“DRIVING LIKE HELL”:
POLICE OFFICERS AND THE PROSPECT OF DYING

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Department of Sociology
Abstract

of

“DRIVING LIKE HELL”: POLICE OFFICERS AND THE PROSPECT OF DYING

by

Joshua Gerald Hammon

This study seeks to understand how police officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty by using driving habits as a proxy. The author analyzes interview data collected from 99 police officers across seven northern California police agencies. The author finds that officers state a commitment to safety yet they admit to engaging in reckless driving habits within specific situations. This study contends that characteristics of the police officer milieu function to obscure the risk inherent in reckless driving and structure participation in edgework (1990). These findings suggest an acceptance of risk among the interviewed officers.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Kevin Wehr, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

This thesis marks the completion of an academic journey spanning the better half of 10 years. I dedicate this thesis to my family, friends, and colleagues. You all played a vital role in the development and completion from day one -- whether it be through listening, revising, or through guidance. Thank you.

Progressing to this point required the assistance from some very special people in my life. A special thanks to my parents, Kim and Sue Hammon -- from you I have learned the patience and dedication I needed to write this thesis. I have and always will continue to seek your guidance. My fiancé, Ritsuko Genka, has supported, loved, and put up with me through the duration of this chapter in my life. She is my foundation and gives me the motivation to pursue my dreams. Thank you.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The prospect of dying is a daily confrontation within the realm of police work. Death may result from patrolling the streets or in situations that do not involve criminals, like driving a patrol car. For example, between 1997 and 2007, the number of on duty police officer injurious vehicle collisions in California increased by 194% (POST 2009: 3). Death is undoubtedly a part of police work and needs elaboration.

To argue that death simply comes with the territory of police work is both unsophisticated and shortsighted. Neglecting the structures that affect officers’ perceptions of death circumvent insight and policies that address it. Engaging in police work requires participants to confront death in various forms – whether witnessing death in the field or engaging in reckless behaviors that increase personal risk of it. If death is prevalent in police work, how do officers interpret the prospect of dying while on duty?

Research regarding police work has yet to investigate how police officers address the prospect of dying on the job. Are officers aware of the possibility of dying when they leave the station or does the routinization of police work obscure it? Society turns to police officers for securing social order; however, who do police officers turn to when they are unable to maintain their personal social order?

The aim of this research is to better understand how police officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty. This research investigates structural forces that influence police officers’ perception of death and, in turn, their behavior. For example, research regarding the police subculture argues that police academies emulate
characteristics of paramilitary environments, which strip participants of their individuality so they learn to function as a collective unit (Chappell 2008; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Marion 1998). To discern perceptions of death, the author uses interview data collected from ninety-nine police officers across seven northern California police agencies. The interview transcript elicits attitudes regarding driving habits, which the author uses as a proxy.

Driving habits function as a relevant proxy for perceptions of death. Not only does driving expose officers to danger, but it does so in an unadulterated way. Understanding conditions that influence officer driving habits offers insight into how police officers view risky situations. For example, officers may negate their personal safety when responding to officer distress calls by increasing their speeds and/or failing to stop at stop signs. This behavior increases risk of serious injury or death yet officers continually engage in this type of behavior.

What factors, if any, obscure the prospect of dying on the job? The author aims to uncover the nuances behind conditions of the police officer environment that affect perceptions of death and driving habits. Durkheim’s research on social integration argues that group norms guide behavior in social environments where the individual plays a small role, which he labels as altruism (2006). Police officers experience this situation; their environment requires participation as a collective unit (Britz 1997; Chappell 2008; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Marion 1998; Paoline 2003). Officers learn the importance of adhering to group norms as they progress through the academy and graduate to police agencies. Moreover, Durkheim suggests that the salience of group
norms can become strong enough to oblige compliance. This is to say that group norms guide behavior. However, additional conditions of the police officer milieu influence driving habits and, thus, perceptions of death.

This research investigates perceptions of risk and its effect on driving habits. While police officers undoubtedly participate in a risky work environment (Paoline 2003), this research aims to better understand why officers voluntarily subject themselves to additional risk. Lyng (1990; 2005) argues that police officers, due to their work environment, participate in what he refers to as edgework. Edgework encompasses endeavors that lead to serious injury or death if performed incorrectly. The police milieu structures edgework and obscures the risk inherent in it at the same time. Thus, police officers accept it as a result of their job.
How do police officers respond to the prospect of dying while on duty? What perceptions do officers create when, for instance, driving recklessly? The goal of this section is to review relevant literature and gain an understanding of mechanisms responsible for influencing a police officer’s perception of death while on duty. This section will review Durkheim’s work on social integration (2006), the police academy, and police agencies.

DURKHEIM’S SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Durkheim’s seminal work *Suicide* (2006) posits that social integration acts as an impetus for human behavior. Specifically, he focuses on degrees of social integration and corresponding suicide levels. Durkheim's arguments should not be limited to suicide. Social integration can influence behavior through group norms. Suicide is a social phenomenon, which affects those who cannot find social balance. This social unbalance stems from three social abnormalities: anomie, egotism, and altruism. Police officers, for example, participate in what Durkheim would term an altruistic environment. Their environment affects their driving habits by obscuring the involved risks.

One should not be surprised to see higher suicide rates during economic hardship. Paradoxically, he provides the reader with data that also show high levels of suicide during economic success. He uses this irony to introduce the reader to his concept of
social regulation. Regulation is the social structure individuals grow accustomed to. An example of this would be the individual who has routinely participated in work for thirty years. Durkheim offers two forms of social regulation: anomie and fatalism.

Anomie occurs when social structures shift suddenly, or when they cease to exist. The social structure one follows disappears and the individual is left without direction. Anomie is like traveling to an unknown destination without a map -- one does not have a concept of an endpoint, how to arrive, or how long it will take to reach the destination. This places the individual in a state of discontent. Affected individuals cannot attain satisfaction because they are unaware of the distance left to travel; no end exists. This is the role of regulation in the human conscience. Regulation structures behavior by creating conceptual boundaries, or endpoints. Like the traveler who is unable to conceptualize distance, the individual without regulation is unable to satisfy desire and subjects him of herself to perpetual torment.

Durkheim (2006) uses his concept of fatalism to discuss how one can have too much social regulation. Fatalism occurs in situations where bodies of power regulate much of one's life. The affected individual may feel that the regulation they experience diminishes their passions or desires. An example of fatalism would be oppressive societies, like prisons. Prison guards structure every minute of inmate life. Guards tell inmates when they can eat, bathe, and sleep. Inmates may consider suicide as an option to stop the endless regulation. Moreover, citizens of The People's Republic of North Korea experience a fatalistic environment. The communist party instructs citizens where to work, what to wear, and how to act. The extreme regulation may explain the desire to
defect and assume a new life in another country. Durkheim also theorizes on social balance and how it can also affect behavior.

In contrast to regulation, Durkheim theorizes about the role of integration and how it too can guide behavior. The first component of social integration manifests as egotism. Egotism occurs when the individual is socially integrated at a rudimentary level. Put simply, egotism occurs when the individual is just that, an individual. Durkheim uses the situation of marriage an example. He presents the reader with a dilemma: would not the single man have less responsibility and more autonomy than the married man thus positioning marriage as an impetus for suicide? Durkheim suggests that the obligations associated with marriage and a family may introduce high levels of stress. One would be inclined to agree; however, Durkheim finds a positive relationship between age and suicide. He uses this phenomenon to focus on the social function of marriage. Marriage operates as the definition of normality; the percentage of married males within the French population increases as age increases. This positions the single man as abnormal, which their age exacerbates. The stigma of celibacy becomes increasingly salient as fewer celibate individuals exist within a population. This is the situation of egotism; individuality (or abnormality) mediates one’s ability to navigate a social environment. People commit suicide because of a lack of social integration or devalued life worth. While too little social integration results in egotism, too much creates altruism.

Altruism occurs when the individual experiences advanced social integration. Durkheim uses the military as an example of how social integration increases suicide rates. He compares these numbers to corresponding civilian age ranges. Increased
military suicide rates present the reader with another paradox: should not the confines of
the military protect the participant from the social constraints experienced by civilians?
The military serves as an exclusive social environment that contains its own social norms.
If non-commissioned officers (NCOs) experience high celibacy rates compared to
civilians within similar age cohorts, would this contradict the social abnormality rationale
presented by the situation of egotism? This furthers the contradiction presented by
altruism; the social abnormality logic does exist. The social environment creates the
norm, which explains how perceptions of celibacy fluctuate. The military inculcates
recruits to rid themselves of their individuality and internalize a collective ethos. This is
the first of many stages where behavior receives sanctioning. All incoming recruits
receive similar uniforms and haircuts. Improper maintenance of appearance receives
group criticism. Moreover, neglect of proper deference prompts harsh, negative
sanctioning from superiors despite who commits the act. These mechanisms serve as a
reminder that everyone is equal. These mechanisms transmit collective norms and teach
desired behavior. The researcher expects similar occurrences when analyzing participants
in social groups that emphasize collective life such as police academies and agencies.

Durkheim delineates three types of altruism: obligatory, optional, and religious
(2006). The present research will focus on obligatory altruism and its effect on police
officer driving habits. Obligatory altruism occurs when the collective supersedes the
individual. Group norms influence behavior as individuals perceive these norms as
duties: “…possessing the characteristic of being carried out as a duty” (Durkheim 2006:
239). Those affected by this form of altruism see the group’s norms as a commitment.
The social group enforces compliance by negatively sanctioning undesired behavior. For example, a soldier in the military may volunteer for war because it is “the right thing to do.” Regardless of the danger, they feel compelled to do so. This desire derives from the response individuals receive from it. This learned behavior facilitates the removal of free will; established group norms guide behavior. Thus, police officers may join an agency with strong commitments to safety but disregard their ideals during socialization.

Police officers participate in a social environment that parallels altruistic conditions. Police research argues that police academies and agencies teach a collective mentality (Britz 1997; Chappell 2008; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Marion 1998; Paoline 2003). Like the situation of altruism, police milieus establish acceptable behaviors. These environments may negatively sanction cops who fail to comply with group norms. For example, a new officer may receive punishment from peers for failing to respond to an officer assistance call. The punished officer perceives this situation as a collective norm. He or she may then voluntarily engage in reckless driving (e.g., driving at high speeds, failing to stop at stop signs, driving without lights and sirens, etc.) when responding to similar incidents thereafter. The compulsion to act this way derives from the group's positive sanctions for the desired behavior. Therefore, the author expects police officers to alter their driving habits when responding to officer assistance calls. It is this process that the present research aims to develop. To understand the norms that guide behavior, the present project will analyze the police officer socialization process.
THE POLICE ACADEMY

Hopeful recruits begin their goal of becoming police officers by entering the police academy. There they learn specific skills (e.g., weapons training, self-defense tactics, driving techniques etc.) that will assist them in performing their duties. Police academies also serve as a socialization agent. Academies foster the importance of working as a team. Trainers continually emphasize the imperativeness of relying on partners and fellow police officers for support across all job duties.

Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce encapsulate the importance of the team mentality fostered by the police academy: “…it is your fellow officers that are your friends, confidantes and supporters” (2010: 203). The academy inculcates trainees with a team-first approach to law enforcement. Recruits learn that reliance on fellow officers is imperative for effective police work. The police academy transmits a collective mentality through three components: organization of a paramilitary environment, an emphasis on solidarity, and the subsequent development of an us-versus-them mentality. Each component increases social integration. Degree of social integration can affect behavior and may assist in clarifying why police officers disregard their personal safety when responding to officer-assistance calls.

Some police academies emulate military boot camps (Chappell 2008; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Marion 1998). The paramilitary environment serves as an adult socialization mechanism aimed at stripping recruits of their personal characteristics to develop the “esprit de corps” (Albuquerque and Paes-Machado 2004; Griffiths, Klein, and Verdun-Jones 1980; Skinner 1983). Hodgson summarizes the intent
of paramilitary organizations best: “The individual who joins a paramilitary organization must be prepared to give up personal liberty and become a part of or an expression of the organizations’ social self” (2001: 528). This type of organization teaches recruits how to function as a collective unit. Durkheim (2006) observes the same process when he discusses altruism among soldiers. The collective mentality coupled with military ethics elicits desired behavior from soldiers, who comprise the social unit. Acceptable behavior derives from group norms, like committing suicide before surrendering to the enemy in times of battle. Participants in altruistic environments may perceive norms as obligatory; this increases the strength of compulsion. This may explain why police officers harbor strong feelings of loyalty, which they may demonstrate through their driving habits. Police academies and agencies emulate paramilitary organizations and teach the subsequent altruism.

Paramilitary organizations implement various tools to teach recruits to operate as a unit. These tools serve as bonding agents and ensure cohesion. The solidarity learned in the academy is paramount to understand why police officers hold safety in the highest regard. Paramilitary organizations aim to strip individuals of their ego and replace it with an emphasis on the collective. This approach clarifies the impetus for reckless driving when responding to officer assistance calls.

The use of uniforms within the police academy and agencies emerges as a socialization mechanism (Chappell 2008; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010). Academies may require recruits to wear specific uniforms during lecture and different ones during physical training. These uniforms function as a symbolic reminder that each recruit
serves as a component of a working unit. The uniform reminds the possessor of their place within a team. It also reinforces the collective and the group's norms. Perhaps police officers feel the obligations prescribed by the group when wearing the uniform. Uniforms also strengthen the social integration individuals experience.

Police recruits learn the importance of group solidarity during their time at the academy. Trainers use various techniques to instill solidarity within recruits. One of these techniques is the use of marching. Some research argues that the purpose of marching is to foster obedience (see Bryant 1979). Others see it as a way to develop cohesion (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010). Both arguments demonstrate the need for a working unit to successfully march. This act requires participants to move as a group in rhythm. Taking an incorrect step or moving out of place breaks the flow, which also warrants unwanted attention from supervisors. This exercise promotes the reliance on others to move in unison. Marching also teaches participants that each individual plays an equally important role. Marching fails when participants fall out of rhythm. Rhythm becomes the goal and guides behavior. The use of marching develops solidarity among participants, teaching them the importance of teamwork while emphasizing social integration.

Various academies have adopted a curriculum aimed at teaching recruits the basics of community policing (Marion 1998). Community policing is a new style in response to decades of deteriorating relationships between officers and the communities they serve (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux 1990). Community policing aims to increase the quality of life through establishing relationships, with the goal of creating trust. The main tenets of community policing include problem solving, community involvement,
organizational decentralization, and crime prevention (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux 1990). The aim for community policing is to involve the community in problem-solving strategies to prevent crime and preserve social order. However, community policing also functions to strengthen social integration via techniques officers learn and implement.

Teamwork plays a vital role in successful community policing (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010); academies integrate teamwork into their curricula (Marion 1998), in the form of various training exercises. Marion's research (1998) observes a police academy teaching a specific type of verbal communication, verbal judo. The function of this communication style is to converse effectively, whether it is with officers or the public. Recruits work in teams in order to develop and strengthen their communication skills. One exercise involved teams conversing over radios and telephones as these media emulate the job environment. This continued focus on the collective partly explains the high degree of altruism and social integration police officers experience. Commitment to fellow officers is imperative to understanding why police officers adjust their driving habits when responding to distress calls from fellow cops. These same driving habits function as a proxy when understanding how police officers perceive the prospect of dying on duty -- it is both an obligation and a norm.

Cops learn that they cannot trust nor associate with civilians (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009). The current body of research labels the relationship between officers and civilians as the us-versus-them mentality (see Marion 1998). This mentality argues that police officers separate themselves from other members of society because officers are morally superior. Conti (2009) notes this development first hand when he
observes an academy and overhears the following from a trainer: “you are not normal anymore” (418). Conti even witnesses a deputy chief reinforce this mentality: “you’re here because you have to be! You’re basically prisoners. If you try to leave I’ll shoot you in the back and I’ll be justified” (419). Police academies emphasize the differences between officers and civilians. One example of this process involves labeling.

The us-versus-them mentality teaches young police recruits to view disobedient civilians as "troublemakers" and "assholes" (Conti 2009; Van Maanen 1978). Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce (2010) observe this labeling first hand during their research at a local police academy. They witness various trainers refer to suspects as “dirt bags,” “perps,” “bad guys,” or “animals.” This tactic also functions as a social bonding agent, which increases social integration. Trainers instruct recruits to bend the rules in order to assert their status over civilians by “breaking arms” and that it is OK if done correctly. These same instructors perpetuate the us-versus-them mentality by claiming a moral disparity between officers and civilians. The police academy labels police officers as “good” and suspects as “bad” thus justifying the use of force. The us-versus-them mentality is not limited to morality.

The police academy utilizes physical fitness to differentiate officers and civilians. This isolation also functions to bond officers. Physical training prepares recruits for the physical demands of police work (Conti 2009). It functions as a social bonding agent. Conti, in his fieldwork, observes instructors belittle the class for its physical condition. The instructors emphasize the necessity of maintaining a higher degree of physical fitness compared to civilians. The trainers took responsibility and led cadets to physical fitness
level needed for graduation. The goal for these future officers is to maintain the physical fitness disparities between themselves and physically weak civilians, serving an additional example of the us-versus-them mentality.

The police academy functions to train cadets for police work. It comprises of various mechanisms to complete this task (e.g., stressful conditions, intense course loads, and high degrees of physical fitness). The goal for each recruit is to attain the status of officer and to don the police uniform. These mechanisms also strengthen social integration, which results in altruism. The police environment teaches cadets and officers to follow group norms. This process begins at the police academy. The academy strips recruits of their individual identities via three mechanisms: a paramilitary environment, emphasizing solidarity, and engendering an us-versus-them mentality. These mechanisms teach recruits to perceive their fellow officers as family. The increased social integration serves as a lens to clarify how police officers perceive the prospect of dying on duty. Perhaps knowing that an officer is in danger obscures the risk involved in reckless driving thus prompting an officer drive through an intersection without stopping. Altruistic environments ensure obedience via social norms; officers adjust their behavior to avoid the negative sanctions that follow defiance. This research aims to understand how police officers justify reckless driving when knowing the involved risk. Altruism is the foundation for reckless driving, but it fails to identify the group norms that affect individual behavior. A unique subculture socializes police officers and guides their behavior.
THE POLICE SUBCULTURE

...when a policeman dons his uniform, he enters a distinct subculture governed by norms and values designed to manage the strains created by his unique role in the community” (Van Maaen 1974:85).

Police officers participate in a unique subculture. Officers develop common responses to the tasks they encounter. Police recruits learn to value cohesion, separation from civilians, commitment to fellow officers, and aggressiveness. Cops perceive these characteristics as vital to their role as a police officer. These characteristics shape the police subculture's group norms. The purpose of this section is to introduce and develop characteristics of the police subculture that mediate how police officers perceive reckless driving.

Eugene Paoline (2003) posits that culture derives from a collective response to tasks and problems. In responding to these situations, participants develop perceptions of acceptable behavior. For example, a police agency that experiences high collision rates among officers may attempt to remediate reckless driving by implementing a mentorship program. This response creates a culture that negatively sanctions reckless driving. Officers with more experience (i.e., mentors) may share this negative attitude of reckless driving with younger officers, which would teach them that the agency does not tolerate safety infractions with regard to driving. One would expect this belief system to emerge as a collective norm. If responses to problems and tasks create culture, then what tasks and problems do police officers experience on duty?

The police officer work environment produces stress, anxiety, and strain, which
ultimately leads to alienation from the public (Britz 1997; Chan 1996; Paoline 2003; Shane 2010; Trujillo and Ross 2008). Threats to personal safety can even manifest in innocuous situations such as traffic stops, or more explicitly in situations like riots or fights. According to the California High Patrol (CHP), on June 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2010, CHP officer Philip Ortiz was struck by a vehicle when issuing a traffic citation on the shoulder of the northbound 405 California freeway. Officer Ortiz died two weeks later from injuries. Moreover, CHP officers Walt Frago, Roger Gore, James Pence, and George Alleyn all perished after a gunfight during a routine traffic stop in 1970. Situations like these teach officers that they cannot trust anyone. As such, police officers acclimate themselves to their environment and develop a preoccupation with the danger they experience. This preoccupation functions as a mechanism to insulate officers from the public (Conti 2009; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Kappeler et al. 1998; Paoline 2003; Shane 2010; Westley 1970). The police academy teaches recruits to distrust civilians and the police officer milieu reinforces it. This lack of trust also functions as a bonding agent among police officers (Paoline 2003), which increases the cohesion they experience. For example, a police officer may discuss an unruly citizen after his or her shift with fellow officers. Labeling citizens and creating moral distance unites officers and strengthens the bonds they share. Thus, separation from the public serves as a component of the police subculture; it is a response to the environment police officers participate in. The separation from the public functions as a bonding agent, which strengthens the cohesion police officers experience with one another. This strong bond coupled with altruism may influence police officer driving habits when responding to a backup call that involves a
fellow officer.

Another facet of the police subculture is the "blue code of silence." This ethic forbids the disclosure of information to anyone outside patrol officers (Benoit et al. 2004; Chin et al. 1998; Rothwell et al. 2007). Police officers who compromise this ethic face ostracism and, as Nolan (2009) states, the possibility of being intentionally left alone in stressful situations (i.e., traffic stops, domestic violence, drug busts etc.). The repercussions levied against officers who compromise the blue code of silence leads to the reinforcement of commitment to fellow officers.

The blue code of silence requires officers to refrain from disclosing officer-related information to civilians (Benoit et al. 2004). Benoit and Durba’s research focuses on the blue code of silence and the variance between positively and negatively sanctioned police officer behaviors. They discuss a 1999 case where New York Police Department officers testified against fellow officer Justin Volpe. Volpe sodomized a civilian with a broomstick during his arrest. The Volpe case contradicts the blue code of silence with good reason. Benoit and Durba posit that officers protect their fellow officers in situations where they could envision themselves. Thus, an officer involved in a shooting would receive the benefits of the blue code of silence because his/her fellow officers deem it as appropriate officer behavior. On the other hand, the Volpe case involved reprehensible behavior, which explains why police officers testified against him without punishment. This phenomenon clarifies the boundaries of police officer behavior, and established group norms. The blue code of silence increases officer cohesion, which strengthens the altruism officers experience.
An additional police subculture characteristic is aggressiveness. An adherence to the traditional police officer perception (i.e., aggressive, assertive) emerges in the literature (Fielding 1988; Paoline 2003; Walker 1977). This perception denotes the police officer as a hyper-masculine champion of justice. The cultural ideal expects officers to proactively fight crime. The researcher expects aggressiveness to emerge in facets of police work like driving habits. In the same vein, “rookies” (i.e., newly-hired police officers) within police agencies may overcompensate to fit in with their new social groups. Henry (1995) argues that overcompensation manifests in hyper-masculine behavior. For example, younger officers are more likely to engage in reckless behavior in order to demonstrate masculinity, or, the traditional police officer ideal. Responding to an officer assistance call where the recipient can "hear it in their voice" may serve as an opportunity to prove one's self within a police agency. "Driving like hell" over "driving to arrive" may function as an opportunity to prove one's self. Perhaps it may provide the driver a chance to feel like the traditional police officer.

Durkheim's research on social integration (2006) teaches us that individuals who participate in milieus that require social integration lose their individuality. These individuals internalize group norms, which guides behavior. Durkheim labeled this phenomenon as altruism. The police environment meets this definition. Research on police academies argues that participation demands the loss of individuality. (Chappell 2008; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Marion 1998). These ideals guide behavior. To accomplish this, police agencies positively sanction desired behaviors through mechanisms such as the blue code of silence (Benoit et al. 2004; Chin et al.
1998; Rothwell et al. 2007). The present research expects the emergence of altruism in the data. Therefore, police officer behavior will correspond to police subculture norms. Hearing stress in a fellow officer's voice may compel a seasoned officer to drive recklessly, despite knowing the consequences (i.e., running lights and sirens). He or she may feel that the consequences levied by peers for violating the police subculture is far worse than the consequences extended by the agency. Or, the officer may be integrated at such a high degree that they may fail to perceive alternative choices. The researcher expects officers to disregard their safety by voluntarily engaging in reckless driving when responding to officer assistance calls.

EDGEWORK AND PERCEIVED RISK

Police officers participate in a work environment that subjects them to consistent danger and stress (Paoline 2003). Situations as routine as traffic stops introduce the officer to vulnerability. Yet, officers may also voluntarily engage in risky behavior (e.g., driving at high speeds or failing to wear a safety belt). Why would these men and women voluntarily subject themselves to danger when their environment places them at an increased risk? The purpose of this section is to better understand the literature regarding voluntary risk taking. Risk-taking theory argues that structural conditions motivate individuals, like police officers, to engage in risky behavior (Lasch 1978; Lyng 1990; Wehr 2009). However, risk-taking literature also suggests that the police officer socialization process pre-disposes cops to voluntarily engage in risky behavior. As such, structural conditions may obscure the involved risk -- which may prompt risky behavior.
Macro-structural conditions play a role in voluntary engagement in risky behavior. Karl Marx deconstructed capitalism to understand its effect on society. One of Marx's key concepts is the process of alienation. The capitalist labor process compartmentalizes workers during the production of goods. This marginalizes the worker to a single task, which alienates them on multiple fronts. Alienation is a key concept in understanding why someone, like a police officer, may engage in risky behavior.

Routine engagement in an ordered reality may become mundane and banal. Performing similar daily tasks is the reality for most laborers, like police officers. This dullness leads to a void and a desire to find fulfillment outside of work (Lasch 1978). Individuals may fill this void through commodity consumption (Wehr 2009) or through alternative endeavors that place the actor in unorganized realities. This ambiguity offers the individual an opportunity to engage in uninhibited behavior or a chance at finding one's authentic self. Various research supports the desire to find authenticity as a result of alienation (Holyfield and Jonas 2003; Kidder 2006; Wehr 2009). An additional reaction to mundane conditions is a desire to reach self-realization. One way of reaching this is through what Mead referred to as the “I” (1962). The “I” is the spontaneous voice; however, the “me” is what counters these spontaneous impulses. The “me,” as Mead defined, is the socially guided voice, or, the voice of reason deriving from the social self. Work places an emphasis on the “me” while suppressing the “I” (Leidner 1993); this suppression prompts a desire to find self-realization, or, authenticity. This explains the connection into what Lyng posits as the gratification one receives when engaging in activities that require behavior deriving from the “I.” Another way to reach authenticity is
through engagement in *edgework* (1990).

Lyng's research investigates motivations for engaging in risky behavior (1990; 2005). Lyng argues that risk taking may not be entirely voluntary, which he develops with a concept he calls *edgework*. Edgework is an activity that, if done incorrectly, leads to serious injury or death. This is where the term "edge" derives from; as you approach the "edge," you increasingly compromise your own safety. Lyng references extreme sports such as mountain climbing or skydiving (Lyng collected data as a participant observer within a skydiving social group) as examples of edgework. These activities certainly have fatal consequences if performed incorrectly. Police officers routinely engage in edgework due to their work environment. Simply making a traffic stop introduces the element of danger. For example, many of the police officers interviewed for this study state that they remove their safety belt when approaching a scene. They want to be prepared to exit their patrol vehicle if need be. This technique exacerbates damage done by collisions. Edgework, however, is not limited to physical activities. Lyng widens the concept of edgework by incorporating activities that push the envelope of reality. Lyng refers to Hunter Thompson’s (the individual who coined the “edgework”) consumption of illicit drugs. Activities that approach the edge of mental health via stress (e.g., overworking) demarcate edgework. Edgework can be a structurally determined reaction to the mundane routinization of employment. It offers participants a way to leave an organized reality and find authenticity. The required skills to perform edgework function as a bonding agent among participants.

Lyng's work on voluntary risk taking (1990) posits that edgework requires a
specific skill set. It demands mental toughness and razor-sharp focus from the practitioner. Lyng’s work with a skydiving crew yielded the opportunity to observe the group’s dynamics as they engaged in edgework. He noticed that the skydiving group fostered elitism among each other. The elitism stemmed from the group’s ability to successfully skydive. Moreover, the group perceived skydiving accidents as a result of undeveloped skills (e.g., mental toughness or elite concentration), not because of the risk involved in skydiving. This view, as Lyng states, functions to bond practitioners. The bonding process Lyng observes is not limited to skydiving. Police officers engage in risky behavior in various facets of their job. Routine driving fits this description. For example, successfully performing a Precision Immobilization Technique (PIT) requires training and an above average driving ability. Lyng would argue that this skill set functions to bond the individuals through their perceived elitism. Police officers may be predisposed to elitism.

The emergence of elitism among police officers is not limited to edgework (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Marion 1998). Specifically, police research labels this phenomenon as the *us-versus-them* mentality. Police officers feel that they possess superiority over civilians due their morality and police skills. However, engaging in this worldview may derive from another source. The police officer milieu socializes officers to function as a collective unit (Britz 1997; Paoline 2003). The police academy introduces cadets to this mentality and police agencies reward participation in it. Thus, police officers may participate in edgework because they perceive it as normal. Driving recklessly may afford the chance to feel more like a police officer as this
behavior corresponds to what officers learn in the academy. In other words, engaging in acceptable police officer behavior may obscure the involved risk in facets of policing, like reckless driving. Police officers may develop an acceptance of the risk involved in reckless driving; their environments consider this normal behavior.

Routine engagement in tasks may also obscure the risk involved in reckless behavior (Lyng 1990). Wehr (2009) suggests that society has taken a reactive approach to the detriments of risky behavior. Risk functions on a continuum; behavior that is considered safe now may be viewed as risky in the future. For example, police agencies failed to equip patrol vehicles with driver safety belts until recently and now adopt policies that require officers to wear seatbelts on duty. The police officer subculture may also play a role; older police officers neglected seatbelt use. They developed an acceptance of the danger involved in driving without safety belts. Officers of these generations (and currently) arguably spent majority of their time driving thus routinizing their reckless driving habits. This repetition obscured the danger involved when driving without safety belts. However, police agencies began to adopt new safety belt policies as preventable injuries began to increase. This is to say that the perception of reckless behavior changes as the corresponding attitudes change. This same fluidity operates at the officer level.

Police officers spend a majority of their time driving their patrol vehicles. Driving becomes one of the many routinized tasks cops confront during their shifts. Lyng (1990) argues that this process obscures the involved risk. Thus, police officers who drive at high speeds or confront criminals without backup may develop an acceptance of the
involved risk if they continually face these situations. One way to understand how police officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty is through their personal experience with risk. Lyng and Wehr argue that one's definition of risk is entirely personal and fluid, which the present study echoes. The interviewed officers all encounter risk, but it is their personal experience with it that shapes their perception of it.

Police officers participate in an inherently risky environment (Paoline 2003). Interaction with civilians introduces vulnerability and exposes the officer to danger. Yet, police officers voluntarily engage in risky behavior, which compromises personal safety. To best understand the impetus for voluntary risk taking, one must understand macro-structural motivations. Marx theorized that the banality of labor influences one's involvement with risky behavior insofar that it enables one to find their authentic self (Holyfield and Jonas 2003; Kidder 2006; Lasch 1978; Wehr 2009).

Lyng's (1990) research on the concept of edgework furthers the reasoning for engagement in risky behavior. Due to the structural conditions outlined above, one may participate in edgework to find fulfillment. Lyng defines edgework as endeavors that result in serious injury or death if done incorrectly. The skills needed for edgework bond those who possess it, which foster elitism. Participation in the police officer work environment and socialization process structure edgework. Edgework allows officers an opportunity to engage in norms established by the police subculture. Thus, officers may participate in edgework not because of the involved risk, but the chance to engage in approved behavior.

In contrast, officers engage in risky behavior simply because of their acceptance
of it. Wehr (2009) posits that the concept of risk is fluid. Therefore, the actor defines it, which explains why officers change their driving habits after involvement in vehicle collisions. Police officers routinely engage in reckless driving due to structural conditions that influence their behavior.
Chapter 3

METHODS

The present study seeks to understand how police officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty. The researcher used data collected from face-to-face interviews with ninety-nine police officers from seven northern California police agencies. The interview data was collected in conjunction with an ongoing research project commissioned by the California Commission on Police Officer Standards and Training (Cal POST), which aims to understand police agency cultural factors that explain the 194% increase in vehicle collisions resulting in injury or death (POST 2009: 3) among California police officers.

Each police agency requested volunteers for interviews which ranged in rank from officer to captain. After permission was granted, officers volunteered for face-to-face interviews. Each interview began with verbal and written consent. The research team utilized pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

The research head chose police departments based on demographic information (i.e., rural versus urban) and police agency size among other characteristics. The demographic information presented in this study is from 2009 as this is the most recent year with accurate data of both population and sworn police officers.

City one has a population of over 15,000 with twenty-five sworn peace officers. City one is densely populated and covers 1.7 square miles. Because of these characteristics, it is considered an urban environment.
City two is also an urban environment, largely due to its university. Key features include heavy foot and bicycle traffic. City two has a population over 101,000 and 180 sworn peace officers.

City three is a rural community with a university. Key features include large student population and heavy foot and bicycle traffic near the university. City three has a population of almost 85,000 and ninety-five sworn peace officers.

City four has a population of almost 63,000 and fifty-eight sworn peace officers. City four is also a university community located within a rural community.

City five is an urban community with key features that include a dense population and high crime rates. Its population is over 404,000 and has 793 sworn peace officers.

City six has the largest population in this study -- almost 500,000. Defining characteristics include a university and city limits that span over 100 miles. This urban community contains 700 sworn peace officers.

City seven is a rural, mountain community with a population over 23,000. Key features include a large tourist population with winter and summer activities. City seven has forty sworn peace officers.

Within each agency, the research team conducted structured, in-depth interviews with the volunteer officers. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews took place at the agency, usually in a break room in between shifts. Some interviews began in the morning (i.e., 8 a.m.) while some progressed into late evenings (i.e., 11 p.m.). The research head conducted each interview while the graduate research assistants kept track of time, ensured interviews stayed on topic, and took notes.
The interview instrument (see appendix 1) contained approximately thirty open-ended questions gauging police officer attitudes on department driving policies. However, the scope of the present research focused on questions that elicit police officer driving habits. The questions of interest involved themes regarding reckless driving: What is the seatbelt policy on the books? Do you generally follow this policy? How often do you drive very fast (self-defined) without running code/lights and sirens? How often do you drive very fast (self-defined) while running code/lights and sirens? Follow-up questions were asked: When/if you do so, what are the reasons? When officers, FTOs, or supervisors don’t follow the policy, what reasons do they give? What are the reasons if/when you don’t follow policy?

The author chose this theme after observing various officers contextualizing reckless driving. Observing these answers led the author to using driving habits as a proxy for perceptions of death while on duty. In general, a number of officers stated adherence to safe driving practices; however, they contradicted this claim when discussing specific situations (e.g., responding to an officer distress call). The context of calls altered driving habits and obscured risk and the possibility of dying from it. This piqued the author's curiosity and thus became the subject of interest.

The unit of analysis for this research was officer driving behaviors as no interview question elicits perceptions of death directly. Understanding the context for these behaviors yielded key information and was thus analyzed. The author identified various concepts and subsequent key words once the data was transcribed. The concepts of interest are contextualized driving habits and distracted driving. Primary key words
include “fast,” “ambush,” “collision,” “MDT,” and “distraction.”

The author utilized an open-coding strategy to develop themes, or, typologies. The author defined these categories and analyzed them for meaning. While applying typologies introduces the perspective of the researcher (Patton 1990), data analysis utilizing typologies is not only a common methodology (Adler & Clark 2008; Grbich 2007; Marshall & Rossman 2011), but qualitative research involving police officers utilizes it, too (Prokos & Padavic 2002). Coding for these concepts resulted in trends, which the author analyzed.
Chapter 4

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Durkheim’s *Suicide* (2006) studies levels of social integration and its effect on behavior. His research aims to argue that suicide is a social phenomenon. He discusses four social abnormalities with regard to social integration: egotism, altruism, anomie, and fatalism. The present study focuses on altruism and how it influences police officer driving behavior. This research aims to understand how police officers perceive the prospect of dying on the job by using their driving habits as a proxy.

US-VERSUS-THEM METALITY

Durkheim used the concept of altruism (2006) to show how the collective supersedes individual behavior. Behavior corresponds to established group norms rather than individual consciousness. Durkheim posits that this mechanism guides the individual. Police officers participate in an altruistic environment. The police academy and agencies, for instance, demand teamwork and discipline. One way to ensure such behavior is to create and enforce group norms. For example, the police officer subculture emphasizes officer cohesion (Manning 1995; Paoline 2003; Westley 1970). Academy administrators instruct cadets that they are different from civilians and not to befriend them. This constant instruction aids the development of a group conscience. The police officer should expect to develop an altruistic approach to police work, which requires officers to abide by group norms.
The us-versus-them mentality aides in creating an altruistic environment. This mentality teaches officers to differentiate themselves from civilians, especially as they maintain social order. Moreover, this separation can also occur internally -- from fellow officers and the administration (Conti 2009; Marion 1998). The us-versus-them mentality emerges in the present study. Police officer eleven from the third agency demonstrates this mentality when discussing a local apartment complex: “The car took off, it was over in West Sac. There’s a dirt bag apartment right there, West Sac.” Officer eleven from the fifth agency concurs: "But when you got these young kids that want to go out there and make arrests, get the bad guy, but they don’t understand that. Hey, there’s risks for rewards.” These officers use language that differentiates themselves from civilians.

This separation may also assist in creating bonds between officers. The us-versus-them mentality fosters cohesiveness through separation, which unifies police officers. Officers learn to conceptualize themselves as superior to civilians. Officers learn not to trust civilians, which may exacerbate their isolation. This influences them to befriend one another and further insulate themselves (Paoline 2003). The end result is a perpetual process that instructs officers to isolate and then insulate themselves with fellow police officers. (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009). Police officer three from the fourth agency confirms: “After a few years of being cops they -- the only people they know is cops.” Officer three from the first agency officer echoes this sentiment: "…like I said, a lot of the people that work here are friends with the people they work with.” These officers imply that they are either unwilling or unable to establish friendships with civilians. Moreover, the first officer suggests that the degree of his officer friendships
increase as he progresses through his career. Group solidarity becomes salient with experience. This exacerbates their insulation while strengthening the mutual bonds with one another.

The police officer milieu also produces group loyalty (Manning 1995; Paoline 2003; Westley 1970). Past research suggests that police officers separate themselves from civilians because of perceived differences (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Paoline 2003). This isolates officers from civilians and yields strong senses of group loyalty. The police officer milieu consists of stress (Paoline 2003) with few coping mechanisms outside it. Not only does this environment teach officers to develop friendships with other cops, but also it implicitly inculcates officers to rely on each other. Officer friendships that function as a coping mechanism are an example of this process. These friendships, coupled with group norms, produce group loyalty. For example, Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce (2010) studied a police academy and observed instructors teaching cadets to befriend fellow officers. The result of these work-peer relationships is solidarity and group loyalty. Officer three from the fourth agency discusses his experience with this phenomenon:

I have seen in this department -- some pretty amazing things that Admin will do to help an officer out, even sometimes an officer you don’t particularly like. But it’s the right thing to do.

The group loyalty characteristic emerges in the above anecdote. This officer also states that this agency would extend similar treatment to a disliked officer; it would be the right thing to do. This officer may feel that treating a co-worker like this is right because of the police milieu. Officer seven from the first agency furthers this concept by discussing his
commitment to assisting distressed officers: "If it’s an officer requiring assistance, you definitely want to get there and that's what gets us there fastest is if an officer needs help." The milieu functions as an environment that distributes altruism through the police subculture. The police subculture teaches officers to perceive themselves as superior to civilians, which isolates and insulates them. This positions officers to befriend one another, which strengthens group solidarity and loyalty through strong mutual bonds. This set of norms influences officer behavior, which emerges in driving habits. Police officers may alter their driving habits (i.e., voluntarily engaging in reckless driving) when responding to officer-assistance calls; the police officer milieu teaches them to sacrifice themselves for the preservation of officer safety.

OBLIGATORY ALTRUISM

Durkheim's social integration research resulted in various altruism subtypes. This research focuses on obligatory altruism, which influences behavior in accordance with cultural norms. The military serves as a contemporary example of obligatory altruism. Countries compel individuals to take up arms and fight. One way of achieving this is through military paradigms that position service as honorable (e.g., the Marine slogan “the few, the proud, the brave”). Fighting for one’s country becomes a positively sanctioned act, which peers, media, and country reinforce. This mechanism serves as a norm that guides behavior. It is expected that police officers experience obligatory altruism; they participate in similar environments.

Obligatory altruism may clarify why police officers voluntarily engage in reckless
driving when responding to officer-assistance calls. When asked why he drives fast in some situations, but not others, officer two from the seventh agency provides this explanation: "But it's to get there, because my car partner is calling for a back or it's a hot call, but necessarily a code three call.” This officer defines this situation as a "hot call," or an incident that requires immediate attention. It is also serious enough to alter driving habits. He justifies reckless driving by noting his partner's request for assistance. The same officer discusses reasons for driving at increased speeds without using his lights and sirens: "But, probably at the most would be partners that call for backs, especially the ones that don't usually call for expedited backs.” Driving with code, or lights and sirens, may be the only indication this officer gives to other vehicles. Traffic laws instruct motorists to yield to emergency vehicles, too. Driving with lights and sirens may be one of the few tools officers can utilize during reckless driving. Yet, this officer chooses not to use code. Officers need clearance from management to use code and drive at increased speeds. Management typically reserves code driving for dire situations and can deny these requests. However, the compulsion to assist distressed officers supersedes supervisory approval. The police subculture emphasizes officer safety and a responsibility to assist distressed officers. These norms demand the officer to comply. This obligation can also influence an officer's commitment to personal safety.

The police subculture inculcates cadets and officers to commit themselves to safety (Albuquerque and Paes-Machado 2004; Griffiths, Klein, and Verdun-Jones 1980; Skinner 1983). For example, Officer two from the second agency comments on his agency's attitude toward officer safety: "The department itself is real oriented towards
officer safety.” This attitude becomes a mechanism that guides behavior. Police officer six from the seventh agency echoes this sentiment when discussing a mundane driving example: “It's not, you know, holy crap, my partner needs me. It's not, you know, I need to get to this call. It's come to the station.” This officer implies that he changed his driving style when realizing his reckless driving. This officer's commitment to safety derives from the police milieu's emphasis on it. It becomes a collective norm that guides behavior through various facets of police work, like driving.

Police cadets and officers receive officer safety training during their time at the academy and within their agencies (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Paoline 2003). The academy teaches safety through defensive tactics, weapons training, and safe driving. Safe driving habits include safe speeds, proper use of code, and safety belt usage. For example, officer eight from the seventh agency corroborates the police subculture's emphasis on safety belts: "I’ve always been a proponent of wearing the seatbelts, and I told my guys and gals on the shifts to wear their seatbelts, you know.” This officer is a sergeant and is responsible for maintaining contact with rank and file police personnel in the field. Officer two from the first agency echoes management's emphasis on safety: "I think that as far as the message that management is sending is they want us to be safe.” Both the literature on police officers and the present research confirm the police subculture's emphasis on officer safety. This may lead to a commitment to seat belt usage or driving at reduced speeds. The police subculture teaches the importance of safe driving.
The interviewed officers demonstrate a commitment to personal safety and to each other. These attitudes emerge as the impetus for officer driving habits. Durkheim's concept of obligatory altruism suggests that this environment positions compliance with cultural norms as obligatory. This clarifies why driving habits are fluid thus explaining voluntary engagement in reckless driving among police officers. Responding to distressed officers serves as a highly scrutinized cultural norm and plays a vital role in the police officer ethos. Cops may feel obligated to assist fellow officers -- this behavior corresponds to their role as a police officer. This results in officers acting against their training and voluntarily engaging in reckless driving.

ALTRUISM AND THE POLICE SUBCULTURE

Durkheim’s (2006) research posits that behavior corresponding with cultural norms increases as social integration increases. He labels this social phenomenon as altruism and gives a military example: soldiers who voluntarily took their lives due to established military norms (i.e., never surrender). Military environments stress participation in a collective unit over individuality. Paramilitary environments negatively sanction (e.g., verbal abuse, physical punishment, unwanted attention etc) unwanted behavior. Much like soldiers, police officers participate in a paramilitary environment (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009). This similar environment inculcates cadets and officers to relinquish their individuality for participation as a team. Academies and agencies ensure desired behavior through negative sanctions. These sanctions also define cultural norms, which the literature defines as the police subculture. The
combination of altruism and the police subculture functions as the impetus for behavior. Thus, elements of this combination should emerge when analyzing their driving habits. The police subculture and the altruistic environment influence officer behavior. Officer three from the sixth agency confirms this phenomenon when discussing his reckless driving when responding to officer assistance calls:

Have I done it? Yes. And I know when I’m doing it that I’ve kind of taking my future into my own hands. I do it if somebody’s asking for a unit, and they’re like, hey, I don’t need code, but, you know, I just need somebody to come.

This officer discusses his strong attitudes toward assisting distressed officers. He even acknowledges the risk involved when choosing to drive recklessly. He justifies the risk because he is assisting a fellow officer. Specifically, he is complying with the police subculture's emphasis on officer safety:

…and you can tell by voice or by radio traffic if you hear stuff in the background, or you hear somebody yelling, I’m going to take that little extra chance for my partners to get there to make sure they’re safe.

The experienced altruism obscures his reservations on risk. While this phenomenon emerges as a trend, it may not function as the impetus. This officer also notes the audible demarcations of distress. Eighty-five percent of the interviewed agencies contained police officers acknowledging reckless driving when responding to distressed officers, similar to the above officer.

The police subculture values safety and loyalty (Herbert 1998; Paoline 2003). These characteristics result from the us-versus-them mentality, which instructs officers to differentiate themselves from civilians. This categorization fosters strong social bonds
among officers, which affects driving habits. Officer eleven from the third agency supports this assertion:

…there’s categories that I internalize when I’m responding to calls… Anything of not urgency is a general response. Anytime where someone of the community (public) is at risk it’s a little faster meaning we still follow the rules of the road but it’s just you might be going five or 10 over the speed limit versus just a casual drive. Anytime an officer is on scene on a situation that is not code four, that would be a situation where our policy still says you drive the speed limit, you drive the rules of the road. Where I may drive 10 miles an hour faster and roll through a stop sign to get to that officer that’s not quite code four. And you can tell in his voice that things aren’t going well yet.

Not all police work requires reckless driving, like writing a traffic ticket or Responding to a minor vehicle accident. The above officer states that responding to "general response" calls prescribe safe driving practices. However, he admits to driving recklessly when responding to a distressed officer. This call functions as one of the core characteristics of the police subculture -- do not leave officers in compromising situations. Officers learn to comply with cultural norms during their time at the academy and agencies (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009). Moreover, officers learn to value officer safety and loyalty (Herbert 1998; Paoline 2003). This process affects driving habits when responding to distressed officers.

Responding to officer assistance calls emerges as a common theme within the data. Of the seven Northern California police agencies the research team interviewed, six contained officers who explicitly stated that they drive faster when responding to distressed officers compared to other calls. In other words, these officers admitted to driving recklessly when assisting fellow officers. This resulted in increased speeds,
failing to stop at stop signs and traffic lights, and driving without lights and sirens. This characteristic corresponds to the police subculture’s emphasis on loyalty (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009). These officers demonstrate an acceptance of the risk involved in reckless driving; they are complying with cultural norms.

Joseph Wambaugh’s book titled The Onion Field epitomizes the consequences of leaving a fellow officer in need. Wambaugh recounts the story of LAPD police officers Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger. In 1963, convicted felons Gregory Powell and Jimmy Smith kidnapped the two officers. The two men drove to an onion field where Powell fatally shot officer Campbell. Officer Hettinger managed to escape the ordeal with his life; however, his actions followed him throughout his career. Fellow LAPD police officers questioned whether Hettinger's decisions. LAPD sergeants even forced Hettinger to recount his story during numerous roll calls to prevent a similar occurrence. Moreover, LAPD updated training material to include the onion field incident as an example of what not to do during routine traffic stops. This social isolation, among other reasons, lead to Hettinger’s eventual resignation in 1966. Needless to say, the police subculture negatively sanctions behavior that contradicts established norms such as preventing the death of a fellow police officer - even if it means voluntarily engaging in reckless behavior.

The interviewed officers consistently discuss their voluntarily engagement in reckless driving (e.g., high speeds, rolling through stop signs, driving without code, etc.) during their response to officer assistance calls. Of the agencies that contained officers who admitted to reckless driving during officer assistance calls, all referenced "hearing it
in their voice." This phenomenon refers to the inflections that demarcate a stressful situation. Various officers noted that this affects their driving. Officer fourteen from the second agency confirms: “I’ve worked with them long enough that I can sense when something’s not quite right or the situation, you know. His voice sounds just a little bit different on the air. While those don’t necessarily necessitate a code three response, I do drive above the speed limit to get there.” Moreover, officer fourteen from the first agency notes a similar mentality: "...sometimes just little intonations in their voice on the air makes you realize this person may sound like he’s maybe on his toes a little more than he typically is for more. And so that would prompt me to drive a little bit higher either at the speed limit or a little bit over.” These officers admit to driving faster than normal when responding to distressed officers. They know that hearing stress in an officer's voice justifies reckless driving due to the combination of the altruistic environment they participate and the norms the police subculture creates.

RISK TAKING

Police officers work in an inherently risky environment. A typical workday may include apprehending a criminal or engaging in a high-speed pursuit. Moreover, officers may choose to participate in risky behavior. When asked whether police officers at his agency voluntarily engage in risk taking, officer seven from the second agency replies: "...yeah, I would say so. There’s been times where I’ve been going 80 or 90 down San Pablo in the opposing lane of traffic. Granted it was nighttime, but still.” However, the choice of voluntarily engaging in risky behavior may not be voluntary at all; structural
forces influence officers' perception of it. When asked what the leading source of collisions for their agency is, many of the interviewed officers answered with "tunnel vision." These officers imply that, when driving, they focus on one task. This introduces risk; obstacles such as stop signals, pedestrians, and other vehicles go unacknowledged. Police work structures tunnel vision, or, voluntary risk taking. This may result from components of the police officer work environment and though the process of obscuring or routinizing risk. The purpose of this section is to better understand these mechanisms through the experiences of the interviewed police officers.

EDGECWORK

Lyng's concept of edgework (1990) refers to endeavors that seriously compromise the safety of the practitioner if done incorrectly. Lyng cited skydiving, automobile or motorcycle racing, and various other dangerous activities as examples. Edgework may also be structured, like facets of police work. For example, police officers may use forced entry into a home. The officers may use tactics to clear the home of any danger, which requires increased focus and attention to detail. If the officers overlook any of the applied tactics, they risk serious or fatal injuries. This activity is required by virtue of being a police officer. Thus, police work is inherently risky. The present research confirms this assertion.

The police officer socialization process predisposes cops to engage in risky behavior. Research confirms that police academies teach recruits to distrust civilians (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009). This phenomenon is known as the us-
versus-them mentality. Officer two from the sixth agency recounts his experience learning it: "...they almost train you not to trust anyone and you know, the truth of the matter is I mean anyone could be your enemy.” In other words, this officer is unable to trust civilians as they potentially expose the officer to danger. This overarching mentality manifests in officer driving habits.

Police officers routinely admit to removing their safety belts when approaching a crime scene. Of the seven interviewed agencies, an officer from each confirmed this. Moreover, each agency mentioned that the impetus behind this action was officer safety. In response to why officers neglect wearing safety belts, Officer three from the third agency states: "I can tell you why we do it and it’s for the purpose of when you get close to a call and you need to get out of the car quickly, you don’t want to be messing with your seatbelt.” Officer one from the same agency is much more explicit: "...there’s been times where, because I’m not used to wearing it [seatbelt] and I do have it on, you go to get out of the car and you're like, oh crap, I have my seatbelt on and it's going to delay you, and your car is your coffin.” This officer views his safety belt as the difference between living and dying when needing to quickly exit his vehicle. The fear of vulnerability and distrust of citizens compels officers to remove their safety belts. While they perceive this technique as a way to ensure safety, they enhance an already risky situation. Officer one from the first agency echoes the distrust of citizens and uses the same analogy: "We’re going to a call and I quite frequently pop my seatbelt off a few blocks away because you don’t want the car to be a coffin.” These officers remove their safety belts when approaching a scene to defend themselves against vulnerability, which
derives from a learned distrust for citizens. Not only does this technique exacerbate the risk, but it motivates officers to engage in edgework. Edgework emerges in other facets of police officer driving habits, too.

Police officers receive information regarding calls via Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs). MDTs are mobile computers (i.e., laptops) officers use in their patrol vehicles. Officers rely on MDTs to query civilian criminal information. This information can return whether a vehicle is reported stolen or if a civilian has a warrant for their arrest. The MDT typically sits on a swivel near the vehicle's center console and is designed for the officer to view while sitting in the driver's seat. While these units are imperative to police work, they also serve as a distraction. Many of the interviewed officers confirmed that a leading distraction was indeed the MDT. Officer fourteen from the sixth agency elaborates: "…on the way to your call, depending on where you're going, you're looking people up and as you're driving you're focusing, so it splits your attention between the road and the computer screen.” This split attention structures edgework. Police officers must now be cognizant of calls they receive from dispatch while focusing on driving, which increases risk for collisions. Police officer fifteen from the same agency confirms: "…the accident that I had been in was because I was looking at my MDT.” Some officers may feel that vehicle collisions are an inevitable part of policing due to MDTs. In response to whether he feels if distracted driving exists in his agency, officer two from the first agency responds: "…it hasn’t happened yet, but there’ll be collisions as a result of the computers [MDTs].” Police agencies require officers to utilize MDTs in their patrol vehicles. These officers admit that MDTs are useful tools, but that they are also a
distraction. Furthermore, these officers may also feel that collisions are a result of MDT use is inevitable and subsequently accept risk.

The interviewed police officers participate in an ostensibly risky work environment. Simply wearing their uniform identifies them as a target and exposes them to danger. Paradoxically, these officers voluntarily subject themselves to further risk. These officers admit to driving at high speeds without code, driving without attaching a safety belt, and failing to stop at stop signs and intersections. While the risk involved in these, and other risky activities may seem apparent, participating in a work environment that routinizes risk obscures it (Lyng 1990; Wehr 2009). The present research confirms this concept.

OBSCURED RISK

Routinely engaging in the same task will eventually become mundane and hackneyed. This is the situation of the police officer -- a collection of repeated tasks during a workday. Lyng argues that routinizing a dangerous task obscures the involved risk (1990). Thus, police officers that routinely drive at increased speeds may grow to accept the involved risk. In addition, perceiving an endeavor as risky requires that it be defined as such. Wehr (2009) posits that identifying an activity or an object as risky is a free-floating concept. Risk operates on a continuum. Activities may appear safe at one point in time, but may develop a perception of risk at another. Seatbelt usage among police officers illustrates this point. Historically, police officers failed to wear safety belts. This attitude changed over time, which officer two from the first agency confirms:
"But the seatbelt usage, over the years, the ones that I can think of that, you know, just didn't wear them were old timers…” This officer suggests that the "old timers" continue to neglect seat belt usage as a result of their generation. This generation grew to accept the risks involved in neglecting seatbelt usage despite younger generations adopting it; risk operates in a similar fashion. The interviewed officers accept the risk involved in reckless driving due to the routinization of it. The danger embedded in these reckless habits emerges when these officers experience collisions and age.

Police officers engage in mundane and routinized tasks. This could take the form of making traffic stops, or responding to noise complaints. This same process affects their driving habits, too. Police officers may routinely drive recklessly, which ultimately obscures the involved risk. Officer three from the sixth agency discusses how he accepted the risk involved in reckless driving: "...when I came on, there was a lot of fast driving. We rolled fast.” These officers may not see the danger involved in reckless driving because they learn to accept the involved risk. Officer four from the fourth agency reiterates this point: "Well, it’s like anything, until you drive fast and you do it, you get used to it, you know.” This routinization prompts officers to continue to voluntarily engage in reckless driving, which affects their perception of the prospect of dying while on duty. However, these officers admit to changing their driving habits upon experiencing accidents and aging, which clarifies the involved risk.

Of the seven interviewed agencies, five contained officers who explicitly stated that they changed their driving habits after their direct or indirect involvement in a vehicle collision. Their perception of their driving habits changed after these accidents,
which changed their definition of risk. Officer nine from the seventh agency discusses his experience with collisions and the resulting effect: "You know when I started being called out for all the fatal accidents back east and went through all that training, I found myself driving a lot different than I did before...” Simply observing accidents as a result of reckless driving redefined this officer's definition of risk, which changed his perception of what constitutes reckless driving. Officer 16 from the first agency discusses why he changed his driving habits: "...it’s just not worth it. I think each officer kind of comes to that realization over time. It’s kind of a culmination of all your own personal experiences. You know, obviously, I had a crash where speed was an issue.” Routinized reckless driving obscured the prospect of dying for these officers. The routine is so strong that officer six from the second agency feels that the only way to decrease reckless driving is to experience an accident: "...now I drive fast only when I need to, and I’m more cautious, and I just slow it down since I was younger...unfortunately people don’t learn [the detriments of speeding] until they get into an accident.” While this is the case for most of the interviewed officers, some failed to make this realization after experiencing a collision. Officer six from the seventh agency fits this description. He experienced two collisions in three days. While he admits to slightly adjusting his driving habits, this officer states: "...I go faster every day. I still, you know, take those risks and stuff, just not as much as I used to." The interviewed officers demonstrate an acceptance of the risk involved in reckless driving until they experience a vehicle collision. However, some officers admit to adjusting their driving habits as they have aged.
Of the seven interviewed agencies, six contained officers who explicitly stated that they changed their driving habits as they aged. Moreover, these modified driving habits took the form of wearing their seatbelt and decreasing their speeds. Officer six from the second agency elaborates: "…now as I’m getting older, and I know the benefits of having a seatbelt. I should try to make a habit of it." This officer implies that he neglected wearing his seatbelt as a younger officer, but now sees the benefits. He continues: "I personally can say when I first started, that was 15 years ago, I drove way faster than I drive today." He continues the same theme -- adhering to safer driving habits as he aged. What about age compels police officers to change their driving habits? Officer two from the third agency provides this answer: "…as I get older and I get closer to retirement, I have much more to lose now. If I was single, starting my career, and wanting to make a name for myself, I may press the envelope.” This officer states that he has attained wealth and started a family during his career. Also, he has progressed closer to retirement benefits. Taking the risk of reckless driving jeopardizes his family’s wellbeing. In other words, attaining wealth, starting a family, and exposure to liability influences officers to adjust their driving habits.

DISCUSSION

How do police officers perceive the possibility of dying on the job? One way to answer this question is by analyzing their milieu. The combination of an altruistic environment and the police subculture structures participation in edgework (1990) and obscures the risk involved in reckless driving. These conditions influences officers’
perception of death, which manifests in their driving habits. Emile Durkheim’s (2006) social integration research posits that individual behavior corresponds with group norms. He labeled this situation as obligatory altruism. This occurs in situations where the individual experiences high degrees of social integration, which results in behavior that becomes an obligation. Police officers experience high levels of social integration as the police academy and agencies promote a collective ethos (Conti 2009; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Kappeler et al. 1998; Paoline 2003; Westley 1970). This belief system teaches officers to behave in ways that comply with group norms.

Various police officers note that they follow seatbelt laws, speed limits, and drive defensively; however, they admit to driving recklessly when responding to officer assistance calls. This requires them to consciously disregard their personal safety. This involves speeding, rolling through stop signs, or driving at high speeds without running code (i.e., lights and sirens). Moreover, they do so without supervisory approval. This behavior, as seen in five of the seven interviewed police agencies, replicates Durkheimian theory. Obligatory altruism teaches officers to comply with the group norms established by the police subculture.

The interviewed police officers for this research admit to voluntarily engaging in risky behavior. Their risky behavior manifests in their driving habits -- from driving at increased speeds, driving fast without using code (lights and sirens), and neglecting to stop at intersections. While these officers may appear to voluntarily engage in risk, reckless behavior is structured in their work environment. Stephen Lyng’s concept of edgework (1990) suggests that some occupations, such as policing, require participation
in endeavors that may result in death or serious injury if done incorrectly. The driving habits of the interviewed police officers fit these criteria. The socialization process of police officers structures edgework through an us-versus-them mentality. This mentality teaches officers to distrust civilians, which emerges in the sample's driving habits. All police agencies contained at least one officer who admitted to removing his safety belt when approaching a crime scene. In addition, patrol cars contain mobile data terminals (MDTs), which are mobile computers mounted near the vehicle's center console. Police agencies require MDTs in patrol vehicles. Various police officers admitted to viewing and using their MDT while driving, which diverts their attention. These actions clearly constitute reckless driving; however, the routine involved in these actions obscure the resulting risk.

The sampled police officers develop an acceptance of risk until they experience the detriments of it. These officers also admit to changing their habits as they age. Wehr (2009) posits that what constitutes risky behavior fluctuates over time. What society views as risky one day may be seen as safe the next. This process emerges in the present study. Of the seven interviewed agencies, at least one officer from five agencies changed their driving habits after experiencing or observing an officer-related collision. The interviewed officers obscure the risk involved in reckless driving due to their routinization of it. They only change their reckless habits if they experience an accident, which clarifies the risk. Moreover, at least one officer from six of the seven agencies stated they changed their driving habits as they aged. Progressing closer to retirement age clarifies the once obscured risk.
This research aims to understand how police officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty. To the author's knowledge, no research discusses this topic. This may be due to the police subculture's commitment to police secrecy (see blue code of silence, Benoit et al. 2004; Chin et al. 1998; Rothwell et al. 2007) or that officers do not feel comfortable discussing it. One way to answer this question is by analyzing behavior. Driving habits place officers at risk for serious injury and death. Thus, their driving habits serve as a proxy to elaborate on how officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty. The group norms established by the police subculture stress officer safety but the subculture teaches officers to disregard their safety in specific situations. Officers address this paradox through their participation in their milieu. Their environment inculcates officers to disregard their individual perceptions and replace them with a collective matrix. This process results in reckless driving habits. The police officers interviewed for this research disregard their personal safety insofar that it ensures the safety of their fellow officers. While complying with this norm receives positive sanctioning, it also obscures the risk involved with reckless driving. Responding to officer assistance calls supersedes personal safety, which is why officers admit to reckless driving despite knowing the consequences.

When analyzing the driving habits of the interviewed officers, they demonstrate an acceptance of risk. This results from the police officer socialization process, which teaches officers to distrust civilians for fear of attack. Learning to accept risk also results from routinely engaging in reckless driving habits. The resulting routinization obscures the danger involved in reckless driving. In the case of the interviewed officers, the police
officer milieu structures voluntary risk taking. The result is an acceptance of perceived risk and possibly dying as a result.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS

The police officers interviewed for this study indicated an adherence to safety in various facets of their work. This includes driving habits. Yet, these same officers contradicted these claims when contextualizing reckless driving habits. It is this paradox that assists in understanding how police officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty.

The police officer milieu functions as a lens when perceiving the prospect of dying while on duty. Durkheim (2006) argues that an altruistic environment imbues the participant with a collective mentality, which guides behavior through group norms. Police officers participate in an altruistic environment at both the academy and agency levels (Chappell 2008; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Conti 2009; Marion 1998).

The police officer milieu also structures participation in edgework (Lyng 1990), or endeavors that can result in serious injury or death if done incorrectly. For example, various police agencies install Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs) in patrol cars. MDTs provide officers with imperative information and keep radio frequencies open. However, MDTs divert attention away from officers when driving, which increases the risk of a vehicle collision. Moreover, MDTs demonstrate how police work has become more dangerous over time as they are a recent addition to patrol vehicles.

The police officer milieu obscures risk through the routinization of tasks, like driving. Many officers routinely remove their safety belts when approaching a scene to
avoid vulnerability to ambush. As officers continuously remove their seatbelt without incident, they deny the risk inherent in doing so. The definition of risk operates on a continuum and is thus fluid (Wehr 2009). What is considered risky today may be deemed safe tomorrow.

The data collected in this study supports these assertions in multiple ways. Firstly, various officers reported reckless driving when responding to a request for backup as a result of the altruism imbued within the police officer milieu. Three emerging concepts support this claim: 1) the interviewed officers denote the development of the us-versus-them mentality, which functions to bond officers and strengthen the experienced altruism. 2) Various officers demonstrate Durkheim's concept of obligatory altruism. Group norms oblige behavior in these situations. 3) A number of officers speak to the salience of the police subculture, which creates the norms that guide their driving habits. These norms teach officers to preserve the safety of fellow officers at all costs, even if it is death.

Secondly, multiple officers demonstrated the salience of structured edgework and obscured risk. The interviewed officers express the salience of structured edgework by denoting the diversion of their attention while driving through use of MDTs. Police officers rely on MDTs for the information needed to perform their duties. The data collected for this study also demonstrates the process of obscuring risk. As these officers routinized reckless driving habits, they developed an acceptance of the inherent risk. Various officers claimed to have changed their reckless driving habits after experiencing a collision directly or indirectly and by aging out of youthful recklessness. These two mechanisms clarified the risk involved in reckless driving.
How do police officers perceive the prospect of dying while on duty when using driving habits as a proxy? This research finds that the police officer milieu socializes officers to accept the consequences (i.e., death) of reckless driving within specific situations. The interviewed officers express that preserving officer safety at all costs is the impetus for reckless driving. Also, their milieu assuages the prospect of death through routinizing reckless driving, which obscures the inherent risk. Experiencing a collision or aging clarified the risk involved with reckless driving for some, but not all officers.

While the findings from this research provide insight into how police officers perceive death, it contains limitations that need addressing. Firstly, the data set prevents generalizable claims as the interview data was collected in northern California, only. Secondly, the data set did not include descriptive statistics. Having this information (e.g., race, gender, rank etc) may explain variation in driving habits. Lastly, the interview questions elicit information regarding driving habits, not perceptions of death per se. However, these limitations afford the opportunity to advance this body of research. This would tease out variation and also measure the uniformity of the altruism and police subculture the interviewed officers experience in their agency.
APPENDIX A

Interview transcript

- There are a number of officer safety policies on the books. Do officers generally follow them? Do supervisors? When officers, FTOs, or supervisors don’t follow the policy, what reasons do they give? What are the reasons if/when you don’t follow policy?
- What is the seatbelt policy on the books? Do you generally follow this policy? Do others? When officers, FTOs, or supervisors don’t follow the policy, what reasons do they give? What are the reasons if/when you don’t follow policy?
- Is permission ever given to act outside agency policies? Are officers allowed under certain circumstances to go “outside” department policy?
- What is the agency willing to tolerate in terms of deviation from policy?
- When was the last time you consulted the department’s policy?
- How important is response time?
- How often do you drive very fast (self-defined) while running code/lights and sirens?
- How often do you drive very fast (self-defined) without running code/lights and sirens?
- When/if you do so, what are the reasons?
- Describe your patrol car. What safety issues to do you see with the patrol car layout?
- Do you think there are issues in your agency with distracted driving? What about MDT use, or cell phone use?
- What are the most common causes of collisions?
- What other factors influence your agency’s risk for collisions?
- What needs to be done to prevent future collisions? (i.e., how to minimize the risks?)
- What are some characteristics of officers who are at high risk for collisions? Why?
- Do you think some officers engage in voluntary risk-taking?
- Describe the culture of the agency in regards to safety and risk-taking.
- Have you ever had an on-duty collision? What was going on when that happened?
- Have you ever had a near miss? What was going on when that happened?
- What do you learn about safety in field training?
- What is the agency doing for ongoing training?
- How is officer-safety training and what happens on the street different? What really happens compared to training?
- How often in a shift do you see a field supervisor?
• What are the consequences for an officer who violates policy or is involved in collisions that do not result in a fatality? What about near-misses?
• How does shift length effect fatigue and performance?
• Are there issues of off-duty lifestyle in your agency that impact performance on the job?
• Do you have any questions for us?
References


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