour. His connection with the young man attracted the attention of the police authorities where he was based during his training. He was informed by his superiors (the director of personnel and the chief of security) that he must break all contact with the young man, which he did, but not without expressing his dissatisfaction at their accusations of links with criminals. He was then informed that he would never get a position in that police district. ‘Colleagues will never be able to trust you when you enter a duty room, you will just be met with silence. No one will believe you. No one will trust you.’ He felt that he was a priori ‘like one of our clients’. In Sweden, ethnic minorities are very often perceived as potential police ‘clients’.

The rookie found himself in a situation that led to a chain of accusations that questioned his undivided loyalty to the police authorities. When his training at the Academy was completed and he applied for a trainee position in three different police districts, he was made aware that these accusations had even been forwarded to these districts. However, his educational records were delayed and the police district where he was accepted began investigating the accusations first, prior to placing him in a unit. The security checks in this district are unusually rigorous, which explains the low number of police with an ethnic minority background. He was finally allowed to complete his trainee period and is now employed in this district. However, he feels that the demands made on him to prove his loyalty to the police authorities, which meant leaving family and friends on the other side of Sweden, were costly. ‘You have to understand the sacrifices that I have had to make.’ He points out that, in his case, the police authorities became directly involved in his private life, making demands about whom he could socialize with. ‘I had to give up my previous life, without question.’

He is convinced that police rookies with an ethnic minority background, and particularly a Muslim background, are met with mistrust and have their loyalty tested far harder than their Swedish colleagues. ‘There is an enormous uncertainty when it comes to Muslims, the whole thing around terrorism which leads to suspicion and extra hard security inspections. Why do they even let us in the Academy?’ Further, he is unsure how he can prove himself and his loyalty to the police aside from the fact that he has left his family and friends. ‘What do I have to prove? How are you going to begin to trust me?’ And, although he has successfully completed his trainee period, this lack of trust in his loyalty continues to haunt him. The police district’s security chiefs have informed him that, if he applied for a position within the police authority that involved a higher security clearance, he would not get it. ‘It’s OK if I work as an ordinary patrol officer or on routine investigations. That will work. But if I have ambitions to set my sights a little higher then I can more or less forget it.’

**Total personality and group submission**

The police culture effectively isolates police officers from sources of identity outside the police organization (Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2000). ‘Being insulated from competing relationships, and from competing anchors for their social identity, these selected status occupants find their identity anchored in the symbolic universe of the restricted role set
of the greedy institution’ (Coser 1974: 7–8). An insulated institution can begin to take over the ‘total personality’ of its members (see Puddephatt, 2008: 166). However, some ethnic minority officers experience their insulation from competing relationships as difficult; whatever they do, they cannot entirely ‘fit in’ with what they perceive as the social identity of their Swedish colleagues.

I can adapt to the Swedish culture, but maybe not to a 100 percent. I always feel like I just don’t fit in. Maybe I don’t have the same interests, I don’t have a house, Volvo and dog. I maybe have other interests. And maybe since before I joined the police I had some friends that are sort of our clients as it were. So I am always under suspicion . . . So I feel pressed, like I am torn in two directions. I have lost quite a lot of friends because I am a policeman now. But you have to fit in, in the police, otherwise it is damn tough. (Policeman, 6 years on the force, from former Yugoslavia)

Another interviewee discussed the suspicion that ethnic minority officers are met with and coupled this suspicion with what she perceived as their lack of integration in Swedish society:

They [ethnic minority officers] aren’t really fully accepted. . . . they are still a little isolated. And I think that what is demanded is that they are more integrated in Swedish society and they aren’t really. So you think what does he really have for bonds to his family and his ethnicity? So they have it tough. (Policewoman, 10 years on the force, from Eastern Europe)

Policing is often regarded by officers as a vocation or a calling. Reiner (2000: 4) explains that ‘policing is conceived as the preservation of a valued way of life, and the protection of the weak against the predatory’. Police officers see themselves as ‘the thin blue line’ that stands between chaos and order. This crime fighter identity serves as a powerful image, which separates the police from those outside the police. It provides a unique sense of exclusiveness, at the same time as it entails honour in the role of a police officer. ‘Greedy institutions are always exclusive’ (Coser, 1974: 8). In order for ethnic minority officers to assume the privileged identity as a crime fighter, they must commit their ‘total personality’ in Coser’s terms to the prevailing social identity of their ethnic majority colleagues. The ‘blue’ police officer identity in the Swedish police is a Swedish ethnic identity, which allows little leeway for retaining ethnic minority loyalties or a sense of identity with ethnic minority family and friends, that is, those ‘outside’ the police force.

Trials of worthiness

Coser (1974) further argues that greedy institutions need to constantly monitor and test members to prove their ‘worthiness’. Police officers, and particularly ethnic minority officers, are persistently tested as to their loyalty to their fellow officers and the police organization.

I think that more is demanded of them [police with an ethnic minority background] than of a Swedish officer; they are tested a little more . . . ‘Can I trust him or her?’ They have to prove
that they can be trusted not to snitch, to tell their family or their ethnic groups. ‘What does he have in the way of ties to his family or ethnic group?’ So they are more mistrustful of them than of ordinary Swedish colleagues. (Male police inspector with 30 years on the force, from Eastern Europe)

The police group or unit is the ‘greediest level’ in the organization. Police officers are especially tested as to their loyalty to the group and their closest fellow officers. ‘This strong feeling of our collective, it protects us. We protect each other, we don’t rat on each other’ (policewoman with 10 years on the force, from Eastern Europe). It is at this level that ethnic minority officers are most rigorously tested as to their loyalty. At this level in the organization it is the police code of secrecy that is enforced, offering protection from the prying eyes and ears of superiors. Can colleagues be trusted not to rat on you?

As soon as you go to your group chief and talk about someone else in the group, it is just not allowed, the culture does not allow it. You can’t report on a fellow officer, things are not that open. You would be seen as a complainer and a rat. It is seen as disloyal to talk about someone else. Police are in general damn hard to criticize. (Male police inspector with more than 20 years on the force, from Eastern Europe)

Cashmore (2001) argues that ethnic minority officers who encounter racism on the job, from casual remarks to outright racist slurs, tend later to contextualize and reinterpret these actions on the part of ethnic majority officers as a ‘test’, a kind of trial. They may encounter deliberate and occasionally even coordinated attempts to ‘test’ ethnic minority colleagues in order to prove their loyalty to the group. If they pass the ‘test(s)’, they hope to be assured of backup in a dangerous situation.

Police talk conveys the common-sense elements of police culture and as such is a vital source of information for the socialization of officers; it provides cues for how officers interact with the citizenry and their fellow officers (Loftus, 2008, 2010; Shearing and Ericson, 1991).4

You can get it [discriminatory language and slurs] out in the open here in a safe environment. We all have confidence and trust in one another. It’s important to have that bond as a team. (Male officer cited in Loftus, 2008: 764)

How then do Swedish officers talk about ethnic minorities? We found the banter, jokes and casual remarks that abound among the police to be heavily laden with discriminatory language and slurs.5 This was a taken-for-granted element within what Waddington (1999) has called ‘canteen talk’. Ethnic minority officers might be confronted with offensive jokes about their ethnicity, but seldom directly encountered outright discriminatory language. However, ethnic minorities among the citizenry were routinely referred to in discriminatory and abusive language. This was an element in the Swedish police culture that ethnic minority officers were expected to accept. Further, they were tested as to their acceptance of the prevailing perspective of ethnic minorities as ‘police clients’.

My sergeant kids around a lot; the language is pretty offensive if you know what I mean. He tested me a little when I came to the unit to see what I went for. But I kid around a lot too, so
he understood pretty quickly that we were on the same wavelength, so he just continued with his jargon. He knows that he can kid around with me and I won’t take it badly. (Policewoman, 3 years on the force, adopted)

To find acceptance in the group, the officer must be prepared to accept the prevailing police culture’s jargon, which is heavily laced with abusive language regarding ethnic minorities. Even if many of the officers we interviewed stated that they found the prejudice and the ethnic jokes ‘tiresome’, ‘coarse and dumb’, ‘unprofessional’, ‘irritating’ or ‘embarrassing’, they had to devise survival strategies.

It has happened to me that someone has poked fun at me, at my workplace. Colleagues have joked about my [ethnic] background: ‘now you had better hold on to your wallet for now a [his ethnic group] is coming’. I haven’t let it offend me even if I don’t think that it is such a funny joke. But I still think that it isn’t harassment; it’s just that they want to joke around with you and they do it pretty awkwardly. So I don’t take it badly. (Policeman, 10 years on the force, from Eastern Europe)

A policewoman said that after engaging in banter with colleagues she was left with a bitter aftertaste. Nevertheless, she felt that ethnic minority officers have to find ways to cope with the prejudice and the abusive language, which routinely fill the air. It is their ethnic Swedish colleagues who set the tone and content of the jargon they are expected to tolerate and even participate in. In short, many stated that, in order to survive in the force, they have to join in and even be prepared to make fun of themselves – ‘you can’t take it personally’. According to Holdaway (1996: 31), loyalty to colleagues prevents a questioning of the acceptability of racial jokes and banter. However, as Cashmore (2001) points out, this enforced acceptance of racist abusive language and ethnic minority officers’ perception or reinterpretation of racist abusive language act as a deterrent to challenging racism in police work and contribute towards its continuation.

The most discriminatory and abusive language is aired within the ‘safe’ confines of the group. ‘What we say to each other stays with us’. ‘What we say in the confines of our “metal bubbles” is between us’. The police code of secrecy protects the use of abusive jargon. And officers, including ethnic minority officers, have to be trusted to protect these spaces, what Loftus (2008) called ‘white spaces’. Protected from supervisory eyes and ears, officers can let off steam, often in the form of racist and ethnic discriminatory talk. In our study, we found that ethnic minority officers are also zealously defensive of these protected spaces. They defended the need for spaces in which us could vent frustrations over encounters with the hostile them.

The test of their loyalty, their worthiness to be a part of the group, is the degree to which they can identify with their colleagues’ prejudices and abusive language. Conversely, this is an inquiry into the degree to which they have cut ties with their ethnic minority identities.

Even as the police identify themselves very strongly as police and as a group sharply separate from the general public, they tend to make even sharper distinctions between themselves and those sections of the citizenry they perceive as problematic, that is ‘police clients’. Swedish society is riven with deep social and economic divisions separating the ‘insiders’ from the ‘outsiders’, which is reflected in the police culture. In Sweden today
the ‘outsiders’ are increasingly found among ethnic minorities living in the socially and economically depressed urban housing estates where the police ‘presence’ is heavy. The police mandate is to police the symptoms of disadvantage, which makes the ethnic minority residuum increasingly marginalized through the institution of policing (Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2000). One of our interviewees expressed the situation succinctly:

You can’t close your eyes to the fact there are a lot of immigrant men who are committing crime. But at the same time you know, we get the same information as everyone else and all the research says that it is more of a social problem. You just have to look. Where are you on the wage ladder and where do you live? That is a much stronger factor than nationality. (Policeman with over 20 years on the force, from Eastern Europe)

The paradox lies in the fact that deeply rooted within the rank-and-file Swedish police culture there is a perception of ethnic minorities as comprising a dangerous criminal class – an ethnicized ‘under-class’ (Crowther, 2000: 155) – which it is the basic mandate of the police to control and contain. When the ethnicized under-class other (ethnic minority officers) enters into the midst of ‘insiders’ within the police force, they become internal ‘outsiders’ (Holdaway, 1996: 21). The structural credibility of their ‘worthiness’ as crime fighters maintaining the ‘thin blue line between order and chaos’ – where order means Swedishness and chaos the dangers posed by ethnic minority under-classes – is then called into question.

Conflicts of loyalty

Loyalty is often conceived of as exclusive. That is, when individuals express loyalty toward some individual, organization or group, they may forsake other loyalties by default. Loyalty, by definition, generates partiality, an identification with the objects of one’s loyalty rather than with its competitors. Fletcher (1993) argues that there are always three parties – A, B and C – in a matrix of loyalty. ‘A can be loyal to B only if there is a third party C . . . who stands as a potential competitor to B, the object of loyalty. The competitor is always lurking in the wings’ (Fletcher, 1993: 4). This conception of loyalty as exclusive undergirds the potential conflicts of loyalty that can arise. Ethnic minority officers can feel that members of their ethnic group are waiting in the wings, ready to make a demand on their shared ethnicity in opposition to the police. Ethnic Swedish officers can in turn have misgivings that, in a given situation with a specific ethnic group, a fellow officer sharing this ethnic minority background might betray his or her loyalty to the police group.

There are some groups with very strong internal bonds with their countrymen and I think that it is more difficult for them to work as police. Their countrymen demand that they help them. [A colleague] has told me that he is sometimes seen as a traitor. They expect favours. It is the same thing when we have brought in individuals from their ethnic group. Then their relatives call this guy and try to fish for information. It is just their tradition. They take it for granted, that is what they do in their homeland, that is how they help each other. (Police inspector with 30 years on the force, from Eastern Europe)
The young police rookie from the Middle East discussed the conflict of loyalty he is faced with:

There is loyalty to my colleagues and loyalty to my employer, those are different kinds of loyalty. One feels split between the two sides. Your family expects things from you and your police colleagues maybe expect other things from you. And the police expect that in that kind of conflict of loyalty you will be on your family’s side, so you are automatically put under suspicion.

Another officer we interviewed expressed a similar conflict of interests. He preferred to socialize with ‘his’ people rather than with his colleagues on the force, with whom he felt he had little in common. However, he found himself now in rather a bind. If he socialized with ‘his’ people, his police colleagues would question his loyalty to them and the force; but his friends among ‘his’ people might in turn question his loyalty to them. This officer found himself in an unenviable position within a tension-filled matrix of loyalty relations.

Whether conflicts of loyalty are actually experienced or, as is more often the case, their fellow officers suspect that ethnic minority officers will be caught in conflicts of loyalty, such conflicts are mechanisms that position ethnic minority officers as ‘outsiders’ within. Conflicts of loyalty, both real and imagined, exclude ethnic minority officers from full inclusion in the police community.

Conclusions: The problem of loyalty in greedy institutions

The greedy institution that is police culture demands the total commitment and the exclusive loyalty of its members. We have argued in this article that the police culture provides the mechanisms whereby the Swedish police force we studied could demand, enforce and monitor the loyalty of ethnic minority officers. Administrative levels could screen these officers, but it is especially the rank-and-file police culture that enforces the loyalty of minority officers and subjects them to everyday trials of their worthiness, that is, their attachment to their fellow ethnic Swedish officers. Furthermore, these trials are underpinned by the prevailing power relations within the Swedish police force that a priori place ethnic minority officers under suspicion as regards their individual loyalty. As one of the interviewed officers resignedly said: ‘How can I prove myself?’

The greedy institution’s demands of exclusive and unstinting loyalty lead to an inherent problem within police authorities, which is not unique, we argue, to Swedish police forces. Loyalty must be moderated if a police force is to work effectively in the best interests of society, or, to put it another way, the greed of greedy institutions must be controlled.

Nathanson (1993), among others, argues that loyalty need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Loyalty need not be considered as an ‘all or nothing’ concept, in that there are degrees of loyalty and that being loyal is not necessarily coupled with uncritical support or unquestioning obedience. Loyalty can be, and should be, tempered. Byers and Powers (1997) point out, for example, that police loyalty to a law enforcement organization need
not mean that the officer(s) is simultaneously disloyal to the best interests of society. However, the perceived exclusiveness of loyalty underlies the unwritten police code, which is a cornerstone of police culture. Under this code, it is not permissible to criticize other police officers, in particular if the criticism is aired to ‘outsiders’.\(^6\) According to Van Maanen (1975: 221), ‘Thou shall not rat on a fellow officer’. Ewin (1990) points out that the code exaggerates the need for, and the benefits derived from, mutual loyalty and support. Distorted, the code not only reduces apprehension and punishment as a deterrent to police misconduct but makes them almost impossible.

Loyalty has the potential of producing moral dilemmas, given its conceptual ambiguity and despite its function in fostering professional relationships. For example, loyalty to people can come into conflict with loyalty to principles. Loyalty to some people can come into conflict with loyalty to others. Sorting out a clash of loyalties is not a matter purely of cold, rational calculation but is a matter of emotional commitment. Ewin (1990: 37) points out that there are several possible objects of loyalty for police officers in the context of their work. Police officers might be loyal to their partner personally or to their group or to the police force or to a police code of ethics or to the government or to the community the police force exists to serve. Conflicts of loyalty can arise from these different possible demands, and it is not particularly clear how they should be resolved. The issue is not an easy one when, for example, loyalty to a fellow police officer guilty of misconduct collides with one’s loyalty to the ethical principles governing police work; or when loyalty to one’s group collides with loyalties to the community when the officers in that group treat the community they exist to serve in discriminatory ways. This suggests that loyalty, although it must be present within the police organization, must be controlled in order to ensure that it has the proper objects.

A control of loyalty within the police organization suggests that in Hirschman’s (1970) terms voice must be given in order to change a perceived unacceptable state of affairs. When one’s loyalties are found to be misplaced because of misconduct by the object of loyalty, the individual has one of two choices: the individual can exit the group or organization (by leaving the force, by requesting a transfer from the group, or symbolically by simply ‘shutting up and putting up’); or the individual can give voice to his or her disappointment with the group or organization in order to correct the situation of perceived misconduct on the part of the object of loyalty (they can voice their dissatisfaction at the actions of an individual or group) (Hirschman, 1970).

The dilemma faced by a police organization is to find ways of opening up to critical voices. Changes within the police culture, which today in Sweden cultivates racist language and discriminatory practices towards ethnic minorities, cannot be accomplished by directives alone. Shearing (1995) argues that change can be effected only by the creation of ‘new stories’, which can undermine the prevailing police culture and its underlying attitudes towards ethnic minorities and behaviour towards these groups in the field. These contradictory ‘stories’, which have thus far been silenced, can be told – given voice – by ethnic minority officers. However, it is difficult for isolated individuals to voice these challenges to the dominant police culture from within. According to Marks (2000: 560), such challenges are particularly effective when collectively organized. The current situation in Sweden, with so few ethnic minorities on the force and with a strong
police union insensitive to their conditions, is far removed from collective strategies that could take on the strategy of collective voice.

The underlying code of secrecy and the demands of unstinting loyalty effectively block critical and constructive voices from being heard. Consequently, the inherent vulnerability of ethnic minority officers’ situation remains unaddressed and police misconduct in interactions with ethnic minority citizenry is allowed to be perpetuated. Only voice could constructively tackle the problems of discriminatory and abusive conduct towards ethnic minorities that we found in our study of the situation of ethnic minority officers in a major Swedish police force and the concomitant misconduct reported in officers’ interactions with the ethnic minority citizenry.

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**Notes**

1. Although the police culture *demands* loyalty, it does *grant* autonomy (Brown, 1988: 85). Loyalty to the organization and the group does allow a degree of individualism and tolerates differences, for example the different styles of policing distinguished by, amongst others, Muir (1977) and Reiner (1978). Paoline (2003) argues that, even though peer loyalty might vary in intensity among officers, there is no reason to doubt that officers are loyal to one another. Rather, there appear to be some boundaries to a cultural fragmentation of police culture. The question remains of which differences are tolerated and which differences are not.

2. The interviewees chose the place of the interview, and the semi-structured interviews varied between one and three hours in length. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. According to the contract agreement with the Police District, the authorities ‘owned’ the evaluation report and we ‘owned’ the raw data, which could be used for further research. The interview excerpts in the article have been translated by us and certain personal details have been omitted to ensure anonymity.

3. Among the police rookies in this district in 2009, only 3.9 percent had an ethnic minority background, in contrast to the national average of 7.4 percent. Given that the district is a major urban area with a high percentage of ethnic minorities in the population and hence should be an attractive employer for ethnic minority officers, this situation is probably a result of the degree of rigorousness in security clearances for prospective officers.

4. Researchers have found that women police experience intense pressure to ‘prove themselves’, and, in order to gain the acceptance of their male colleagues and inclusion in the prevailing police culture, they tended to adopt the norms, values and behaviour of the culture (Young, 1991). Loftus (2008: 772) extends this adaption by women to the white, heterosexual male bias of police culture to include the ethnic minority officers in her study. She found that many of the ethnic minority officers embraced comparable perspectives on being a ‘bobby’ to those of their white colleagues. Her findings resonate with research focused on officer attitudes: few statistical differences were noted for ethnic minorities (or for women) (Paoline et al., 2000). Although our study of ethnic minority Swedish officers dovetails to a degree with this research, we did find attitudes among these officers that were at odds with those of their colleagues. In particular, many tended to take offence at the way their ethnic Swedish colleagues talked about ethnic minorities.
5. In contrast to Britain, although racist language is discouraged there are no direct sanctions against the use of racist language.


References


