



Identity and the more things change

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The adage attributed to French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr that says, “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” or “The more things change, the more they stay the same”, seems to be applicable to societies across our globe. Humans seem to hold the contradictory urge to innovate and progress as a species while also simultaneously resisting change. My more than 20 years in policing has taught me that this contradiction – whether biologically, psychologically, or socially constructed – holds true in the law enforcement profession.

As a journalist by training, a public affairs professional by trade, and an academic by choice, I’ve wondered what makes such professionals – especially police officers – tick. Spending two decades working among police leaders, civilian managers, and front-line officers has given me a front-row seat to the identity-building process in law enforcement.

In my role as Director of Government Relations with the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police (OACP), I’ve spent many years working with and lobbying governments on behalf of police in the Province of Ontario. Working with cops has allowed me to appreciate the dedication and innovation (most often selfless and done without fanfare) of police officers and other law enforcement professionals. I’ve also observed the deep roots of the traditional police culture that stubbornly resists change. There’s that very human contradiction again.

On the academic side of things, the policing profession inspired me to look into the lives of 2SLGBTQI+ police officers through my Master’s work and then doctoral research on how police officers in Canada build their unique professional identities, both at Royal Roads University. All of this led to a simple conclusion for me: it’s not easy being a cop.

In any profession, identity – the sense of “self” shaped by values, beliefs, and organizational culture – plays a fundamental role in how individuals perceive and perform their roles. This is especially true in policing, where officers balance their sworn duty to serve communities impartially with upholding the law, often in high-stakes and dangerous situations that shape not only their personal identities, but also the public perceptions of their profession.

Study after study on police legitimacy, trust, procedural justice, community relations, systemic racism, etc. has led me to conclude that the very essence of policing is at stake at this point in Canadian history. We need to study how we are literally constructing police officers today through recruitment, training, socialization, policymaking, and many other factors

which shape the police officer and how they do their work out in the real world (where this work can literally change lives for the better or be destructive).

That’s why I am delighted to be working with the amazing academic minds in this uniquely Canadian journal. The *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* has carved out a reputation for publishing academic work that needs to be read and actioned by those who shape law enforcement and public safety in general.

In the coming edition of the journal, I will be publishing the findings of my study *Born to be Blue? The Construction of Canadian Police Officers’ Identity*. My research considers the concept of identity formation in policing as an active process, rich in changing values and contradictions. It reveals complex dynamics within Canadian law enforcement and how identity construction impacts both officers and the broader community.

Over the course of the last 20 years, I have seen a movement within policing toward a greater understanding of the role of identity in terms of what officers go through on “the job”, how they cope with the demands of police work, and how they see their role in relation to their superiors, their peers, and ordinary people they inevitably interact with.

The idea that a “cop will always be a cop” may not hold true today than it was 70 years ago when things like work–life balance, community policing, evidence-informed policing, mental health and the realities of occupational stress injuries, and equity, inclusion, and diversity issues weren’t the big factors they are today for today’s cops.

I have had the privilege of teaching undergrad students in Justice programs at both Humber College and the University of Guelph-Humber in Toronto for years as well as teaching communication and leadership students at Royal Roads University. I’m very proud that many of my students have gone on to become the police officers they dreamed of being. Many have stayed in touch. One in particular stands out to me. This young person was a quiet and respectful student, generally average in their academic performance. Four years after graduating and being hired by a police service, they reached out to me to volunteer to be part of my doctoral research.

To say that this quiet and very pleasant young person had changed would be an understatement. In five short years, they admitted that they had become fairly distrustful of people as a rule and been thoroughly socialized into the cop culture.

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The concept of the police “brotherhood” had certainly done its job in attaching this person’s sense of self to the job.

This is not a bad thing. My former student had become a good cop in terms of enforcing the law. What they struggled with was how to bring the other part of themselves that wanted to be a cop in the first place – the sense of duty and service and the goal of making a positive difference and respecting people – into their police work. With all the pressures and public scrutiny on police officers, no wonder good, young law enforcement professionals like this struggle for that balance in their sense of self.

These identity-building challenges are just as relevant in other areas – in health care, education, housing, social services, and even government – that impact people’s lives. The *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* can play a significant role in helping law enforcement and other professions think critically about such challenges.

I encourage academics and researchers in areas related to community safety and well-being to be brave and to

publish their work here so that we can get to the root of the challenges that hinder advancement and positive social change. As African American writer and social critic James Baldwin famously puts it, “The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world”.

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