# Communicating law enforcement professionalization: social construction of standards

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to analyze how institutional arrangements and discourses shape law enforcement professionalization efforts, to identify opportunities and potential problems associated with professionalization, and to propose research to address practitioner interests in education and training and public interests in accountability and service equity.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper explores discourses surrounding law enforcement professionalization efforts to identify implementation barriers and potential consequences. It reviews earlier literatures and analyzes occupational standards data, utilizing a communicative perspective to investigate professionalization problems that have often been approached from political or economic perspectives.

**Findings** – Although law enforcement is often urged to professionalize, educational standards for officers remain low. There is no clear nexus between college curriculum and law enforcement as a profession. This paper shows that competing discourses about professionalization in general and law enforcement in particular undermine efforts to establish professional status and increased standards for law enforcement.

**Research limitations/implications** – Future research should include greater cross-sectional data analysis. Investigation of law enforcement standards or professionalization should account for social discourses that contribute to norms and expectations.

**Practical implications** – Law enforcement agencies and criminal justice programs have opportunities to better coordinate practice and scholarship. Failure to attend to institutional relationships and the role of communication in shaping professional standards will hamper advances in either field.

**Social implications** – The paper shows that professional norms shape law enforcement accountability to the public in critical and sometimes unintended ways.

**Originality/value** – Previous authors have not considered social discourse impacts on law enforcement standards and professionalization, nor their relationship to higher education. By introducing these variables, barriers and alternative approaches are revealed.

**Keywords** Communication, Professionalization, Education, Standards, Discourse, Training, Law enforcement, United States of America

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Although it is tempting to rush head-on into a new era of law enforcement standards and training, efforts to enact large-scale advances in this area encounter complex, often unanticipated problems. A move to further professionalize law enforcement will necessarily be shaped by existing ideas about what it means to work in and attain a particular status in the law enforcement community. These ideas are, in turn, shaped by broader understandings of what it means to be a professional in the USA. This article explores these broader understandings, as they exist in discourses in society. Understanding these discourses will help to identify important barriers to law enforcement professionalization efforts, and illuminate potential accountability concerns. This article will:

- surface social and political processes that shape occupational status in the US;
- identify and analyze institutional arrangements and discourses that shape law enforcement professionalization efforts;
- identify opportunities and potential problems associated with more professionalized law enforcement; and
- propose research that extends the study of law enforcement professionalization.

First, this article reviews efforts to professionalize law enforcement and forge new ties with higher education. It goes on to review professionalization as a constantly evolving and often disputed concept (Haber, 1993; Fischer, 2009) understood and enacted through discourse (Cheney and Ashcraft, 2007; Kuhn, 2009). Next, it explores existing and emergent discourses about the work of law enforcement with attention to how these discourses engage commonly held ideas about professionalism. Finally, it draws from previous scholarship to identify potentially problematic aspects of a more professionalized law enforcement workforce. This article aims to generate discussion among practitioners and academics and recommends a path for professional development and future research that supports more meaningful and accountable law enforcement.

## Background

### Higher education

The debate about higher education requirements for law enforcement officers has been ongoing for nearly 100 years (Adams, 1976; Carte, 1972; President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1967). Measures of educational requirements and the impact of education on policing tend to be the focal point of professionalization efforts and arguments for and against change. This section reviews notable scholarship in this area and argues that educational standards alone offer an insufficient condition for assessing professional status, and even when increased educational law enforcement standards are advocated, they are substantially different from those associated with familiar professions like medicine, law, or architecture.

Higher education standards were called for by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice in 1967 and many have echoed this call (Carter *et al.*, 1989; Travis, 1995). More recently, empirical studies have considered the impact of scholarly education on law enforcement outcomes such as arrest rates and

use of force (Rydberg and Terrill, 2010) and complaints against police (Mayo, 2006). There is also a robust literature calling for scholarly education for law enforcement officers based on general commitments to education (Mayo, 2006), an interest in consistency with other professional preparation pathways (Buerger, 2004), and generalized calls for betterment (Landahl, 2009). Despite these efforts, consistent educational standards beyond graduation from high school are uncommon.

With very few exceptions, law enforcement education regulatory standards remain low throughout the US (Carter *et al.*, 1989). The International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST) publishes the *Sourcebook* which reports survey results on minimum regulatory standards for state and municipal law enforcement officers by state nationwide. In its most recent edition (IADLEST, 2005), Question 32 asked, "The minimum education requirement to be appointed a criminal justice officer is:" and the response options included, "None" "Associates Degree" "High School or GED" "Bachelor Degree" and "Some College" (p. 22). IADLEST reported 45 responses to this question (Alaska, Georgia, Hawaii, New Jersey, and Texas did not respond). Of the 45 responses, 42 states reported "High School or GED" as the minimum education required for appointment. Ohio reported "None" and Minnesota and Wisconsin reported "Associates Degree" (p. 22). In his analysis of state regulation in the US, Teske (2004) describes the purpose of regulatory standards as a barrier to entry and notes that education is one of the common barriers for professional practice. In the case of law enforcement, this barrier is set quite low. This is consistent with Teske's (2004, p. 2) "race to the bottom" concept wherein regulations are minimized in order to attract participants to the industry.

Law enforcement standards are also notably inconsistent in the US in terms of scholarly education (Carte, 1969; Carter *et al.*, 1989). While no state requires a bachelor's degree for entry-level law enforcement officers such as police officers or deputy sheriffs, some individual law enforcement agencies and two states require some level of scholarly education (Hickman and Reaves, 2006). The Police Association for College Education (PACE, 2006) has tracked these individualized standards and published a list of departments that require four-year degrees or other scholarly education. Still, a brief review of the PACE list indicates considerable variability. For example, the Arlington Texas Police Department (2010) requires officers to have a bachelor's degree from an accredited college. The Redlands California Police Department requires officers to have 90 college credits (City of Redlands, 2008). But neither of these requirements specify that the college education needs to be in criminal justice or any other specific subject area. Unlike physicians, lawyers, or engineers who typically study specific subject matter, law enforcement officers – even when required to take scholarly courses of studys – have no specific disciplinary requirements. For example, Dr Theron Bowman, Chief of the Arlington Texas Police Department, has a bachelor's degree in biology (Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, 2010) and James Bueermann, Chief of the Redlands California Police Department, has dual bachelor's degrees in sociology and criminal justice (California State University, San Bernardino, 2009).

On the whole, law enforcement has maintained little to no historical relationship with colleges and universities (Adams, 1976; Janeksela, 1981; Scott, 2009; Vogel and Gamache, 1981). To be sure, notable exceptions exist. The programs at John Jay

College, Sam Houston State University, and the University of California, Berkeley have longstanding ties to law enforcement practitioners. Overall though, the relationship between law enforcement and criminal justice is often tenuous. At least anecdotally, criminal justice scholarship is often disconnected from criminal justice practice (Vogel and Gamache, 1981), and when a connection does exist, it is frequently critical or even adversarial. The relationship between lawyers and law schools, physicians and medical schools, architects and schools of architecture, is quite different. These schools exist primarily to produce lawyers, doctors, and architects. This is not true of schools of criminal justice or criminology as they "are not uniform in either content or in general philosophy and purpose" (Birzer and Palmiotto, 2002, p. 204). While all hospitals require physicians to have medical degrees, just 1 percent of police agencies require a college degree for officers (Hickman and Reaves, 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that graduates of criminal justice/criminology programs work in a variety of occupations and the evidence suggests that there is no scholarly field, discipline, or major primarily designed to prepare law enforcement officers for their career.

*Professions versus trades/crafts*
In part, because of this lack of scholarly grounding and the resultant focus on practice-based skill development and a form of apprenticeship, some authors have identified law enforcement as a trade or craft (Bumgarner, 2002; Champion and Hooper, 2003). Others contend that law enforcement has evolved into a profession (Crank, 1990). To explore its status and situate law enforcement among other vocations, it is useful to compare it to two other vocations: para-medicine and cosmetology.

In the case of paramedics, consistent national standards have been established (Salzman *et al.*, 2007). The standards, measured via competency, are estimated to require 1,000-1,200 hours of training (Cason, 1999). For law enforcement officers and cosmetologists, a convenience sample of the largest states in the US (by population) ($n = 10$) is used to compare the requisite minimum number of hours of training required in each state (as determined by referencing the appropriate regulatory web sites). The mean minimum number of training hours required was 576.5 for law enforcement officers and 1,405 for cosmetologists. Using the lower estimate for paramedic training hours (1,000) suggests that on average they train 1.7 times longer than law enforcement officers, while cosmetologists train 2.4 times longer. While it is worth noting that these data reflect minimum standards and thats – at least in the case of law enforcements – some training locations exceed the minimum hours (Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2009), this study compares the "barriers to entry" (Teske, 2004) and presents a prima facie case based on those differences.

Since the broad move toward increased law enforcement standards in the 1970s and 1980s, minimum required training hours have remained relatively stable in law enforcement (Rojek *et al.*, 2007). At the same time, the industry has experienced a great deal of change (Bumgarner, 2002; Crank, 1990)s – especially since the September 11th terrorist attacks (Buerger, 2004; Landahl, 2009). Subject matter requirements have increased notably while training hours have remained constant. In California, for example, many new requirements were added to the minimum basic training curriculum while the total minimum hours remained constant (Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, 2007; Rojek *et al.*, 2007). Adding new components

without increasing the minimum number of training hours has meant that the training periods for other content areas have had to be shortened.

This review of law enforcement education and training requirements indicates that there is no consistent and coherent body of scholarly knowledge that law enforcement officers can draw from. There are some studies that make compelling arguments for higher levels of education (Mayo, 2006; Schneider, 2009). There are also arguments that new technologies, threats, and social complexity necessitate higher levels of education (Buerger, 2004; Landahl, 2009). Still, little traction has been gained over the past several decades in terms of nationwide trends (Scott, 2009). What else can explain the ambivalent relationship between law enforcement and higher education? The following sections describe the role of social discourse in shaping and constraining efforts to professionalize occupations in general, and law enforcement in particular.

### Professionalism and discourse
*Discourse*
Professions don't just exist; they are enacted in intentional, and sometimes unintentional ways, by people in workplaces and communities. For example, a statement like "campus police officers aren't real cops" influences how people view both law enforcement officers and campus police as a distinct category in the law enforcement occupation. In this sense, professions are not fixed and natural entities, but rather institutional and social understandings that are constantly being created, challenged, and reshaped through social interactions. Numerous social science scholars have identified relationships between discourses – generally in the form of organizational talk and textss – and how individuals come to understand professions and their own work within these professions (Cheney and Ashcraft, 2007; Fischer, 2009; Hardy *et al.*, 2000; Kuhn, 2009; Perrotta, 2006). According to Cheney and Ashcraft (2007, p. 153), "seen through a communicative lens, the professional becomes less an instantiation of given or established structural categories and more a set of discursive and material processes by which various aspects of social identity and relations are constantly enforced and renegotiated".

Localized discourse is influenced by larger organizational and societal understandings:

> Strategic actors cannot simply produce a discourse to suit their immediate needs and, instead, must locate their discursive activities within a meaningful context if they are to shape and construct action ... Consequently, if we want to explain how discourses operate, we must examine the broader context in order to ascertain the scope that it provides for action, as well as limits it places on action (Hardy *et al.*, 2000, p. 1228).

Gee (1999) distinguished between two kinds of discourse:

(1) localized language-in-use; and

(2) the combination of language with other social practices such as values, ideologies, and customs by referring to the former as "little d" discourse and the latter as "big D" discourse.

For Gee, "'Big D' discourses are always language *plus* 'other stuff'" (p. 126). Being a type of American workers – executive, student, day laborer or something as specific as

a law enforcement officers – are all Discourses according to Gee. The relationship between big D and little d discourse means that everyday little d talk will have more resonance if it is consonant with larger Big D discourses. This helps to explain why the statement "law enforcement officers are like physicists" isn't likely to gain much social traction while the statement "cops are brave" had particular resonance for many New Yorkers after 9/11. A simple Google search beginning with the term "police are . . . " leads to pop-up topics such as: "police are not obligated to protect you," "police are not your friends," "police are corrupt," "police are out of control," "police are my favorite people," and "police are useless." Although these phrases are outcomes of prior internet searches, they indicate how larger societal discourses about law enforcement potentially shape and support particular understandings of the industry. When a law enforcement officer shrugs off negative comments about the industry, or becomes visibly defensive in response to such comments, he or she is engaged in "little d" discourse that responds to a larger "big D" discourse. When a member of the public repeatedly encounters particular statements and stories about law enforcement in the media, his or her perception might be changed or reinforced by this "big D" discourse. To reduce confusion, this article will refer to "little d" discourse simply as discourse and to "big D" discourse as public discourse hereinafter.

### Defining professionalism

What does it means to be a professional? Are professions determined by levels of education or by particular forms of service? Are well-educated workers necessarily professionals? How, and under what circumstances, do some occupations become thought of as professions? Professionalization has never been a static state of affairss – it is, rather, a constantly evolving and often disputed concept (Cheney and Ashcraft, 2007; Fischer, 2009; Haber, 1993; Macdonald, 1995). Major historical shifts have influenced public understandings of what qualifies as a profession, and different nations have exhibited varied approaches to professionalization over time. Haber (1993) points out that public support for professionalization has ebbed and waned based, at least in part, on political and economic trends. For example, a strong emphasis on public participation might undermine the expert practices of practitioners while entrepreneurial activities often support the formation of new professions.

Education is central to most accounts of professionalization (Wilensky, 1964). Haber (1993) shows how an emphasis on liberal arts education during the 18th century strongly favored the upper classes. He also shows how early professional claims of authority and honor were buttressed by new licensing legislation that conferred legitimacy to professional practitioners during the late 19th century. According to Macdonald (1995), the state played a more modest role in conferring monopoly powers to professions in the United States because educational institutions were viewed as conferring necessary legitimacy. During the second half of the twentieth century, a rapidly expanding service economy led to the development of many new jobs and training programs. Etzioni (1969) suggests that this resulted in new semi-professionss – workers who aspired to be professionals and mirrored many professional practices without having the traditional authority or honor necessary to achieve recognized professional status. Examples include school teachers, nurses, and social workers. These blurred boundaries suggest that education levels are, on their own, insufficient

markers for constructing or recognizing professional status. At a time when over 25 percent of US citizens hold a bachelor's degree or higher (Crissey, 2009), a liberal arts education is not a particularly reliable indicator of professionalization.

Historically, professions have often been associated with a sense of public good or service (Haber, 1993; Wilensky, 1964). With honor and authority come responsibilities to the people utilizing professional services. Professionals typically work with great autonomy and limited oversight in exchange for providing trustworthy advice and assistance to the public. Fischer (2009, p. 20) states that "Professional practices, in short, have traditionally rested on a set of understandings about trust and good faith between the practitioners and the general citizenry". Professionals derive status from their relationships with the public, however, the nature of these relationships have frequently been challenged. During the Progressive Era, Dewey (1927) called for professionals to do more than dispense technical advice; he urged them to become engaged in facilitating democratic deliberation and education for citizens. Hummel (1994) describes how professionalism in civil service coincided with new bureaucratic features as a way to organize the work of civil servants. New technologies have also reshaped professional expectations and generated new training expectations with the advent of nanotechnology in the medical field or forecasting software in economics, for example (Borup *et al.*, 2006).

During the 1980s and 1990s an expanding market economy helped to generate new public discourses about professions. Enterprise goals and values began to restructure occupational classifications and reshape professional expectations. Haber (1993) cites impressive benefits of industrial productivity, but also expresses concerns that central benefits of professionalization may be lost in the process:

> This has not been achieved without cost. Intrinsic to that achievement was the development of less-gratifying work and the exclusion of a larger, more elevated purpose for economic endeavor. The leading professions in bringing ideals and predispositions of an earlier era into the modern world strove to retain what the market economy relinquished. Professions, of course, are occupations and therefore can be understood, in part, as economic interest groups. Yet they offer much more than economic betterments – they offer a way of life (Haber, 1993, p. 1586).

Whereas Haber views this market-oriented emphasis as a potential threat to professionals, du Gay (2004, pp. 299-300) views enterprise (public) discourse as dramatically reshaping preferred models of organizations and professions. According to du Gay, boundaries between government and commercial activities have become blurred and new professional public discourse emphasizes "initiative, risk-taking, self-reliance and personal responsibility" in pursuit of entrepreneurial goals. Within this context, professionals such as physicians, who have typically acted with great autonomy, are being pushed to emphasize profit and efficiency as primary values (Lammers and Geist, 1997). A number of government practices have become more entrepreneurial and most recognized government professions have corresponding private sector opportunities (Dewatripont *et al.*, 1999). In law enforcement, for example, parking enforcement programs are now frequently expected to generate revenues equal or greater to their costs. In the past, these same programs were intended to regulate parking. Fines (i.e. parking tickets) were levied to discourage improper parking, not to generate revenue. Additionally, law enforcement generally lacks

corresponding private sector employment. While an attorney, physician, or engineer can typically perform the same work in the public or private sectors, law enforcement officers do not have corresponding private sector options. One might consider security guards or private detectives, however a brief job task analysis quickly reveals stark differences in public trust, accountability, and overall importance that distinguishes law enforcement officers.

Pragmatic concerns within occupations have also mobilized occupational members to advocate professionalization by deploying resources with the goal of "collective social mobility" (Macdonald, 1995, p. 51, emphasis deleted). Etzioni (1969) suggests that most workers employed in semi-professions actively seek professional status as an alternative to being perceived as a part of the non-professional or blue-color workforce. Just as the "personal is the political," the "professional is the political." Workers seek to mimic professional occupations in their talk and actions in an effort to receive many of the same social benefits achieved by full professionals. What it is to be professional can be understood, at least in part, by watching what it is that people actually say or do when they evoke professional status. A simple phrase such as "that is so unprofessional" sheds light on taken-for-granted aspects of professionalism related to a particular occupational group.

Although it is impossible to account fully for the multifaceted and evolving status of the professional, this work is committed to keeping complexity in mind as it explores the nature of law enforcement professionalization. The following assumptions drawn from the above literatures will be used as a baseline for exploring law enforcement's often disputed occupational status:

- professions are characterized by specified levels of education aligned with specific bodies of scholarly knowledge as a necessary, but insufficient, condition;
- a public discourse of trust has typically ensured a great deal of work autonomy in exchange for certain educational and ethical commitments, but these discourses are being reshaped by enterprise interests; and
- the everyday discourse of professionals in the workplace simultaneously draws on larger public discourses while potentially challenging or reshaping these same public discourses.

## Public discourse and law enforcement

Public discourses shape what it means to be a professional, and help to determine the extent to which an occupation is widely thought of as a profession. According to Haber (1993), in the US early discourses about professionalism were based largely on claims of authority and honor conferred, at least in part, by the state through licensing legislation. A social contract ensured that professionals would work with a reasonable level of autonomy so long as they engaged in scholarly study to achieve particular licensing standards. During the late nineteenth century, several important professional associations emerged, including the American Medical Association (Baker *et al.*, 1999), the American Bar Association (Abel and Lewis, 1988), and the American Institute of Architects (2001). During the same time period, however, police staffing was still subject to the spoils system and formal law enforcement training was essentially nonexistent (Vollmer, 1933). This meant that law enforcement was not engaged in

professional public discourses and institutional arrangements associated with emerging professions and their particular bodies of knowledge.

Haber (1993) also pointed out that professional rank structure, popularly accepted in Britain, did not transition well to the US. Law enforcement, with its paramilitary rank structure, did not provide professional development opportunities for a large percentage of its rank and file members. Early twentieth century theories related to classical management only served to strengthen divisions between management and non-management employees in heavily hierarchical organizations. Taylor's scientific management discourse emphasized gaps between small groups of educated managers and larger groups of workers with limited access to education. While Weber's theory of bureaucracy challenged existing spoils systems, it also encouraged hierarchical offices and a clear and fixed division of labor (Handel, 2003). This disparity of educational advantage made it difficult for all but a small number of law enforcement managers to achieve any form of professional status:

> Civil service control is gradually resulting in a professionalized police service, and men start at the bottom of the ranks and work up to the top positions in the administrative and executive branches, proceeding through the several grades of civil service examinations. Los Angeles holds examinations for all positions in the service, including deputy chiefs, the assistant chief, and the chief of police. This method of selection has the advantage of guaranteeing that the *executive heads* have been professionally trained for their positions. (Vollmer, 1933, p. 162, emphasis added).

Discourses about professional standardization of government services have also existed in tension with discourses related to federalism in the US (Bonta, 2002). Kuhn (2009) urges scholars to attend to how multiple discourses intersect to shape organizational and worker identity. Studies of law enforcement should not therefore assume one cohesive public discourse, but the likelihood of multiple competing and/or reinforcing public discourses. In this case, public discourses related to standardized educational expertise conflict with public discourses related to federalism. Professional standardization typically requires the state to implement and enforce regulations that are passed down from higher to lower levels of government (Teske, 2004). The founders of the American government, however, envisioned strong state and local governments and minimally intrusive regulation from the federal government (Middlekauff, 2005). There has been much debate about the nature and scope of these relationships over the past two centuries, and efforts to establish law enforcement standards have been shaped, in part, by public antipathy towards a more federally regulated police force (Bonta, 2002).

During the latter part of the twentieth century, a rapidly expanding market economy also contributed to new discourses of managerialism and enterprise with implications for organizations and occupations. Deetz (1992) describes managerialism as follows:

> The control drive of managerialism seeks the medium of its extension, and money is it. In doing so, everything that cannot be adequately translated into money is implicitly suppressed (Deetz, 1992, p. 235).

For du Gay (1997, p. 299), the neo-liberal discourse of enterprise constitutes a "new rationality of organizational governance" that "blurs traditional distinctions" (du

Gay, 1997, p. 307) between government and commercial spheres. These discourses helped to generate and reinforce *New Public Management* (NPM)s – a business-like, bottom line-oriented approach to public management. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) extended initial NPM to suggest that government should be run like a business with smaller public components and external service contracts. This emphasis on business and efficiency is problematic for law enforcement since efficiency has never been a primary goal of regulation (Fort and Rosenman, 1993) or public service (Newland, 2003).

Traditionally, law enforcement has functioned as a bureaucracy with significant systems of oversight and strict procedural rules and regulations (Schneider, 2009). Discourses of managerialism and enterprise coupled with a NPM approach are leading to new public-private security partnerships, but also to greater uncertainty about the boundaries of law enforcement knowledge and work (Bayley and Shearing, 1996). The role of Blackwater security contractors in Iraq is a familiar corollary. According to a report on "The New Structure of Policing," prepared for the United States Department of Justice by Bayley and Shearing (2000), there are fundamental distinctions between public and private providers of police services, and this is changing the role of public law enforcement:

> Policing is being reconstructed worldwide. Its distinguishing features are (a) the separation of those who authorize policing from those who do it and (b) the transference of both functions away from government . . . Many non-governmental providers now perform the same tasks as the public police (Bayley and Shearing, 2000, p. 3).

> Although public and private providers perform the same tasks, they employ distinctive practices. Specifically, governmental providers tend to prevent crime through punishing; non-governmental providers through exclusion and the regulation of access . . . in response to the restructuring of policing, the role of the public police may be changing significantly (Bayley and Shearing, 2000, p. 4).

Bayley and Shearing (2000) call upon governments to safeguard justice, equity, and service quality in light of these transformations. They introduce potentially negative consequences associated with the professionalization of law enforcement, and argue that steps to professionalize police services have already impacted the public in negative ways: "police officers no longer engaged in community-based crime prevention; they became specialists in law enforcement" (Bayley and Shearing, 2000, pp. 48-9). Bayley and Shearing warn readers that an emphasis on "increasing competition in the policing market leads all providers, public and private, to exaggerate the danger from criminal activity" (Bayley and Shearing, 2000, p. 50). This suggests that professional discourses are reinforced by powerful public discourses related to both enterprise and risk. A public discourse of risk has been prevalent in the wake of both the 9/11 Trade Center attacks and the Hurricane Katrina crisis, but this public discourse is also consistent with sociological theories on risk society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999) articulated by scholars in the 1990s. These scholars suggested that risk aversion now guides social interactions and policy decisions in significant ways. Law enforcement is uniquely positioned at the nexus of public discourses related to enterprise and risk. Hence, efforts to further professionalize and privatize the occupation are likely to have significant consequences for how law enforcement enacts public accountability.

## Everyday law enforcement discourse

Everyday occupational discourses also serve to construct, reaffirm, or dispute professional status in relationship to larger public discourses. Cheney and Ashcraft (2007, p. 161) suggest that professionalism should be studied as it is being enacted through even mundane motionss – "how "real" people navigate the cultural codes of professionalism in everyday life or how they respond in daily interaction across various contexts to institutionalized expectations for professional demeanor". Organizational communication scholars look at everyday talk, artifacts, and rituals to better understand how professions are enacted. These types of interactions shape occupational expectations, and they reinforces – or compete withs – larger public discourses about professional work.

If a certain level of education is one prerequisite for professional status, to what extent do law enforcement officers draw on particular bodies of knowledge to complete their work? Education and training, or lack thereof, are enacted in countless everyday situations. For example, an officer who encounters behaviors perceived as problematic and/or a violation of law will need to interpret these behaviors in ways that correspond with laws, best practices, and agency expectations. This officer will write reports and collect evidence to link her/his observations to a larger legal system (e.g. violations of statutes or criminal court proceedings). In doing so, do they evoke particular legal texts? Do they regularly enact practices that require certain forms of expert knowledge or training? What knowledge and/or resources do they draw on in making difficult, highly subjective interpretations? For example, conversations in one online forum about policing suggest competing everyday discourses about how new officers should expect to learn field skills:

> Keep two very important things in mind. Motor officers and Sgt's speak directly to God. Keep your ego in check as you will not breath without the approval of your FTO. In the old days a rookie did not speak to veteran officers unless spoken to (chiefdennis, 2010).

> Academies are good for teaching mechanics. Street smarts come from FTOs and those who have BTDT (been there done that). Combine the two. We all still are learning every day, no matter how long we have on the job. Always present yourself with the authority you represent even if you are struggling (Sgt405, 2010).

> If you are on a call and you are not a 100 percent sure of what the answer is or what the next plan of action should be, give your FTO a plan of action or the best answer you can come up with. You may be wrong but it shows that you were thinking and had an idea (maybe not the right one) but you had an idea. Also remember your LAW BOOK is your best friend. If you are unsure look in the book and 99 percent of the time you can find the answer to any crime (ten8, 2010).

Close observations and interviews with officers will contribute significantly to current understandings of the occupation and its relationship to education. Kuhn (2009) recommends the use of interviews to supplement observation since research participants will be more likely to reflect on the justifications for the common practices they engage in.

Physical artifacts also contribute to professional status. According to Dewey (1927, p. 44), "tools and implements determine occupations, and occupations determine the consequences of associated activity". Law enforcement officers use a wide variety of physical artifacts in carrying out their everyday work. From ticket books to TAZERs and badges to in-car GPS units, they rely on particular artifacts to achieve

organizational goals. It is important to explore how these artifacts mesh with larger public understandings of professional work, and this requires a distinction between front stage and back stage work performances. Goffman (1959) theorized that people perform work or other activities on front stage when an outside audience is present, and on back stage when they are only interacting with members of their own team. It appears that, for law enforcement officers, particular artifacts are more likely to be present during either front stage or back stage performances as illustrated in Table I.

Most members of the public only get rare glimpses of back stage law enforcement artifacts in day-to-day life. In fact, these back stage artifacts are typically most accessible to the public via popular media (Dowler and Zawilski, 2007; Perlmutter, 2000). Allen (2007) argues that television dramas like CSI generate misconceptions about forensic tools and law enforcement, and Perlmutter (2000) and Allen (2007) both suggests that media portrayals of policing can create inaccurate or unreasonable public expectations about law enforcement work.

Law enforcement rituals might also be viewed in light of the front stage/back stage distinction. In many law enforcement agencies, officers spend the majority of their time driving on patrol (Berg, 1999). This activity is not typically associated with professional status, and other driving-related occupations are generally associated with lower occupational status (e.g. bus drivers, truck drivers, and cab drivers). Although officers may frequently conduct research and report writing on in-car computers, this is not something the public typically sees. If, on the other hand, an officer is found resting on the side of the road, this is a publicly visible front stage performance. Whereas physicians frequently have onsite rooms to allow for naps between shifts, law enforcement officers rarely have access to private rest areas. Officers working patrol shifts also have limited access to break rooms and few opportunities to interact with colleagues while on the road. This has resulted in front stage coffee and snack rituals that have contributed to public narratives about cops and donut shops (Klinger, 1997). Officers are also in uniform as they perform these rituals so, unlike architects, engineers, or lawyers, they are immediately identifiable even while on legitimate work breaks. Public perceptions of law enforcement rituals – skewed towards front stage performances and artifacts – are likely to align poorly with larger public discourses about professional accountability, enterprise, and minimization of risk.

## Discussion
This analysis challenges mainstream assumptions that professionalism is simply a product of high educational standards and attainment. It also challenges the

| Front stage | Back stage | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Patrol cars | Computers | |
| Badges | Databases | |
| Utility belts | Evidence storage | |
| Ticket books | Policy manuals | |
| Guns and TAZERs | Communication centers | |
| Uniforms | Online communities | **Table I.** |
| Handcuffs | Forensic tools | Types of performance |

conception that a high degree of professionalism represents an occupational panacea. The value of taking a discourse-based approach to professional status is its ability to reveal new insights about complex social relationships and the possibility of unintended consequences related to professionalization. Professional status relies on both changing public discourses and everyday on-the-job discourse. This approach understands discourse as constitutive of larger social structures and arrangements. The constitutive approach views a world in which individuals are "involved in the process of creating and re-creating their unique social order" (Jablin and Putnam, 2001, p. xxi). In this case, discourse does not fix or determine relationships, but mediates relationships so that "ideology is not merely ideational, but is enacted and embodied in everyday practices" (Mumby, 2005, p. 238). This analysis has highlighted professional discourse as the nexus between larger institutional structures and agency in localized occupational settings.

*Scholarly considerations*

The primary contribution of this article is its extension of the analysis of law enforcement professionalization efforts beyond consideration of educational standards and a simple dualistic understanding of professional/non-professional status. First, it highlights the significance of viewing professional education itself as about more than specific degree programs or titles. Although education is an important precursor to professional status, successful efforts to professionalize law enforcement will need greater clarity as to the scholarly bodies of knowledge that contribute to professional coherency. Education is a necessary, but insufficient, component of professional status. Additionally, steep hierarchical rank structures common in law enforcement may serve to reduce educational attainment and professional development opportunities for the majority of officers. Future research considering law enforcement professionalization and education should begin by critically assessing how curriculum and standards are developed and by whom. Can or should criminal justice do more to serve as a scholarly body for the law enforcement profession? If not, what other discipline(s) might serve in this role?

Second, public discourses shape what counts as a profession. Discourses related to federalism and local autonomy limit the extent to which law enforcement standards can be established consistently across states and regions. Public discourses related to enterprise and New Public Management make it difficult for law enforcement to increase its professional status since traditional policing services and structures are not oriented towards economic efficiency. A move to contract services out to private security firms potentially fragments law enforcement duties and reduces accountability to the public. Bayley and Shearing (2000, p. 67) found that decentralized policing services potentially reduce the equality of protection and make public oversight more challenging. They argue that market-based policing systems pose significant threats to government itself: "if the distribution of policing coincides with structural divisions of race and class, the legitimacy of government itself may be jeopardized". This also raises important questions about law enforcement's occupational status: how will blurred boundaries and fragmentation of policing services shape the education, training, and everyday discourse of law enforcement workers?

Third, and related, is the idea that everyday discourse constantly shapes and reshapes the nature of professions. Interpreted broadly, everyday discourse in the form of talk, artifacts, and rituals helps to constitute both professional identity and public perceptions about a given profession. In the case of law enforcement, much of the front stage or publicly visible discourse fails to align with larger public discourses about professionalism. Law enforcement officers frequently do their most technical and intellectually-oriented work removed from the public eye. Publicly visible tools of the trade are not typically associated with bodies of scholarly knowledge or enterprise, and public narratives often pick up on the least professional aspects of law enforcement work. More empirical studies should be undertaken by interdisciplinary teams to better understand how everyday law enforcement discourse shapes officer identity and public perceptions of policing. The outcomes of such research would have practical implications related to the recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers as well as to public-law enforcement community relations.

Most important is how critical reflection opens up spaces for interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions about professionalism. Numerous studies indicate that increased law enforcement standards and education bring certain benefits to law enforcement workers, organizations, and communities (Carter *et al.*, 1989; Mayo, 2006; Travis, 1995), but is heavily professionalized law enforcement the only or best option? This analysis suggests that there are both immediate and long-term reasons to question or temper this assumption. On a practical note, there is significant political debate over efforts to professionalize law enforcement. Advocates of higher professional standards suggest that law enforcement officers with college-level liberal arts educations are better critical thinkers, more sensitive to diversity in all its forms, and more empathetic public servants (Mayo, 2006). Law enforcement practitioners, who oppose increased educational standards and university partnerships, often claim that it is either unnecessary or likely to generate barriers to entry, and therefore, recruitment problems (Mayo, 2006). A longer-term perspective suggests that potential unintended consequences of increased law enforcement professionalism include reduced accountability and reduced public trust in law enforcement (Bayley and Shearing, 2000). Van de Ven (2007) also suggests that professional communities – whether made up of scholars or practitioners – are often committed to a common body of specialized expertise that leads to insularity and reduced public engagement. Given these challenges, scholars should assist law enforcement professionalization advocates in being attentive to both the complexity of the issue and the potential for unintended consequences associated with a more professional police force. Future research might draw on the experiences of other professions to better understand the social implications of more expert law enforcement. Additional empirical research should also explore accountability challenges posed by private-public policing partnerships.

### Practical considerations
Law enforcement practitioners and scholars have an opportunity to collaborate in designing and implementing more cohesive educational standards for law enforcement. Efforts in this area are likely to be most viable if they recognize both localized practices and larger discourses related to law enforcement and

professionalism. Empirical research can generate new understandings about law enforcement expertise and emerging public expectations, but practitioner-scholar partnerships should explore how on-the-job differences create varying demands across regions, and even across agencies. Will increased degree requirements pose recruitment challenges in particular areas of the country? Should more educational programs support on-the-job degree completion or differentiated areas of law enforcement expertise? How can changes to current systems be implemented with minimal disruption to existing personnel? Research and action in this area will be particularly important for practitioners concerned with law enforcement succession planning.

At the local level, practitioners should consider how officer discourse could be better aligned with particular public discourses about professionalism. By attending to how everyday talk, artifacts, and rituals are employed and perceived, law enforcement practitioners can work to expand what citizens know about law enforcement and to engage citizen perspectives on policing. This might be accomplished in multiple ways. Efforts to improve police/citizen relations have already been undertaken in community-oriented policing programs (COPs), but Molloy and Giles (2003) argue that such efforts may only be successful if intergroup communication dynamics are taken into account. Otherwise, they suggest that negative stereotypes and perceived power differences will often prohibit meaningful interaction. This is another point where practitioner-scholar collaboration will be critical. In addition to programmatic efforts, more modest steps might also involve the conscious sharing of more information about law enforcement procedures, activities, and tools with members of the public in everyday interactions.

Finally, practitioners should respond consciously to New Public Management expectations by facilitating public dialogue and debate about private enterprise and policing. Powerful enterprise discourses obscure important dilemmas and trade-offs by shaping particular decisions as natural and taken-for-granted (Deetz, 1992). Efficiency is a legitimate interest, but what happens when efficiency is achieved at the cost of other legitimate interests such as public accountability or service? Law enforcement practitioners can help to make trade-offs more transparent by involving citizens and elected officials in dialogue, deliberation, and decision-making processes related to major service delivery strategies.

## Conclusion

For many decades, scholars and practitioners have struggled to determine whether law enforcement is a profession. This article argues that there are more meaningful questions to ask. Occupations exist on a changing professional continuum rather than in discrete categories of professions and non-professions. Even the added notion of semi-professions appears insufficient to accommodate the complexity associated with continuously changing perceptions of occupational status. Scholars should ask questions that acknowledge an occupational continuum and view professionalism, in general, as an ongoing search rather than an achievable end (Newland, 1986). Instead of asking, "is law enforcement a profession?" scholars and practitioners might begin by asking why law enforcement is seeking to become more professional in the first place, or what it would mean for law enforcement to be perceived as a more professional

occupation. Pragmatic questions could then explore what it would take for this to happen given existing public discourses about professionalism and law enforcement. Rather than work to fit into existing discourses, scholars and practitioners might explore how these discourses relate to the current mission and goals of law enforcement.

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