Role perception and professional identity development of municipal police recruits in British Columbia

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Abstract

Purpose: The study aimed to address how recruits perceive their roles and develop professional identities during in-classroom and in-field training.

Design/methodology/approach: This study explored the professional identity formation process by analysing asynchronous surveys with recruits from 13 municipal police departments in British Columbia, Canada. The participants were surveyed twice: after classroom-based training following Block I at the British Columbia Police Academy (BCPA) and after their departmental field training following Block II.

Findings: The analysis revealed that police recruits lacking public safety experience transformed their occupation and lifestyle. The training at the police academy helped develop recruits' muscle memory as they applied their knowledge to the situation through hands-on practice. Moreover, teamwork at the police academy and during field training allowed recruits to form their police identity. The study was conducted between 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus revealing how the recruits learned effectively while facing continuous challenges and adjusting.

Originality: This study demonstrates that police recruits acquire diverse competencies and skill sets through rigorous formal requirements, nuanced informal aspects, and comprehensive training at the BCPA and during field training, all pivotal in shaping their professional identities.

Keywords: role perception, identity development, police recruits, British Columbia

Article Classification: Research Paper

Introduction

Police officers occupy an important social position. People join the police to serve their communities, contribute to public safety, and fulfill a sense of duty to make a difference in people's lives. However, in Canada, there have been concerns raised about the decision-making of police in both routine and critical incidents, with actions found to be unlawful, raising questions about their legitimacy, self-perception, and societal roles. Examples such as the 'starlight tours' by members of the Saskatoon Police between 1990s to 2000s, where Indigenous individuals were abandoned in harsh winter conditions; the shooting of J.J. Harper by a Winnipeg police officer in 1998; the 2007 incident where Robert Dziekanski died after being repeatedly tasered by RCMP at the Vancouver International Airport; Toronto Police officer James Forcillo, who was convicted after fatally shooting Sammy Yatim eight times in 2016 (Yatim was armed with a small knife in an empty Toronto streetcar); and in 2020, RCMP officer Constable Browning pleaded guilty to assault after attending a student during a wellness check in Kelowna are just a few of the many incidents that contradict expected professional police conduct. While training can never fully prepare police officers for the contingent world of policing, a gap highlighted by Manning (2003), but in most cases, police respond to calls based on their training (Griffiths et al., 1999). However, considering the repeated nature of these incidents across different settings, times, and police agencies across Canada, there is a gap in understanding how professional police identity formation, developed through theoretical knowledge and hands-on training, translates into on-duty actions - whether positive or negative.

One's identity significantly influences the actions one takes, as discussed in the influential writings of Erickson (1968). Hence, tracking professional police identity formation can provide critical information regarding how and why such self-perceptions change or remain stable.

This qualitative study explores how police recruits affiliated with 13 municipal police departments in British Columbia (BC), Canada, formed their professional identity. The BCPA is an interesting site for exploring the professional identities of police recruits since police identity formation questions remain unexamined in this region. The study tracked their perceptions at the early stages of police identity development between the end of classroom and field training. The following questions were explored: What are the stages of identity transition? How do police recruits grow into the role of police officers? How does police identity form in conjunction with other identities? What social processes are involved in police identity formation? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for training were also investigated. This research does not explore the subsequent phase where police recruits become fully-fledged officers after graduating from the police academy, leaving a gap for future researchers to investigate.

Literature Review

Professional identity formation involves adapting, modifying, and integrating various aspects of one's identity to align with the demands and expectations of a profession (Pratt *et al*. 2006). Cruess *et al*. (2015) interpreted the journey from layperson to skilled professional as unique and affected by the individual's initial and ideal professional identity. Jarvis-Selinger *et al*. (2012) described the formation of professional identities as an adaptive and developmental process that co-occurs at the individual and collective levels. Forming an identity involves

moving through unique developmental stages, and the transition phases of professional identity formation must be considered to understand how an individual becomes a police officer.

Knutsson and Tompson (2017) note that evidence and knowledge are tightly bound into notions of being a profession. Fielding (1988) described policing as a 'special profession', noting that other expertise or formal education may provide inadequate preparation. Fielding replicated the research design and methodology originally used by Van Maanen (1973), adding additional methods (a survey and a repertory grid measure). Previous studies on identity development have also demonstrated that individuals continuously organise their life experiences and incorporate them into meaningful personas that emerge from their private, personal, public, and professional selves (Cruess *et al*., 2015).

The feeling of the body is an organism's ability to represent and map the state of the interior and exterior of the body, which becomes the substrate for consciousness (Bechara *et al*. 2003). This is also related to the cultural spaces and nuanced ways of accommodating each other, most importantly mentally, that lead to the sense of 'us' (Immordino-Yang *et al*., 2018). According to Vignoles *et al*. (2011), identity is best explored by responding to the question 'Who are you?' Stets and Burke (2000) similarly claimed that forming identity is attained through views that reflect the social categorisation or classification into which the individual falls. The three identity bases are personal (who one is), group (societal membership), and role (what one does).

Theoretical and practical policing knowledge is delivered through training and the education recruits receive at the beginning of their professional journey. This training enables recruits to evolve from civilians into the roles, responsibilities, terminologies, and ideologies of

the policing profession, thus becoming police officers (Heslop 2011). Fielding (1988) and Bittner (1978) highlighted the key features of knowledge acquisition in police recruit training, which include becoming accustomed to the formalised aspect of classroom learning, physical training, scenarios, drills, wearing uniforms, following chains of command, accountability, disciplinary rules, building core competencies, character, obedience, compliance, and developing stress tolerance.

Policing subculture comprises the accepted practices, rules, and principles of conduct that are situationally applied and consist of generalised rationales and beliefs. As academy training progresses, police recruits develop strong bonds with each other (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce 2010). Adjusting to the dominant culture of the police academy may require additional skills. Further, a recruit may only become aware of their feelings when fully immersed in academy culture. Fielding (1988) described police attitudes during training, finding that police recruits' new roles caused significant changes to their lifestyles and identities and often required adjustments. Some recruits lose touch with their old civilian friends; however, with time, police recruits become confident and secure in their positions within the culture. The dimensions of police legitimacy outlined by Tankebe *et al.* (2016) highlight critical aspects of the policing culture that interrelate with the professional police identity formation process. Lawfulness and procedural fairness are vital to legitimacy perceptions and integral to how police recruits internalize their roles and responsibilities.

Socialisation is a significant aspect of police training. It allows a beginner to internalise the knowledge, skills, and ideas essential for gaining competency to fit into an organisation (Van Maanen 1975). Police recruits undergo several socialisation stages as they learn the laws,

procedures, jargon, techniques, organisational skills, expectations, and attitudes pertinent to the profession (Chan *et al*., 2003, Fielding 1984). By identifying with their new role, recruits de-socialise from their old civilian roles. Meanwhile, socialising agents are the people and groups that influence an individual's identity formation with their self-concept, mindsets, emotions, and behaviour (Jarvis-Selinger *et al*., 2012). In policing, the socialising agents are fellow recruits, academy instructors, field training officers (FTOs), or sergeants (Karp and Stenmark, 2011). Recruits observe agents' work habits, listen to their ideas, and learn from their competence or incompetence. During socialisation, recruits experience shifts in self-concept, attitude, and moral beliefs, paralleling the perceptions of experienced officers (Christie *et al*., 1996, Fielding 1984, White 2006).

'War stories' are part of the hidden curriculum, informally woven into police academy training by police instructors. Recruits pay more attention to these stories than formal lectures (Doreian and Conti, 2017). These stories mainly involve policing's physical aspects, such as foot chases, car pursuits, or drug raids (Marion, 1998). Scholars have long identified storytelling through 'war stories' in academy training. Simon (2021) observed that war stories are a method of pushing recruits towards a warrior mentality. However, toxic aspects of informal messages may unwittingly be transmitted. As a result of socialisation, some characteristics of a recruit's identity are rebuilt into occupationally acceptable ones (Chan *et al*., 2003, Yarmey 1990).

Police field training resembles an apprenticeship wherein recruits apply their knowledge and skills to real-world policing for the first time (Karp and Stenmark, 2011). On patrol, recruits are expected to work as trained police officers (Hoel and Dillern, 2022). The experiences shape recruits' police identity as they master the role in explicit and tacit forms (Hoel 2020,

Wieslander 2019). Here, recruits embrace their new identity of working on the street as officers and discontinue their identity as recruits.

Learning through participation is about identity development. It involves essential negotiations and the prospect of professional membership (Lave and Wenger, 2011). During field training, a considerable amount of time is spent in a police cruiser, where FTOs mentor police recruits. The learning may be incidental and informal (Harris *et al.,* 2004, Heslop 2011): the physical proximity facilitates conversations and mentorship between the recruit and the FTO and ongoing evaluations of the recruit's training experiences (Rantatalo and Karp, 2016, Tyler and Mckenzie, 2014). Reflections made in the police car allow recruits to understand how and why a situation occurred (Samuels and Betts, 2007).

Municipal Police Recruit Training in British Columbia

Municipal police recruits are hired by their home departments and sworn in as officers before they start their training at the BCPA. They are governed by the British Columbia Police Act (1996). Recruits undertake the BCPA program until they graduate from Block III. Blocks I and III comprise classroom-based training conducted at the BCPA. In Block II, recruits report to their hiring departments for field training under the supervision of an FTO. Block IV is the probationary period, during which they complete their policing duties independently at their home departments and become certified constables (British Columbia, 2021).

Block I at the BCPA lasts 13 weeks. Each week is organised around general patrol-level calls. Block I comprise pre-reading; application of theory in cases; development of specific skills related to cases, such as completing paperwork and reading specific documents; putting

theory into practice through practical scenarios; reflection on the practice; writing reports; and ongoing feedback from a mentor (Houlahan, 2018).

Block II (field training) lasts 18–21 weeks, depending on the time of the year and holidays. The FTO provides feedback, documents the recruit's progress, and assesses performance. The Block II training is structured, consistent, and assessed using standardised rubrics. Block II is divided into Phases I and II. Phase I lasts one week and consists of introductory sessions, wherein recruits focus on their legal knowledge, officer safety and presence, and using computer software. Recruits do not drive police cars and instead focus on becoming comfortable with basic skills. During Phase II, recruits take on more responsibility from their FTO (Houlahan, 2018).

Block III lasts eight weeks and reflects an actual patrol shift. Recruits specialise in sections of the Criminal Code of Canada and Provincial Acts, acquire investigative skills, work on longitudinal cases, and write warrants and operational and arrest plans. Recruits must also attend Advanced Operational Policing Skills days, which focus on specific advanced topics. Graduates of the Police Recruit Training in BC (Blocks I and III) must meet 10 core competencies for a Rank A police constable: decision-making, written skills, stress tolerance, teamwork, adaptability, organisational awareness, problem-solving, interactive communication, risk management, ethical accountability, and responsibility (Houlahan, 2018).

Overall, the training is 40–42 weeks long. The basic entry requirements include being at least 19 years old, physically fit, in good health, a Canadian citizen or permanent resident and possessing an excellent character (no criminal convictions or charges pending), a full driver's

license with no restrictions (Class 5), standard first aid certification, a Grade 12 diploma, and a minimum of 30 academic post-secondary credits.

Methods

Qualitative Research Approach

This qualitative study was conducted using cross-sectional surveys with the same participants at two time points. The surveys explored the early experiences of police recruit constables between the end-of-classroom training (end of Block I) at the BCPA and end-of-field training (end of Block II). Qualitative research aims to understand the social world through the eyes of those who inhabit that world: it has a 'preference for a contextual understanding so that behaviour is to be understood in the context of meaning systems employed by a particular group or society' (Bryman 1988: 78, see also Saldana 2011; Saldana 2015). Therefore, it is founded in phenomenological epistemology, which stresses actors' perspectives in a social situation and allows this study to explore the structures and inner meanings of police recruits' lived experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected via asynchronous, structured online surveys consisting of open-ended questions. Participants were requested to provide a secret PIN or code word at the beginning of the survey to anonymously track individual responses to the first and second surveys.

The first survey was conducted on 2 December 2020 (end of Block I). The items in the first survey were: 1) Describe your transition from civilian life to being a police recruit, 2) Describe what has helped you grow into the role of being a police recruit, 3) Describe your

sense of belonging to the police profession, 4) Describe what kind of relationship you expect to have with other officers working with you during field training, 5) Describe what kind of relationship you expect to have with the public, and 6) Is there anything I have not asked that you think is important and would like to share (e.g. COVID-19 impacts)?

The response rate was 56.25% in the first survey. Twenty recruits (74.7%) had some previous experience in public safety and security. Nineteen recruits (70.37%) had previous volunteer experience with a police organisation or policing centre. Only nine recruits (33.3%) had police officers in their immediate family. On average, the recruits took 19 minutes to answer all the questions (lowest: 4 minutes–highest: 167 minutes).

The second survey was conducted from 14 to 30 April 2021. The items in the second survey were: 1) Describe your transition from the police academy to field training, 2) Describe your sense of belonging to the police profession, 3) What has helped you grow into the role of being a police officer in the field training setting?, 4) Describe how the field training has prepared you to fulfil the role of a police officer, 5) What kind of relationship did you have with your fellow officers in the field training?, 6) What kind of relationship did you have with your fellow field training officers?, 7) What kind of relationship did you have with the public?, and 8) Is there anything I have not asked that you think is important and would like to share (e.g. COVID-19 impacts)?

The response rate was 35.4% in the second survey. Thirteen recruits (76.4%) had some previous experience in public safety and security. Thirteen recruits (76.4%) had previous volunteer experience with a police organisation or policing centre. Only five recruits (29.4%) had police officers in their immediate family. On average, the recruits took 27 minutes to answer

the questions (lowest: 2.25 minutes–highest: 120.6 minutes). Refer to Table 1 for demographic information, response rate, and response time.

Table 1: Phase 1 and Phase 2 Surveys

Surveys	Training Blocks	Response Rate	Males	Females	Age Groups	Response Time
Phase 1: December 2020	**Block 1:** End of classroom training	56.25%	51.8%	48.1%	**20-24** years: 40.7%	19 minutes (average)
					25-29 years: 40.7%	
					30-34 years: 11.1%	
					35-39 years: 3.7%	
Phase 2: April 2021	**Block 2:** End of field training	35.4%	44.4%	52.9%	**20-24** years: 17.6%	27 minutes (average)
					25-29 years: 52.9%	
					30-34 years: 11.7%	
					35-39 years: 5.8%	
					40-44 years: 11.7%	

(Source: Cross-Sectional Surveys - BCPA, December 2020 – April 2021)

The data retained the critical ingredients of qualitative research and aided in understanding the participants' world as they perceived it. The survey was not a metacognition-driven questionnaire where respondents were expected only to tick boxes; instead, respondents were given space to describe their views, feelings, experiences, and expectations. This approach offered several advantages: low cost, minimal preparation was required, selection of an interview time and location was not necessary, travelling to the field site was not necessary, the survey was automatically documented via Qualtrics, digital recordings were not necessary for transcription, and no field notes were necessary.

Data Analysis

The first step involved interpreting and clustering the data by similarity to weave together the major concepts, themes, codes, and categories. In Vivo coding and descriptive

coding were used. In Vivo coding refers to a verbatim record of research participants' statements, ascribing meaning to the data instead of imposing the author's ideas onto the codes. Descriptive codes summarise the topic of the participant's response. Both genres of coding are essential in developing concepts at the initial stage of analysis before theories are developed and grounded in the data (Saldana 2011).

The second step involved logging the questions and answers in a print codebook with three separate sections on a case-by-case basis. The first section was organised for initial coding, wherein the participants' thoughts were entered to analyse the answers for emerging conceptual categories. The second section was more focused, and detailed descriptions of what was happening were entered through emerging themes. Finally, being iterative in both sections allowed for another collective section where the overall impression from all the answers was included.

Ethical Considerations

Formal ethical approval was obtained from [omitted for peer review], which provided ethical approval and risk assessments for all research with human subjects, and [omitted for peer review].

Results

Research suggests that police recruits are motivated to join the police by their altruistic desire to positive impact society and help others. For example, a study by Clinkinbeard et al., (2021), which involved data from 341 commissioned officers from two Midwestern police departments in the U.S., found that motivations to serve and protect were most important for both men and women. Majority of the recruits in this study, aspiring to become police officers,

highlighted several reasons for choosing a policing career, mirroring to the motivations discussed above. These reasons can be categorised into distinct patterns. First, they strongly desired to help others and positively impact society. This desire was driven by a passion for justice and a belief in contributing to the community's well-being. The recruits participating in this study felt a deep connection to their community and saw policing as a means to give back to those who had been a part of their lives.

> I hope to be the police officer that treats everyone with respect, kindness, and equity. I hope to be the police officer that families would want to show up to their house when they are in crisis. I want to be the police officer that advocates for change inside and outside of the organisation to better the community.
>
> - Response on Survey by recruit 156789

Majority of the recruits were also drawn to the exciting and dynamic nature of police work. They were motivated by the opportunity to engage in challenging and fulfilling tasks that involved protecting and serving their community. Being part of a supportive team and experiencing the bond within the department also contributed to the appeal of a police career.

> I hope that I am the kind of police officer that in 20 years people will still remember the positive impact I had on their lives. It feels like a family here. Everyone looks out for each other. We all work towards the same goal of community safety.
>
> - Response on Survey by recruit 707

Furthermore, majority of the recruits appreciated the diversity of job opportunities within the field. They valued the aspects of continuously learning, growing, and problem-solving in

policing. The fulfilment derived from a career in law enforcement, the ability to prevent crime, and the promotion of justice were also significant driving forces.

> Pride and excitement to be starting my career after such a long process. I wanted a fulfilling career where I can work as part of a team every day and help people on their worst days. I feel a huge sense of belonging because I love to work in a team environment and that's exactly what it feels like here. Every week at the BCPA has provided an incredible amount of preparation.
>
> - Response on Survey by recruit 2901

Stages of Identity Transition

Survey 1 captured the initial transition from civilian life to entering the policing profession as police recruits at the BCPA. Nineteen recruits reported a smooth, straightforward transition, characterised by minimal changes to their previous lifestyle. This easy transition was particularly observed among recruits with similar work experience (e.g., military, special constable, reserve constable, corrections officer, sheriff, or security) and those with familial and social ties to the policing profession. The congruence between their pre-employment expectations and the transition process indicates the influence of prior occupational knowledge and familiarity with the profession's norms and expectations.

> I worked as a special municipal constable before policing so I felt as though the transition was easier for me. That being said, I still felt like I had to make an adjustment as I had just entered the policing world.
>
> - Response on Survey by recruit 129

Conversely, recruits without prior experience underwent a dual transition of occupational and lifestyle adjustments. These individuals had to acclimate to the demands and culture of policing, highlighting the significance of socialisation and acculturation in identity development within the profession. These challenges can undermine recruits' self-perception and confidence and, thus, have negative effects on the learning process. For example, recruit 1991 stated "hard to balance, stressful." Recruits may also experience heightened anxiety and emotional distress as they strive to meet the expectations of their new identity.

> I feel some sense of belonging to the police profession right now, but expect I will feel more once I am not a new recruit anymore. I don't feel like the public respects us much right now, but I will do my best to show everyone I deal with respect. There were areas that I didn't know very much about, but knew that police were involved with (e.g., traffic stops). I had a limited exposure to police duties prior. I hope my FTO is patient with me!
>
> - Response on Survey by recruit 8642

Survey 2 explored the second transition phase from the BCPA training to the field training stage. While recruits developed crucial legal knowledge during their academy training, they encountered disparities between the theoretical scenarios covered in training and the practical applications encountered under the guidance of FTOs on the street. This transition necessitated adjusting recruits' approach to handling calls, completing reports, and recording information. The inherently unpredictable and high-stakes nature of policing posed overwhelming challenges for recruits during this phase. Given this nature, it is impractical for training programs to encompass every possible scenario recruits may encounter. Unlike the

reality of dealing with real threats on the streets, police academy training occurs in a controlled environment with role-players engaged in simulated scenarios.

Hence, when police recruits transition from the academy to actual policing during field training, they face a stark contrast. Several recruits mentioned a greater sense of responsibility and accountability in their actions compared to civilians in the general civilian population. Dual-transition police recruits were particularly susceptible to experiencing the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve, which suggests that knowledge retention may decline rapidly when there is an overwhelming amount of new information (Finkenbinder, 1913).

How Recruits Grow into the Role of Police Officers

The significance of scenario-based training was highlighted by 18 recruits in the first survey, who answered that it helped recruits grow into the role of police officers. The scenarios played a critical role in their development by revealing their current knowledge base and areas for improvement. Hands-on training, particularly in tactical situations, using force, de-escalation scenarios, and encountering simulated unpredictable or violent subjects were most beneficial. The impact of batching on recruit performance is important. Batching related exercises and scenarios created a cohesive, integrated learning experience. For example, a batched session might start with a classroom debrief on skills such as tactical considerations, verbal de-escalation, and legal application. This would be followed by scenario-based exercises where police recruits must demonstrate these competencies in a simulated situation. The session would end with constructive feedback from the instructor.

> The overall training and scenarios I feel have prepared me well to leave training and enter this profession. The scenario conducted in a safe environment with immediate

feedback have given me an opportunity to figure out my style as a police officer before I engage with the actual public.

- Response on Survey by recruit 4669

After scenario-based training, instructors and coworkers were pivotal as the second most influential determinant in the recruits' development. Their influence in providing feedback on performance and facilitating continuous improvement was evident. This feedback gave recruits invaluable insights into the skills and attributes they needed to refine to attain their envisioned police identity. It was a guiding roadmap, enabling recruits to cultivate habits, establish objectives, and transcend police identity-based practices.

Drawing upon the theoretical underpinnings of habit and identity formation, specifically the integration of behavioural responses about one's self-conception (Verplanken and Sui 2019), habits had an intimate linkage to identity when aligned with aspirational aims. As police recruits assimilated their newly acquired habits, their sense of police identity concurrently assumed shape. The influence of instructors and coworkers, interwoven with forming and integrating habits into the fabric of police identity, contributed to their overall growth as police officers. Overall, a supportive environment, learning habits from others, and applying knowledge and advice helped recruits grow into the role of being a police officer.

Support of family, friends, classmates, instructors. Applying myself fully to the program. Learning as much as I can about the job and role.

- Response on Survey by recruit 1214

It feels like a family here. Everyone looks out for each other. We all work towards the same goal of community safety.

- Response on Survey by recruit 707

How a Police Officer's Identity Forms in Conjunction with Other Identities

The responses from 17 recruits suggested that they developed strong bonds with their FTOs and colleagues and felt a strong sense of belonging to the police profession early in Block I. A few recruits used numeric ratings (e.g., 10/10, 100%) to express the strength of their sense of belonging. In contrast, others used terms such as 'very highly', 'I feel a strong belonging', 'very strongly', 'I feel like I have another family', 'second family', and 'it already feels like a family'. For many recruits, it was the career they had worked towards their entire lives, and they had a strong sense of belonging because they loved working in a team environment. Teamwork in the police academy and during field training allowed recruits to form their police identity. Consequently, recruits identified policing as a 'brotherhood' and a 'team profession'.

All the recruits reported feeling a strong sense of belonging to the policing profession at an early stage of training. Support from instructors and FTOs and mentoring by home department supervisors were crucial. The opportunity to work closely with experienced officers and receive feedback on the job for an extended period was vital. As novices, recruits absorbed almost everything from the policing styles they observed in experienced officers and morphed this into a style that worked for them. They valued teamwork and camaraderie within the occupation. Most importantly, they recognised the FTO's role in guiding them, given the hierarchical aspect of this relationship.

> I want to feel like my FTO cares about me and wants to see me succeed. I want to do well and learn, and my hope is that my FTO sees that and supports that. I know that I may make mistakes, and I would like patience and support as I try to learn the job. I want

to be active in everything I do and take in as much information as possible.

- Response on Survey by recruit 524

What are the Social Processes Involved in Identity Formation?

Social psychology shows that people's expectations concerning themselves can explain their choices and behaviours (Markus and Nurius 1986). Psychological capital plays a significant role in the social dynamics during police recruits' identity formation. Psychological capital refers to self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, and hope (Luthans *et al*. 2007). Six recruits in this study frequently mentioned pride and positive emotions associated with their chosen career, even though many anticipated experiencing ups and downs throughout the training period. The desire for connection, trust, and engagement with others created a mentality that good work must be done for the community.

I have great satisfaction and pride wearing the police badge and getting to do it in the city I was born and raised in. It is my way of giving back to all the community members that have been a part of my life, by protecting them and keeping the peace.

- Response on Survey by recruit 8986

The majority of the recruits expressed their aspirations to become highly professional, reputable, and well-respected officers. They aimed to fulfil their hopes through hard work, ethical conduct, fairness, and compassion towards others. Their self-efficacy, that is, their belief in their ability to perform effectively in their roles, was evident in their descriptions of wanting to be professional, compassionate, fair, and perceived as reliable and honest. This self-efficacy motivated them to work hard and achieve their professional identity.

> I did my Masters in Social Work and worked on a mental health and substance use team before getting hired. I heard a lot of my clients stories about their negative interactions with the criminal justice system and saw how having a criminal record impacted their ability to find work and lives. I saw lots of areas for improvement. Social work has a code of ethics and values and they really emphasized knowing your role/scope/function. I think having a strong professional identity and understanding what that means has helped me transition into my role as a police officer. I understand why it is important to have a code of ethics, governing bodies, strong understanding of what our role is, history of our role, etc. I feel very strong in my professional identity. I hope to be the police officer that treats everyone with respect, kindness and equity. I hope to be the police officer that families would want to show up to their house when they are in crisis. I want to be the police officer that advocates for change inside and outside of the organization to better the community.
>
> - Response on Survey by recruit 3295

Optimism was reflected in all the recruits' positive outlook and desire to have a lasting positive impact on peoples' lives. They expressed a sense of satisfaction, pride, and fulfilment in wearing the police badge and viewed their work as a means of giving back to their communities. Despite concerns about negative perceptions of law enforcement in the current Canadian context, their optimism drove them to do their best and maintain respect for all citizens.

> I expect to have a mostly positive relationship with the public. I'm aware that not everyone is pro-police, especially in this day and age, but I hope to conduct myself in a way that portrays that I am still a regular person and am just trying to do my job.

- Response on Survey by recruit 0810

Resilience was implied in the recruits' determination to overcome challenges and maintain their commitment to the police profession. They recognised the potential difficulties arising from negative public perceptions but remained steadfast in their pursuit of being ethical, impactful officers. They also acknowledged the complexity and challenges of the job, including the need for emotional, mental, and physical resilience and the level of detail and legal knowledge involved. Resilience enabled them to navigate adversity, persist in their goals, and uphold their values.

> It has become more mentally exhausting than I imagined. You need to come prepared to talk to people and comfort them every day. Our instructors at the [BCPA]that taught us to prepare for the worst and hope for the best. I hope to be a police officer that inspires kids and young adults to join the police, and the kind that holds a high standard for my other team mates to keep up with in terms of work ethic, pride, professionalism.

- Response on Survey by recruit 8986

Hope was a central theme in the recruits' aspirations and outlook. They expressed hope for a future where they could positively impact people's lives, even years later. One participant identified the responsibility and power associated with policing, acknowledging the potential for abuse but emphasising the potential for positive change. This hope was a motivating force, guiding their actions and reinforcing their commitment to policing. It provided a purpose and vision for their future identity as police officers.

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic During Police Recruit Training

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the recruits, exposing them to health risks and causing psychological stress. A primary concern was unintentionally spreading the virus to their loved ones or other vulnerable individuals. Additionally, they grappled with the absence of a normal social life, depriving them of the opportunity to alleviate stress through social interactions and therefore leading to isolation.

Several measures were implemented to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the training. Recruits were paired up to minimise contact and maintain physical distancing. Frequent testing and health screening protocols were also established, along with protective equipment to safeguard against virus transmission. Despite these challenges, the recruits found solace in building strong bonds that extended beyond their professional obligations. They actively looked out for one another, demonstrating a sense of camaraderie that transcended working hours. These relationships played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging to the police profession, offering support and encouragement amidst the difficulties of the pandemic.

Discussion

Oppal (1994) notes that properly trained police officers not only protect themselves better but also offer greater safety to the community. To achieve this, all recruits in Canada undergo competency-based training that shapes their professional police identity. However, the attributes and personalities of recruits evolve as they transition from training to active duty, and these changes can have positive and negative implications. This is particularly relevant when exercising discretion and the authority to use lethal force (Griffiths *et al.,* 1999).

Recruits in this study expressed a strong sense of pride as they achieved their goal of becoming police officers. The excitement and eagerness to begin their careers and the deep

sense of honour for being sworn in significantly impacted their identity formation. Alongside these positive emotions, they were also slightly nervous and anxious, given the weight of the responsibility they were to undertake.

Upon completing Block I at the BCPA, the recruits gained an increased understanding of the scope of practice and the wide range of their responsibilities, including using force options. The various ways to engage with the community were better understood through talks by guest speakers, heightening the perception of the numerous opportunities to interact with and contribute to the community. Several recruits were surprised by the level of oversight and paperwork involved, noting the administrative responsibilities and behind-the-scenes work accompanying each call. Recruits also acknowledged the non-glamorous aspects of policing.

In forming their professional identity, recruits identified embracing the role of a 'helper' as a significant aspect. This role signifies their commitment to assisting and supporting individuals in need, which fosters a sense of duty to serve communities. The community policing literature emphasises the importance of police officers acting as helpers within the community (Knutsson, 2003). This approach underscores the significance of building positive relationships between the police, considered the 'powerholders', and the public, referred to as the 'audience' in the police legitimacy literature (Tankebe *et al*., 2016).

Another crucial aspect is the role of protector, which aligns with the core purpose of law enforcement and reinforces the importance of ensuring the safety and well-being of others. Recruits recognised themselves as servants whose primary objective was to meet the community's needs. This perspective emphasises humility and dedication in prioritising the interests of others. Moreover, they identified as guardians, highlighting the role of police

officers as caretakers of the public and signifying their responsibility to safeguard and protect the community.

The role of problem-solvers was another significant aspect. This role highlights police officers' proactive approach to addressing issues and meeting others' needs. Furthermore, their recognition of their role in the community foregrounds the interconnectedness between police officers and the communities they serve. This recognition underscores the understanding that effective policing requires close collaboration and collective efforts. Valuing teamwork acknowledges the significance of working together towards common goals, reflecting the understanding that successful outcomes are achieved through collaborative endeavours.

The recruits found the transition from Block I to Block II challenging and observed that scenarios encountered while on duty differed substantially from those practised at the BCPA. The results varied for those with previous work or volunteer experience in the public safety field. This evidence supports identity theorists' claims that those who enter a profession do so with a fully formed personal identity. As Sedikides *et al*. (2011) noted, the individual self of each police recruit comprises experiences, interests, or aspirations that differ from those of another recruit. This finding indicates how recruits start with a motivation for joining the police force that is derived from their selves. Although a few recruits started their journey with previous work experience in public safety or security, some adjustment was observed as they underwent classroom training and field training.

The police literature widely understands that technical skills, legal knowledge, physical training, and scenarios play essential roles in developing recruits from the police academy level onwards (Bittner, 1978, Chan *et al*., 2003, Charman, 2017, Fielding, 1988, Heslop, 2011, Van

Maanen, 1975). In Survey 1, most respondents indicated that the training at the BCPA helped them become police officers. The term ‘scenario’ or ‘scenarios’ appeared 29 times in the responses, demonstrating the impact of case-based scenarios and simulations on police recruits regarding the intended outcome of the BCPA training. The preparation became more intense and better for the recruits as the weeks progressed. Fielding (1988) and Charman (2017) held that police recruits experience formal and informal learning as part of their identity development throughout their police academy training. During Block I, the police recruits at the BCPA learned relevant skills and applied them to case-based scenarios. Theory, report writing, firearms, and driving training are components of the formalised training structure. While the formal aspects of the BCPA training were crucial, the informal aspects, such as socialisation, ongoing feedback, war stories, and debriefs, were also vital for recruits’ learning.

A significant part of police recruitment development occurred during field training. The initial field experience was challenging for a few participants. Nevertheless, they became comfortable with police work through the support of collective social agents such as FTOs, sergeants, classmates, and fellow officers (Karp and Stenmark 2011). While police instructors in Charman’s (2017) study had the greatest influence on the development of British police recruits, recruits in the present study indicated that their FTOs had the greatest influence. This finding aligns with Tyler and Mckenzie (2014) and Rantatalo and Karp (2016), who highlighted that FTOs and police recruits spend the most time together on a patrol shift, mainly inside the police car, presenting an ongoing learning opportunity for recruits. Receiving immediate feedback throughout the training shift is useful.

The participating recruits had high expectations of themselves, their FTOs, other officers, and the public but did not comment negatively about them. Bradford *et al*. (2014) explored the precursors and consequences of organisational identification (i.e., identification with a police organisation). Given the importance placed on the FTO in the present study's findings, research exploring fair treatment from supervisors in the identification process would also be useful. However, overall, the participants' experiences aligned with their expectations. They perceived themselves as protectors of society and hoped to become the best possible police officers. In line with the core components of identity theory, the three selves of recruits and self-categorisation play a role in how they start becoming professional police officers (Sedikides *et al.* 2011, Stets and Burke 2000).

Limitations and Recommendations

First, this study's surveys were structured as they were administered online. A structured format in qualitative research indicates lower flexibility (Queiros *et al*. 2017). Further, short, limited responses to open-ended questions in qualitative research may be unclear (Ochieng 2009). This study relied solely on the respondents' language in text-based answers; therefore, it was not possible to ask follow-up questions or seek clarification. Consequently, several inputs were excluded from the analysis. This would not have been the case if a quantitative method, where answers can be selected from several options, had been used.

Second, social desirability bias may affect responses. Social desirability bias is participants' tendency to answer questions in a manner likely to be viewed favourably by others (Streb *et al*. 2007). Thus, the information recruits provided may have over- or under-reported issues.

Third, another shortcoming stems from missing opportunities to interact with the participating police recruits due to COVID-19 restrictions. Using an online instrument meant many recruits did not provide descriptive answers or they skipped multiple questions. The crucial opportunity to build rapport with participants or follow up on questions to gather rich data was missed. In addition, responses given over a short time (across only two training blocks) cannot reveal major changes.

Fourth, Blocks III and IV were not included due to time restrictions. Consequently, the recruits were from 13 different agencies, and some variation occurred in organisational priorities. Assessing the influence and variation of organisational culture throughout the different training blocks may prove fruitful.

Fifth, the implications of attrition bias in the second wave of the survey must be addressed. The second wave had a lower participation rate. In addition, compared with the first wave, the respondents were older, more were female, and they spent more time answering the questions. The differences represent a lost opportunity to gain different insights, including the 37% of recruits who dropped out after the first survey or those who did not participate in either survey.

Lastly, some research areas may remain unexplored. Following the recruits over a significant period could reveal important aspects of their transitions or challenges. For example, less than 10% of the participants were minority officers. Future studies could compare the experiences of minority officers and white officers. Another critical development to better understand police recruits' identity formation is observing in-person field training. Conducting an ethnographic study may be beneficial to investigate how these recruits learn to do their job in

a real-world setting. Similar results can be obtained, even if an ethnographic approach or following the recruits in person is impossible, by auditing body cameras: reviewing this footage can reveal how recruits learn to become police officers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that police recruits acquire diverse competencies and skill sets through rigorous formal requirements, informal aspects, and comprehensive training at the BCPA and during field training, all of which are pivotal in shaping their professional identities. Recruits who embark on becoming police officers undergo a profound metamorphosis, relinquishing their civilian identities for new police professional identities. Although the recruits initially grappled with the challenges of training, their resilience and adaptability prevailed, thanks to the support provided by FTOs, co-workers, family members, and friends. This reaction exhibited notable variations among individuals, influenced by their unique backgrounds and experiences. Identity development remains fluid and highly individualistic as recruits navigate a series of personal negotiations, which are indispensable in crafting their nascent professional identities. Understanding the role of the brain and the influence of experiences, backgrounds, culture, and interaction with others is crucial in comprehending this process. Given the inherently social nature of human biology, identity formation relies heavily on social experiences and interdependence on others to construct a sense of self. The symbiotic nature of identity formation, police culture and socialisation, thus, emerges as an inextricable trinity. Central to police training is the relentless pursuit of competence, wherein attaining proficiency catalyses the organic crystallisation of recruits' professional identities. The process is complex,

involving the construction of a narrative based on conscious feelings and transforming that narrative into a belief system.

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