Police Culture and Transformational Leadership: Outlining the Contours of a Troubled Relationship

Tom Cockcroft*

Abstract For a number of years there has been a sustained acknowledgement of the worth of ‘transformational’ leadership as a catalyst for change within police organizations. Academics, policy makers, and senior officers alike have pronounced the benefits to be enjoyed from the implementation of such leadership models, not least in respect of promoting cultural change. However, this article will present a counter argument to suggest that the application of transformational leadership models to policing contexts is worthy of more robust critique than which, to date, it has been subjected to. In doing so, this article explores the concept of ‘transformational’ leadership and its relevance to policing contexts. Additionally, the article will suggest that claims of success in effecting cultural change within police organizations are likely to rest on simplistic conceptions of police culture and its relationship to police behaviour.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing application of the language and ideas of transformational leadership to the context of policing (Porter and Warrender, 2009; Aremu et al., 2011; Dean and Gottschalk, 2013; Mazerolle et al., 2013). In particular, this popularity appears linked to the expectation that transformational leadership styles might, in some way, allow us to deal with the perennial challenge of police culture (Foster, 2003; Mastrofski, 2004). This article will argue that the assumed symmetry between the ‘problem’ of police culture and the reformative powers of transformational leadership is a more complex relationship than has been commonly acknowledged. In particular, it will be argued that insufficient attention has been paid to the unique organizational setting of policework (and its associated organizational culture), the concept of transformational leadership or to the challenges of measuring the ways in which formal leadership can affect cultural change.

During the summer of 2011, at a time of widespread speculation as to who would be appointed the next Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and in the wake of widespread rioting in the British capital, journalists from The Guardian newspaper conducted an interview with Bill
Bratton. Bratton had been largely credited for his leadership successes in a number of large American police departments [although see Bowling (1999), for a critical overview of Bratton’s successes as NYPD Commissioner] and had, according to reports, been approached by the British Prime Minister David Cameron as a potential applicant for the role. During the course of the interview, Bratton stated that; ‘Bureaucrats change processes, leaders change culture. I think of myself as a transformational leader who changes cultures’ (Dodd and Stratton, 2011). At one level, this statement is relatively unremarkable in that it can be seen merely as a senior police officer pronouncing their leadership strengths. At another level, however, it is interesting in its positioning of transformational leadership as an approach that can be used to achieve cultural changes within police organizations where, according to some literature, there is a perceived cultural divide between the world of the street officer and that of his or her manager (Marks, 2007). That those who do the ‘dirty work’ of policing and those who provide formal leadership might have conflicting agendas and aims and be subjected to different organizational pressures is not a particularly new idea. Although Reuss-Ianni and Ianni (1983) did much to expose this issue, as far back as 1969, Niederhoffer described the ways in which the recruitment policies of the New York City Police Department led to an intake of applicants from both working class backgrounds and the college educated classes resulting in cultural tensions between ‘common sense’ street policing and the newly professionalized ranks of police managers. With the increasing application of neoliberal narratives to police work over recent decades (see Bevir and Krupicka, 2007; Cockcroft and Beattie, 2009) this cultural tension, which had previously been presented as essentially a sociological issue, became recast as a leadership one. This article will therefore seek to explore the relevance of transformational leadership to the context of police organizations particularly in respect of initiating cultural change. The article will then assess the challenges of accurate measurement of cultural change.

What is transformational leadership?

The popularity of transformational leadership symbolizes a fundamental shift in stance from more traditional transactional models of leadership that have become increasingly disparaged over recent years. These conventional leadership styles began to be viewed by many as ineffective due to their reliance on what was viewed as little more than the imposition of ‘contractual relationships’ (Bass and Avolio, 1993, p. 116). Densten (1999) demonstrates how, through these relationships, workers are motivated by reward and punishment structures that encourage an orientation to organizational engagement predicated upon self-interest rather than through any real emotional association with the values of the organization. Under such models, he notes, workers are motivated through rewards for displays of appropriate behaviour and punished for that which is considered inappropriate. Under transactional leadership, according to Engel and Worden (2003, p. 136), therefore,

‘The subordinate performs what is expected of him or her, while the leader specifies the conditions under which these expectations must be met and the rewards that the subordinate will receive when the requirements are fulfilled’.

Transformational approaches, on the other hand, are based upon values of ‘participation, consultation and inclusion’ (Silvestri, 2007, p. 39) and seek to erode the cultural barriers that may exist within an organization’s hierarchy. In this respect, they aim to transform the orientation of the worker to the desired behaviour, from one where they conform due to the expectation of reward or punishment to one where they conform because
they share, and buy into, the organization’s ‘vision’. To Mastrofski, the advent of the transformational agenda has meant that:

‘Police managers are encouraged to persuade officers to embrace certain goals and values not because doing so will produce desirable personal consequences, or failing to do so will produce negative ones, but because doing so is simply right and proper or the best way.’ (Mastrofski, 2004, p. 104)

Whilst some might be tempted to suggest that the above quotation reveals perhaps the major innovatory aspect of transformational leadership as a straightforward appeal to the virtues of the individual and, in the case of police officers, as essentially a plea for compliance on moral grounds, a number of writers make a more compelling case for its benefits. For example, although transactional leadership has generally been the norm within police organizations (Densten, 1999), transformational leadership is seen as enabling legitimate organizational change (Mastrofski, 2004), facilitating improved communication (Densten, 1999) and encouraging a more motivated workforce (Pillai and Williams, 2004). Scepticism has, however, been voiced from some quarters (see, e.g. Currie and Lockett 2007; Neyroud, 2011) regarding the extent to which transformational leadership should be viewed as a cure-all for the organizational issues facing public sector institutions. Furthermore, as Pawar (2003) illustrates, our understanding of transformational leadership (and its application to a broad range of organizational contexts) is somewhat hindered by a number of conceptual issues that demand clarification and which centre upon the relationship between leadership styles, organizational contexts, and organizational change. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore these matters in depth, it is of use to be aware that transformational leadership remains a sometimes vaguely defined and divisive concept, that one of its founders himself described as ‘both an art and a science’ (Bass, 1990, p. 30). For the purpose of this article, a definition will be adopted which draws on Densten’s (1999) view of transformational leadership as leadership behaviours that draw on idealized influence (for example, encouraging a ‘sense of mission’), inspirational motivation (e.g. more fully engaging the employee with the organizational vision), individualized consideration (e.g. having individualized relationships with subordinates) and intellectual stimulation (e.g. encouraging employees to think innovatively about problem solving). Similarly, Densten’s view of transactional leadership will be adopted. This suggests that transactional leadership focuses on the relationship between leaders and followers, with the former seeking to influence performance through either ‘contingent reward’ (application of positive sanctions as a response to desired behaviour) or ‘management-by-exception’ (application of negative sanctions as a response to undesired behaviour).

Mapping transformational leadership to the police organization

Bratton’s statement regarding the ability of transformational leaders to effect cultural change is interesting as it portrays a very stylized and uncomplicated sense of the role of culture in the police world. Although it would be unwise to lose track of the fact that we are referring to a media-directed sound bite, it would similarly be unwise to ignore the fact that the sentiment conveyed within it represents an increasingly orthodox position within the arena of police leadership. Numerous academic commentators have drawn attention to the prevalence of transformational leadership strategies and rhetoric within law enforcement circles (e.g. Foster, 2003; Silvestri, 2003; Dobby et al., 2004; Neyroud, 2011; Mazerolle et al., 2013), with one, Janet Foster, noting succinctly that, ‘Transformational leadership is a vital
component in changing police cultures’ (Foster, 2003, p. 220).

However, when contextualized in the light of what we actually know (or, perhaps more accurately, in the light of what we think we actually know) about organizational culture and, more specifically, police organizational and occupational culture, it soon becomes apparent that such sentiments might make more sense as rhetorical aspiration rather than an empirical example of cause and effect. Indeed, a number of issues immediately present themselves and make clear the complexities to be addressed when seeking to understand or to address the cultural issues impacting on police organizations. First, literature over the last two decades has given rise to continued debate regarding the existence of a universal police culture (see, e.g. Chan, 1997). Increasingly, writers are acknowledging that some elements of police cultural life are essentially embedded, whereas others are more fleeting (see, e.g. Loftus, 2009) and that this necessitates an acknowledgement of the existence of multiple (and fluid) cultures within the police world. However, what remains uncertain is the extent to which academic debate over the existence of multiple cultures will, or should, impact on strategies for dealing with culturally driven behaviour at an organizational level. Second, the existence of both organizational and occupational cultures provides another layer of complexity to the challenge of delivering change within organizations. Although organizations may seek to impose culturally driven values upon their staff, these values often conflict with occupational values associated with practitioner cultures (see Gregory, 1983; Paoline, 2003). This tension is of interest in that it focuses attention on the key issue of whether it is organizations or occupations that provide the key cultural influence on worker behaviours and values. Taken together, these issues make clear not only the intricacies of the cultural world of the police officer but also serve as a warning for police leaders against assuming that police culture is a relatively straightforward issue requiring an undemanding solution.

While there is a need, as described above, to acknowledge the complexities of the cultural terrain of police organizations, there is perhaps an even more fundamental challenge to be addressed when considering the adoption of transformational leadership as a means of dealing with police culture. It concerns the extent to which it is appropriate to apply transformational leadership (developed as a response to the perceived needs of private sector organizations) to the policing context. In particular, it can be argued that both the core business of police organizations, and the environments which they operate within fail to reflect the type of ‘business’ envisaged by writers like Bass and Avolio. And while commentators like Bevir and Krupicka (2007) note that narratives of reform based upon neoliberal models are unlikely to overcome practitioner resistance, it is possible to make a strong case to suggest that such resistance is rooted in a fundamental mismatch between the perceived problems facing policing and the solutions offered by transformational leadership. In other words, the operational context of much police work can be considered largely ‘transactional’ as opposed to ‘transformational’. Here it is interesting to note that key proponents of transformational leadership methods did display an awareness of the limits of their conceptual framework. For example, Bernard Bass, in 1990, admitted that transformational leadership is not an appropriate solution for every organization. He went on to suggest that the intellectual stimulation of staff demanded by transformational leadership has scant opportunity for realization in roles where opportunities to foster new opportunities, to reflect on organizational weakness and to develop new ways of working are limited.

This, unavoidably, lead us to reflect on the extent to which policing allows its practitioners to be what might be broadly termed ‘innovative’ in the ways in which they interpret and discharge their functions. Police scholars have, of course, written exhaustively about the importance of discretion to policework. Freeman (1980), noting the inevitability of
discretion in the police world, stated that concern should be directed not so much at debating its appropriateness, but at developing strategies with which to control it. Similarly, writers like Skolnick (1994) and LaFave (1962) have discussed the existence and application of police discretion at length, whereas others have sought to show the ways in which the discretion of lower-level police officers is controlled, be it through the application of disciplinary codes (Brogden, 1991) or through rule tightening (Chan, 1997). Since the 1980s, however, it is possible to identify, especially within the UK context, moves to limit discretionary behaviour among police officers. Although such impacts have been identified throughout the public sector by Taylor and Kelly (2006), who viewed public sector reform initiatives as decreasing discretion among front-line workers and leading to a decline in ‘street-level policy-making’, commentators have also identified such developments in the specific context of policing. For example, Home Office Circular 114/83 (Home Office, 1983) had a significant impact by providing the foundations for greater scrutiny of police performance through the introduction of private sector leadership models to police organizations (Long, 2003). Over time the importance of this development has become realized as the prescriptive nature of performance targets associated with these models and has led to a decrease in discretion and autonomy (see Long, 2003; Flanagan, 2008) and a subsequent growing disempowerment among staff (see FitzGerald et al., 2002). There may be some evidence therefore to suggest that the spread of New Public Management to police organizations has effectively limited the degree of discretion available to make the indiscriminate adoption of transformational models appropriate.

In order to highlight the conceptual weaknesses associated with transformational leadership, it is necessary to invoke, as is the case here, a simplistic distinction between transactional and transformational leadership. This, in truth, reflects the way in which transformational leadership has been presented by its proponents. However, there are some academic accounts which have been largely critical of two-factor, or binary, models of organizational leadership. For example, Yukl (1999a) notes that such binary arguments are insufficiently sophisticated to fully explain how styles of leadership are applied in real-life situations. In a telling quotation, Yukl (1999a, p. 38) states, ‘Some managers use some of the behaviors some of the time, but few managers use most of the behaviors whenever they are relevant’. This, inevitably, leads us not only to question the relevance of the binary argument that is often drawn upon but to go further and seek clarification, as Pawar (2003) does, of the exact relationship between the concepts of transformational and transactional leadership. Although the complex methodological challenges of exploring this relationship are set out by Yukl (1999b) we must not lose track of the fact that other issues remain. Not least, the challenge of understanding the relationship between transactional/transformational leadership and the police relies not only on understanding conceptual difficulties associated with leadership models, but also on acknowledging the problems of transposing private sector management models to the public sector. As noted by commentators like Wisniewski and Olaffson (2004), public sector organizations tend to deliver a broader range of more elaborate services than those in the private sector. Similarly, Williams (1985) draws attention to the fundamental differences in role and values between the two sectors. In short, substantial challenges remain in respect of understanding how transformational leadership operates within the private sector (within which it was originally developed). It remains to be seen whether or not the model will prove relevant to the complexities of public sector policing. Furthermore, if Wisniewski and Olaffson are correct in their assumption that public sector organizations like the police carry out a wider range of roles than those in the private sector, it may well be the case that we should expect to see both transformational and
transactional leadership styles used depending on the requirements of a given situation. If this proves to be the case, we may be in a position to further question the relevance of the binary model.

Assessing cultural change

It might also be prudent to articulate, at this juncture, the benefits to police managers of evidencing cultural change within their organizations. Within the British context, the tension between ‘traditional’ police arrangements and practices and those broadly associated with private sector management strategies (such as New Public Management) can be traced back, according to Southgate (1985), to the Planning, Programing and Budgeting System of the early 1970s. Whilst the cultural aspects of such paradigm shifts are more fully documented elsewhere (see, e.g. Cockcroft, 2013), it has become increasingly apparent over recent years that the implementation of change (or perhaps, more accurately, the ‘appearance’ of change) is now perhaps the most persuasive evidence of success for police leaders (FitzGerald et al., 2002; Smith 2009). And in a world where ‘the shift from hierarchical bureaucracy to markets and networks [has become] the new governing framework for the police’ (Marks, 2007, p. 235) there is a marked will to be seen to overcome the perceived obstacles placed by an intransigent culture so steeped in ‘discourses of morality [and] tradition’ (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003, p. 134).

However, the work of one of the defining writers in this area, Edgar Schein, emphasizes the nuanced nature of workplace culture in a way that has been generally ignored by many of those with an interest in police work, be they practitioners or academics. To gain a fuller comprehension of Schein’s model, it is perhaps apposite to start with his definition of culture;

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 2004, p. 17).

From this relatively straightforward foundation, Schein went on to differentiate between different levels of culture and it is in respect of these, arguably, that many of our misconceptions regarding culture arise (Cockcroft, 2013). Schein conceived of culture as working at three distinct levels; ‘artifacts’, ‘espoused beliefs and values’ and ‘underlying assumption’, where ‘artifacts’ represented the explicit and outwardly visible manifestations of cultures including language, modes of self-presentation, opinions, custom, and ritual. ‘Espoused beliefs and values’ include those expressed attitudes that lead to observable behaviour or language at the ‘artifact’ level. If these beliefs and values prove successful as a means of explaining the social worlds of group members they may become entrenched at the deepest cultural level of ‘underlying assumption’.

Thus, arguments which maintain that police culture can effectively be modified by transformational leadership styles need to consider at which of these three levels they believe their effectiveness is felt. Perhaps ironically, it appears perfectly plausible that it is at the most superficial level, that of ‘artifacts’, that the impact of formal leadership might be felt. That is to say, the impact of leadership on ‘police culture’ might be merely to restrict the extent to which officers feel comfortable in exhibiting the more explicit manifestations of underlying cultural values, for example, in respect of inappropriate or discriminatory language. If this is the case, wider questions remain regarding the extent to which leadership can or does impact at the deeper levels of ‘espoused beliefs and values’ and ‘underlying assumption’.

This idea that leadership-driven initiatives may impact at more superficial levels (such as those
associated with Schein’s ‘artifacts’) rather than at
more entrenched levels (as in the case of ‘under-
lying assumption’) is amply illustrated by the work
of Bethan Loftus (2009) in her police ethnography
Police Culture in a Changing World. Within it she
describes a police world where the politicization
of identity has effectively impacted on police inter-
actions with particular social groups. For example,
she notes how police interactions with ethnic
minority groups have changed as a result of the
rise of identity politics. One result of this develop-
ment was that some police behaviours were
motivated not so much by occupational culture
or, for that matter, the wishes of police leaders
but by the fear of becoming the target of complaints
from those groups whose encounters with the
police were open to substantial public scrutiny.
Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the chal-
lenges regarding the implementation of change
within policing contexts revolve around two main
issues. The first issue is whether ‘change’ has been
effected at the level of behaviour/performance,
explicitly articulated attitude or personally held
assumption. That is, does the change represent a
modification to displayed behaviour or to cultural
outlook. The second, and related issue, concerns
whether or not this can realistically be represented
as cultural change. In terms of the first, Loftus’
work provides a glaringly obvious example of the
challenges of identifying cultural change being
effected through formal leadership. To those offi-
cers studied by Loftus, a reduction in explicitly
articulated views, far from signifying cultural
change, merely represented the importance of
‘transactional’ relationships between rank and file
and senior officers. Modifications to behaviours
through a fear of being disciplined (as a result of,
e.g. a complaint investigation) obviously suggest
that it is individual officers’ self-interest at work
rather than any deep-rooted engagement with
organizational values. As Loftus herself notes,
traditional police stereotypes regarding the race–
crime nexus remain intact, yet co-exist with a new
dynamic in the social world of police work, that of
‘anxiety’ towards these particular groups. What we
appear to be witnessing are the traditional, rather
than new, cultural markers of the occupation being
played out against the backdrop of a changing
landscape.

In terms of the second issue, it remains clear that
not all apparent ‘cultural change’ is anything more
than a change in behaviours and that such modifi-
cations may be of scant use in establishing evidence
of cultural change. In particular, it may be the
case that officers, rather than undergoing any
pronounced transformation of attitudes or values,
may be becoming more guarded about how and
to whom they express the artifacts of their culture.
To Loftus, officers were weary of attracting the
epithet of ‘racist’ but, simultaneously, held working
personalities very much attuned to the notion of
race. This not only suggests that race has an increas-
ingly complex relationship to police culture but
also reminds us of the challenges of quantifying
culture, and perceived changes to it, especially
in an organizational environment where managers
are keen to evidence cultural change among practitioners.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to subject the
relationship between transformational leadership,
the police, and police culture to a degree of crit-
ic scrutiny. In particular, the paper identifies
three key areas where greater clarity about our
terms of reference would further this debate.
First, there is a real need for greater clarity
regarding what constitutes ‘police culture’ in the
eyes of police leaders. Although police scholars
may be accused of over-intellectualizing the
issue of police culture, the counter argument is
that police leaders may have been guilty of
oversimplifying it, or at least not being explicit
in why and how it constitutes an issue of leader-
ship. Furthermore, our attempts to evidence
cultural change should acknowledge the inherent
complexities of culture.
Second, as with culture, there is a need to avoid oversimplification of the ways in which we conceptualize transactional leadership, transformational leadership and the relationship between the two. The simplistic binary argument that has been used to extol the virtues of transformational leadership over transactional leadership fails to fully recognize the nuances of organizational life. Models that synthesize the two might be a way of overcoming criticisms founded upon both the simplicity of two-fold classifications and the need for clarification of the relationship between the two models.

Third, and finally, there is a need to acknowledge that ‘policing’ covers a wide range of roles within increasingly complex organizational environments. As such, it is unlikely that one form of leadership will be appropriate for every set of organizational relationships. While Neyroud (2011, p. 39) may be correct to note that transformational leadership is essentially incompatible with what he termed the ‘transactional demands of command’, on some occasions police organizations will undoubtedly require, and benefit greatly from, leadership styles that are not predicated upon hierarchy, reward, and punishment.

References


