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Theorizing police response to domestic violence in the Singaporean context: Police subculture revisited

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Abstract

This article focuses on the well documented, yet potentially contested concept of rank-and-file police subculture to conceptualize police response to situations of domestic violence in Singapore. It argues that the utility of the concept to explaining police behavior is often undermined by an all-powerful, homogenous, and deterministic conception of it that fails to take into account the value of *agency* in police decision-making and the range of differentiated police response in situations of domestic violence. Through reviewing the literature on police response to domestic violence, this study called for the need to rework the concept of police subculture by treating it as having a *relationship with*, and *response to*, the structural conditions of policing, while retaining a conception of the *active* role played by street-level officers in instituting a *situational* practice. Using Pierre Bourdieu's relational concepts of 'habitus' and 'field,' designating the cultural dispositions of police subculture and structural conditions of policing respectively, the study attempted to reconceptualize the problem of policing domestic violence with reference to the Singaporean context.
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Introduction

Two major perspectives—situational and cultural—have informed criminologists in their conceptualization of the problem of policing domestic violence. The situational perspective, predominantly taken by non-feminist legal theorists, contributes to an understanding of how exogenous factors—legal and extra-legal—affect rank-and-file officers' decisions of arrest (Black, 1971). A particular contribution of this perspective lies in its theoretical credence to developing a model of police decision-making rife with situationally-determined contingencies. Using the model, which emphasized that police assessment of the situation, and later justifications for their actions depended in part upon the ways in which the police actors themselves set the stage for police management in "handling" of situations (Bittner, 1967), researchers investigating police response to domestic violence situations began to attempt to determine and delineate aspects of police arrest decisions based on a variety of exogenous variables.

Studies that attempted to determine police arrest decisions using the situational model in domestic violence episodes had generally employed three types of methodology (Dutton, 1995): (1) having police specify how they would have responded to hypothetical scenarios (Waaland & Keeley, 1985); (2) reconstructing arrest decisions from information on police reports and victim-study reports (indirect observation) (Berk, Berk, Newton, & Loseke, 1984; Berk & Loseke, 1980; Brown, 1984); and (3) examining police behavior under real intervention conditions (direct observation) (Smith & Klein, 1984; Worden & Pollitz, 1984). By and large, the major findings from the studies were consistent with one another irrespective of the methodology taken (Choi, 1989).

The main limitation of the situational perspective, however, was that it obscured an understanding of police

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decisions to avoid arrest as studies using this perspective had generated findings based on specific and discrete observations of police-citizen encounters, where arrest was inevitable (Smith & Klein, 1984). It was also evident that the issue of *motivation* on the part of the rank-and-file police to circumvent legislative policies on mandatory and presumptive arrest practices (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1990; Ferraro, 1989b; Sherman & Berk, 1984; Stanko, 1989) had not been satisfactorily theorized by situational theorists as their primary concern was to isolate and delineate exogenous determinants affecting arrest decisions in *real* circumstances. Neither did these studies attempt to sociologically explain and account for officers' decision-making process in initiating arrests: why certain situational factors became determinants of arrests? How did these factors assume importance if one was to situate them within the larger organizational and occupational culture of police work and policing? As Smith and Klein acknowledged, "While our quantitative results identify factors which significantly affect arrest decisions, they do not directly address the underlying processes: how do police choose to arrest in some disputes and not in others" (Smith & Klein, 1984, p. 477).

In an attempt to better conceptualize the issue of rank-and-file *decisions to avoid arrest*, feminist criminologists, in particular, developed the cultural perspective in which they specifically sought to examine and delineate aspects of rank-and-file police culture, which appeared to determine rank-and-file officers' handling of domestic situations (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1990; Edwards, 1989; Ferraro, 1989a, 1989b; Field & Field, 1973; Hanmer, 1989; Hatty, 1989; Parnas, 1967; Zoomer, 1989). The cultural or attitudinal perspective essentially viewed that negative police response, conceptualized as one equivalent to perfunctory or 'non-arrest' interventions, was reflective of the normative values achieved during the process of social and organizational socialization of the police. The conflict between the individual 'call for help' and the larger organizational mandate of police departments (Parnas, 1967), perception that responding to domestic incidents was not 'real' police work (Manning, 1978; Reiner, 1985; Van Maanen, 1974), absence of occupational rewards attached to legal intervention in domestic disturbances (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1990), perception that victims would eventually withdraw their complaints (Edwards, 1989; Field & Field, 1973), absence of training to deal *effectively* with domestic violence cases (Martin, 1976), the effect of police attitudes on the treatment of violence against women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, Ferraro, 1989a; Hanmer, 1989; Hatty, 1989; Stanko, 1989) and perception that domestic violence cases were extremely dangerous to attending officers (Homant & Kennedy, 1985) were all cited as reasons why police avoided using arrest as an option, and one worth avoiding. Although these studies provided useful answers to questions of why police detested domestic violence calls, there were two issues that remained unclear.

First, these studies tended to portray domestic incidents as *unique* situations in which police failed to make arrests when they 'should' (Berk & Loseke, 1980, p. 321) (emphasis in original). They conveyed a message that police response to domestic violence was *uniquely* subject to the forces of male prejudice, occupational constraints, organizational pressures, and unpredictability of police-citizen encounters (emphasis in original). In stark contrast to the view that the defining feature of policing as one involving the invocation of criminal law (Berk & Loseke, 1980, p. 321), however, the general literature on policing and police work indicated that the role of the police could only remotely be viewed as 'law enforcement' (see for example Bittner, 1967; Black, 1971; Reiss, 1971; Skolnick, 1966; Van Maanen, 1974).

Second, although this study shared the basic premise of the cultural perspective that 'no-arrest' outcomes were reflections of normative values developed and sustained by rank-and-file police culture, it contended that this approach to understanding policing domestic violence inherited a similar theoretical weakness as that of the situational perspective. As noted earlier, non-feminist theorists (e.g., Worden & Pollitz, 1984) identified situational variables of arrests in *determinate* circumstances where arrest was inevitable and as observed, these studies did not provide an explanation for officers' *decisions of non-arrest*. In the same vein, an all-powerful, homogenous, and deterministic conception of police subculture as affecting police decisions of *non-arrest* did not adequately explain *decisions to arrest* and the observed variations in police handling of domestic violence. In other words, it lacked a conception of agency, yet it was known from the now voluminous literature on police subculture that the use of discretion-the staple of policing-essentially signified agency.

Policing domestic violence: towards a reconceptualization

To address these theoretical weaknesses, it was argued that an understanding of both the *structural* and *cultural* aspects of the organization of policing was necessary in order to derive a deeper understanding of police response to domestic violence. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) relational concepts of 'habitus' and 'field,' designating the cultural dispositions of police subculture and structural conditions of policing respectively, the study attempted to reconceptualize the problem of policing domestic violence with reference to the Singaporean context. This involved reworking the concept of police subculture by treating it as having a *relationship with*, and *response to*, the structural conditions of policing, while retaining a conception of the *active* role played by rank-and-file officers in instituting a *situational* practice. This required not only an investigation into the occupational and organizational dynamics of the rank-and-file police (habitus)—the mainstay of police force and the

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