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# From exclusion to inclusion
## A proposed approach to addressing the culture of masculinity within policing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the cultural aspect of policing, particularly as it relates to the role of gender, and proposes an alternative approach to addressing the culture of masculinity within policing.

**Design/methodology/approach** – First, the author provides a brief overview of the nature of policing. This is followed by a review of the relevant literature on policing and gender and the implications for men, women, and police organizations of adhering to a militarized or hegemonic form of masculinity. Finally, the author discusses Ely and Myerson's proposed theory for "undoing gender" and its relevance for policing.

**Findings** – The findings of this paper suggest that the police culture continues to reinforce the masculine image of policing, thereby representing a significant barrier to the advancement of women. The findings also suggest that this barrier may be overcome through shared goals that advance collective well-being, definitions of competence linked to task requirements, and a learning orientation toward work.

**Originality/value** – This paper makes an important contribution to the existing literature on gender and policing, as it specifically focusses on the cultural influences of masculinity and considers the structural, behavioral, and cultural changes required to create margins of safety for police officers to experiment with new behaviors.

**Keywords** Gender, Women, Organizational culture, Workplace

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

In a democratic society the police are responsible for enforcing the law, preventing crime, protecting life and property, and maintaining peace and public order (Martin, 1999). And while the nature and philosophy of policing has evolved since the inception of modern policing in the early 1800s, policing continues to be understood as a dangerous, "masculine" occupation because of its association with aggressive behavior and the legitimate use of force, from which women have been traditionally excluded (Rabe-Hemp, 2008).

The more recent shift toward community policing has called for police organizations to redefine the role of the police, from one of strictly reacting to crime to one that seeks to address recurring problems affecting public safety (Martin and Jurik, 2007). This shift was also intended to bring a change in required skills and qualities: from the hyper-masculine attributes such as strength, power, and authority; to those perceived as "feminine" such as communication, empathy, compassion, trust, and relationship building (McElhinny, 1994; Herbert, 2001).

By all accounts, adoption of the community policing philosophy has, in part, created an arena in which women have been drawn to the social services aspects of building links with communities and have become more readily accepted into policing (Miller, 1999). Studies have shown that the increases in the number of women in policing in recent decades has been attributed to a number of factors including, a greater emphasis on community policing. Changes can also be attributed to changes in formal and informal

internal practices, the retirement of older officers who resisted women and other minority groups, the advancement of women into senior ranks, changes in organizational culture, public attitudes, and the changing societal expectations of gender roles (Kingshott, 2012).

Many changes to the composition of the police have also been driven by external forces such as federal legislation, lawsuits and financial incentives, and the availability of federal grants, whereby police organizations were required to meet specific targets for hiring and promoting women and minorities (Allen, 2003). As a consequence, many approaches to diversity have been largely short-term and compliance-driven, with assimilation into the existing male-dominated culture as a central focus (Thomas and Ely, 1996; Thomas and Gabarro, 1999).

Although these changes have been created opportunities for women and other minority groups, women remain significantly underrepresented in policing. For instance, women accounted for 20.6 percent of all police officers in Canada in 2014 (Hutchins, 2015), and 11.9 percent in the USA in 2012 (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2012). Comparatively women represent just over 50 percent of the total population in both Canada and the USA (Statistics Canada, 2010; US Census Bureau, 2014). Moreover, many of the problems encountered previously by female officers have not been completely resolved (Kingshott, 2006). Women are still subjected to biases, stereotypes, and organizational policies and practices that preclude their full integration and advancement within policing (Archbold and Hassel, 2009; Silvestri et al., 2013).

To move beyond traditional approaches to diversity management and to achieve the full benefits from a diverse workforce, researchers suggest that diverse individuals and diverse perspectives must be effectively integrated into structures, systems, and organizational processes (Pless and Maak, 2004; Stewart et al., 2008), thus involving a complete cultural change (Miller and Katz, 2007).

In the context of policing, Walker et al. (2000, in Sklansky, 2006) argue that the police organizational culture continues to shape the nature of policing. More specifically, Ely and Meyerson (2010) suggest that organizations import norms and behaviors that tend to be associated with one gender. For organizations doing dangerous work, such as policing, the presence of physical risk reinforces a culture of masculinity and the dominant image of the ideal man as autonomous, brave, and strong. Additionally, male officers continue to cling to the image of the physical crime fighter and downplay social service aspects of the job that are perceived as feminine work, in order to preserve masculinity (Prokos and Padavic, 2002). Organizational norms also continue to encourage displays of masculinity, which have been rewarded by various organizational practices (Ely and Meyerson, 2010).

Prior research on diversity in policing has largely overlooked the cultural aspect of policing, particularly as it relates to the gendered aspect of the police profession. The majority of studies relating to gender have focussed on such topics as the equal competence of female officers (Archbold and Schulz, 2012), the different applications of use of force between men and women (Brandl et al., 2001; Garner et al., 1995), and the ability of female officers to more effectively resolve disputes (Braithwaite, 1998). Accordingly, this paper argues that women remain underrepresented in policing due to a focus on traditional diversity practices and a lack of emphasis on examining the cultural influence on gender as a primary barrier to inclusion.

## The nature of policing

The police are often considered the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system as they are expected to work to prevent crime and enforce laws. In addition, they are expected to protect life and property, maintain peace and public order, and provide a wide range

of other services to citizens 24 hours a day. In any of these scenarios exists the potential for violence and the right of the police to use force to gain control (Martin and Jurik, 2007). The combination of danger related to physical violence, authority to exercise force, and increasing organizational pressures for efficiency has resulted in a unique set of police behaviors and attitudes (Skolnick, 1994).

Police officers rely on fellow officers for physical protection, support, solidarity, and even social identity (Martin and Jurik, 2007; Skolnick, 1994). Recent research on the police occupational culture within a police service in the UK noted a heightened sense of isolation and loyalty on the part of police officers (Loftus, 2010). Feelings of isolation were derived from perceptions that the police were alienated from the general public due their role as visible symbols of authority. These feelings of isolation generated a sense of togetherness with other officers, which were further reinforced due to the inherent nature of the work, such as the anticipation of violence (Loftus, 2010).

In his seminal study, Skolnick (1966, in Loftus, 2010) argued that police culture arises from the common tensions that are inherently associated with the job of being a police officer. These include the potential danger that officers face in their day-to-day encounters with the public, the authority they hold to respond to such encounters, and the pressure to be efficient. Researchers contend that the police culture serves as a mechanism to assist police officers in coping with the problems, dangers, and tensions that confront them in their daily work (Chan, 1997; Paoline, 2003; Reiner, 2000). Once this culture has evolved, it is passed down from generation to generation, thereby posing as a stubborn barrier to change (Terpstra and Schaap, 2013).

The shift to community policing was intended to broaden the police mandate from a narrow crime-fighting role to one that addresses wider issues and provides a means through which police officers can work with residents to identify and solve local problems (Trojanowicz *et al.*, 1998). Notwithstanding this shift, crime fighting is still regarded by both officers and the public as "real" police work. It is visible and valued by the public, and often the most satisfying part of the work for the majority of officers (Loftus, 2010; Martin and Jurik, 2007). Additionally, the association of catching criminals with danger and bravery continues to denote police work as a "man's job" (Martin and Jurik, 2007).

### Policing and gender
Police work is performed in gendered organizations where "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker, 1990, p. 146). Masculine occupations, such as policing, require qualities that are perceived as being possessed by men and not women (Ely and Meyerson, 2010). Women have generally been deemed incapable of possessing the traditionally masculine and esteemed characteristics of strength, courage, and authority, and therefore have been considered unable to do the job (Balkin, 1988). When women are either consciously excluded or relegated to inferior positions, they are unable to advance and are expected to accept a subordinated role within an organization (Shelley *et al.*, 2011). The impact on policing is the maintenance of a numerical dominance of men, which serves to reinforce the masculine identify of the profession (Acker, 1990).

One of the more significant influences on the role of gender within policing is the adoption of a military model. This model led to the emergence of hyper-masculinity or hegemonic masculinity, which is frequently characterized by the use of force,

physicality, hierarchy, superiority, courage under fire, the subversion of "feminine" characteristics (Bevan and MacKenzie, 2012), refusing to display evidence of mistakes or lack of knowledge, and emotional detachment (Ely and Meyerson, 2010). Hegemonic masculinity is often considered as the dominant form of masculinity, which reinforces power through various forms, such as the "subordination of women, heterosexism, uncontrollable sexuality, authority, control, competitive individualism, independence, aggressiveness, and capacity for violence" (Prokos and Padavic, 2002, p. 442).

O'Neil (2010) noted that: "(b)efore anything else is considered, a man is defined by his level of masculinity, as defined by his adherence to traditional male roles" (p. 335). Given this, male officers exert significant effort to demonstrate these attributes in order to prove their worth and fit in (Ely and Meyerson, 2010). The outcome is intense pressure to conform to a masculine identity that also "prizes stoicism, composure, and self-control" (Pasciak and Kelley, 2013, p. 140). Officers who do not conform to this identity may be viewed as nurturing or weak, and therefore subjected to ridicule and shame from peers (Nolan, 2009).

In a police setting, where the rejection of peers might mean isolation at the station or even on the streets, to avoid shaming, officers may overemphasize their masculinity and repress emotions so as not to appear vulnerable or feminine (Addis and Cohane, 2005). Research has demonstrated that the costs of such displays can be high, with both individuals and organizations paying a price. Attempts by men to maintain an image of hegemonic masculinity have led to excessive risk taking, poor-quality decisions, the violation of civil and human rights, the alienation of men from their health, emotions, and relationships with others, and the marginalization of female colleagues (Ely and Meyerson, 2010).

Based on research conducted at a police academy in a rural US county, Prokos and Padavic (2002) argue that hegemonic masculinity is a defining concept of police culture. The academy's "hidden curriculum" taught recruits that women are different from men, and as a result it was acceptable to exclude, denigrate and objectify women, and to disregard women in authority (p. 454). Other researchers have validated this argument suggesting that hyper masculine or hegemonic masculinity has become legitimated through various cultural practices such as informal work practices, behavioral norms, rituals, stories, and symbols (Acker, 1992; Martin, 2002).

The constructed hierarchy of male dominance in policing therefore segregates female officers through words, actions, and organizational policies and practices (Shelley *et al.*, 2011). Although these practices can manifest consciously or unconsciously at the individual or organizational level, they result in significant ramifications for female officers. Studies have demonstrated that the entrance of women into policing has been met with significant resistance from male rank-and-file officers who continue to believe that women are unfit for the physical and emotional demands of policing (Chan *et al.*, 2010), or that they pose a threat to the male-oriented occupational solidarity of policing (Balkin, 1988).

Resistance to women has manifested in a number of ways; including sharing war stories, telling sexist jokes, and tales of sexual exploits to display physical toughness (Connell, 1987). Other forms of resistance have involved male officers seeking to devalue women by highlighting the differences between men and women in order to confirm the masculine nature of the job by showing women to be unfit for it (Cockburn, 1988). Women were expected to either accept their biological inferiority or to strive to overcome it by adopting masculine traits (Martin, 1999).

Male officers have also been found to demean female officers through anti-women remarks and sexual harassment (Morash and Haarr, 1995). Sexual harassment between individuals is viewed as a mechanism of control and segregation in male-dominated professions (Shelley *et al.*, 2011). Although not strictly the domain of women, research suggests that the most common problem facing female police officers is sexual harassment (National Center for Women and Policing, 2002; Wells and Alt, 2005). For example, a survey of serving policewomen in 35 countries revealed that 77 percent had experienced some form of sexual harassment from colleagues (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000). Similarly, a 2008 study of sexual harassment and health among male and female police officers revealed that women were more frequently sexually harassed than men; 64 vs 48 percent (de Hass *et al.*, 2009).

Other inappropriate behaviors exhibited by male officers and superiors include derogatory name calling, putdowns, and affectionate terms of address (Dick and Jankowicz, 2001; Haarr, 2005), which have often been used to prevent the inclusion of women (Haarr, 1997). A quote from a former female police officer appearing at a roundtable session on sexual harassment highlights aspects of her experience as one of the first women in a law enforcement agency:

> The name calling became derogatory in nature […] in other words my supervisor […] thought it would be funny to call me beaver and raisin tits […] I was called these names in the office, on the radio so other detachments could hear, and in public when I was driving the car (Liberal Roundtable, 2013).

The harassment of female officers by male colleagues has not been limited to just the workplace. Research by Martin and Jurik (1996) determined that women discovered sex magazines, dildos, and vibrators in their lockers and mailboxes. A class-action lawsuit filed in 2012 by a former female police officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police highlighted sexual harassment, bullying, and gender-discrimination experienced by the plaintiff, Janet Merlo. The court filing specifically noted the following incident:

> On one occasion, the Sergeant brandished a dildo that had been seized as evidence in a criminal investigation and yelled across the Nanaimo Detachment office words to the effect: "Merlo, what the hell happened? This thing was brand new yesterday. Now it's almost worn out. Did you take it home last night?" (Notice of Civil Claim, 2012).

It is important to note that women are not the only group used to help define masculinity within policing. The culture of masculinity has excluded some men, particularly those who do not fit the requirements of hegemonic masculinity (Bird, 1996; Acker, 1999). Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to other forms of masculinity as well as in relation to femininity (Connell, 1995). For this reason, the presence of men who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity may also threaten the association of a masculine identity with police work (Prokos and Padavic, 2002).

### Removing gender as a barrier to inclusion

Taking a step outside policing, research in similarly dangerous and masculine work environments indicates that the script of masculinity can be changed. A study by Ely and Meyerson (2010) at two offshore oil production platforms identified three primary cultural elements that enabled platform workers to deviate from traditional expectations of masculinity: shared goals that advance collective well-being, definitions of competence linked to task requirements, and a learning orientation toward work. Additionally, the primary focus on safety directed workers away from the goal of proving masculinity

to goals that were incompatible with maintaining a masculine image. In contrast to other "dangerous" workplaces, the workers at the two sites routinely admitted physical limitations, publicly admitted to mistakes, and openly shared fears and anxieties while demonstrating concern regard for others. These actions were supported through cultural practices that rewarded competence, learning, and the expression of vulnerability (Ely and Meyerson, 2010).

The findings from the offshore platform study imply that the pursuit of a common purpose, the promotion of learning, and the alignment of competence with task requirements and not masculine traits, enable male workers to effectively disrupt their compliance with traditional gender norms. This disruption can occur through a supportive culture and the creation of margins of safety in which people can relax their guard and experiment with new behaviors without fear that others might belittle or humiliate them (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson and Mogelof, 2005).

Ely and Meyerson's (2010) proposed theory on undoing gender provides evidence that the police organizational culture can be changed by providing police officers with sufficient motivation, a model to follow, and a margin of safety in which to deviate from traditional masculine scripts. Instead of focussing on traditional law enforcement practices, police organizations may be better served to elucidate the higher goal of preserving public safety. This also means shifting from a performance culture and a focus on individual goals to one that focusses on collaborative or collective efforts to achieve a common purpose.

Similar to other organizations, police work has been subjected to changes in managerial policies and processes. As a result, a substantial portion of police work is now quantified with performance indicators assessed at the individual officer level (Cashmore, 2001). Long and Silverman (2005) argue that the impact of these changes is a focus on individualism and a culture of blame rather than attempts to learn from mistakes and best practices. Research has shown that performance cultures cause people to focus on proving rather than improving competencies, and to consciously avoid any evidence that would demonstrate incompetence (Edmondson, 2003). Furthermore, given the role of masculinity in policing, proving competence is often equated with proving masculinity. As such, organizational practices that reinforce an orientation toward performance also reinforce compliance with traditional masculine scripts (Edmondson, 2003). An important consideration in shifting to a more collectivist culture is the articulation of competencies that better support the mission of the police, as opposed to competencies and skills associated with the traditional image of the police, such as aggressiveness and physicality.

In their early work on organizational change, Schein and Bennis (1965) noted the need to create psychological safety for individuals in order for them to feel secure and capable of changing. Psychological safety, "or the belief that one will not be rejected or humiliated in a particular setting or role, describes a climate in which people feel free to express work-relevant thoughts and feelings" (Edmondson and Roloff, 2009, p. 48). In the context of teams, it pertains to a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up or for making a mistake, and is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). This margin of safety facilitates learning as it alleviates concerns about others' reactions to potentially embarrassing actions, thereby permitting individuals to be both vulnerable and themselves (Edmondson, 1999; Mayer et al., 1995).

A key element of creating psychological safety is leadership. Edmondson (2004) suggests that when leaders exhibit vulnerability, openness, availability, and accessibility,

these efforts facilitate the development of psychological safety among employees. There is evidence to suggest that police supervisors can play a role in shaping the norms and work environment of the officer, thus helping to influence officer behavior (Engel, 2000; Engel and Worden, 2003).

For policing, the introduction of cultural practices that enable officers to be vulnerable and to engage in demonstrating different behaviors, without having to prove "manliness," may hold greater promise than previous efforts that have simply focussed on attempting to change attitudes. Such a change would also require a significant shift from traditional control-centered management approaches to allow for greater officer discretion and autonomy (Greene, 2000).

### Implications and limitations

Policing as a profession has continued to evolve since the early days of the modern police departments. Once dominated by the masculine qualities of strength, authority, and power, the introduction of community policing has given way to more "feminine" characteristics that serve to create cooperative relationships with communities; however, police organizations continue to draw on masculine images to define what it means to be a police officer (Prokos and Padavic, 2002). In addition, recruiting and other professional materials continue to include images of male officers engaged in tactical and other traditional crime-fighting roles (Gascon and Schaefer, 2003). What this implies is that despite the rise of community policing and the increasing presence of women, the masculine reality of policing has not been sufficiently addressed.

Ely and Meyerson's (2010) proposed theory on undoing gender presents a compelling alternative to approaching change, and therefore holds significant implications for policing. In leveraging Ely and Meyerson's (2010) research, this paper presents a possible framework for how police organizations may finally be able to revise and reframe the traditional masculine policing script. By "undoing gender," police organizations not only become more welcoming for women, they may also enable both men and women to achieve their full potential. More importantly, the police are more likely to be able to fulfill societal expectations by embracing a policing paradigm that emphasizes both service and order maintenance. This latter point is significant as it speaks specifically to the legitimacy of the police, which is determined through the trust and confidence members of the public have in the police to perform their duties (Garcia and Cao, 2005).

This paper also presents important implications for police leadership. A shift in performance culture to a collectivist culture requires a significant shift in the transactional/command and control leadership styles that have often been associated with policing (Drodge and Murphy, 2002). As demonstrated by Ely and Meyerson (2010), undoing gender requires a greater degree of humility and a more inclusive form of leadership that focusses on achieving organizational goals over individual goals.

This paper has two significant limitations. First, Ely and Meyerson's (2010) proposed theory of undoing gender remains largely untested. Additional research would benefit from testing this theory in a variety of settings. Second, this paper generalized the findings of Ely and Meyerson's (2010) research to the police environment and outlined a framework for undoing gender in policing. No testing was done to validate if the experiences on the offshore oil platforms would be similar to other dangerous types of work, such as policing. While it is reasonable to conclude that if gender can be "undone" in the highly masculinized environment on oil platforms, it should be equally probable in policing, future research on masculinity in policing should involve testing the theory through experimentation or through field studies.

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