<u>**Rotten apples and the barrel**</u>

Research Question: To what extent can police misconduct be caused by peer influence in police organizations?

Subject: Psychology

Word Count: 3888 words

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<u>Introduction</u>

In 2019, Indian police officers forcefully entered a Delhi college and attacked students for protesting the Citizenship Amendment Bill, injuring around 200 people. The Hong Kong police force, formerly known as "Asia's Finest" (Sinclair), has been accused of excessive violence, sexual assault of detainees, and falsification of evidence following the pro-democracy movements of the 2010s. American citizens are pressing for nationwide police reform due to the disproportionate killings of African Americans by police officers in the US in recent years, such as the recent murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020. Many such prominent incidents demonstrating police abuse of authority in today's society have sparked debates about the integrity of police organizations that are supposed to serve as gatekeepers of the justice system, built to protect the public and preserve law and order within societies.

Including the harm inflicted on the public that they are sworn to protect, police misconduct can also lead to huge political and economic losses (Mauro). It is one of the biggest barriers preventing progress in modern societies today and can significantly deteriorate public trust in law and order due to the very nature of the institution – police organizations are built to serve as protectors of the law and are a symbol of legitimate governmental authority (Ivkovic). Police misconduct can be defined as any "inappropriate behavior on the part of any police officer that violates police policy, morality, or/and the law, and may also entail some type of personal benefit for the police officer involved" (Papazoglou), and can take on many forms such as bribery, opportunistic theft, buying and selling of drugs, unwarranted brutality, protection of illegal activities, insubordination and neglect of duty (Chappell & Piquero).

From the psychological perspective, it is often attempted to explain police misconduct through the proverbial 'rotten apple' theory; an individualistic approach claiming that only select

problematic officers participate in misconduct due to their inherent individual characteristics; these isolated officers are considered to be solely responsible for all cases of misconduct. However, the copious amounts of empirical evidence testing this hypothesis seem to be inconclusive and at times inconsistent (Ouellet et al.; White & Terry). Conversely, if we look at police misconduct through the lens of social *deviance*— behavior that differs significantly from the expressed mission of police organizations—then, it is most likely a behavior that is learned through socialization (Ouellet et al.). Thus, this essay probes into how social factors can play a role in the transmission of deviant behavior in police organizations.

The research question this paper poses is relevant in today's world due to the universal nature of police corruption and its far-reaching consequences. If this essay is able to successfully determine the role of peer influence and social learning on police officer misconduct, it can provide clarity on how successful police reform can be brought about. Therefore, this essay aims to explore and answer the following question: **To what extent can police misconduct be caused by peer influence in police organizations?**

Social transmission of deviance

The transmission of attitudes, beliefs and values through social groups has since long been the guiding principle of many criminological and psychological theories of behavior (e.g. Sutherland's Differential Association Theory, 1947; Bandura's Social Learning Theory, 1977). The main principle of these theories is that behavior is mainly learned from observing and modeling others' behavior. This process starts when individuals are exposed to varying definitions of behavior as a result of socialization, and can learn deviant or non-deviant values & behaviors guided by a variety of social processes including socialization, status-seeking or conformity, and such social learning can take place in a number of different environments, for

instance school, the workplace, and by means of informal peer interactions. The structure of police organizations easily fits into such social contexts (Chappell and Piquero; Roithmayr) and the large body of literature exploring the characteristics of police subculture can provide background on why peer effects may be a useful explanation of police misconduct.

Characteristics of police peer groups

Police social networks differ significantly from the average peer group in which they are not impromptu and are highly controlled by the organization itself. For example, many officer relationships are the result of structural features, such as the unit and geographic areas they have been assigned to, the partners they are assigned with etc. (Ouellet et al.). These factors lead to frequent interactions between the same officers which consequently allow the transmission of beliefs and values between individuals.

It is also reported that officers are "subjected to intense peer influence and control" which may result in condoning and accepting deviant behavior (Kappeler et al.). Officers maintain a heightened sense of solidarity with their peers and with the police organization (Tator & Henry), and as a consequence a "code of silence" develops, resulting in officers turning a blind eye when their colleagues engage in problematic behavior. Additionally, the police view themselves as outsiders due to the nature of their job (as they are prominent figures of authority in a society) which limits their social interactions to an extent (Tator & Henry). Because of this they are likely to spend more time with their occupational peer groups for support and for socializing (Skolnick), and it becomes all the more important for them to feel accepted by their occupational peer group in order to maintain self-esteem (Conser). This pressure may lead to the acceptance of problematic values and definitions, as research has shown that officers may alter their behavior in order to appear in a positive light in an occupational environment (Herbert). All the

aforementioned characteristics help provide a useful conceptual framework to further understand why peer influence may a useful explanation of police misconduct.

Evidence regarding peer influence on police misconduct

Savitz (1970) investigated how the attitudes of police recruits regarding occupational deviance changed over time as they assimilated with the police organization. A questionnaire was employed to a sample of 197 police recruits from the Philadelphia Police Department in the USA, through which the participants' attitudes towards deviant behavior was longitudinally assessed. Participants answered the questionnaire thrice over a period of time to assess change in beliefs while gaining increasing exposure to police subculture. It was found that over time, the recruits' attitudes towards misconduct became more lenient; they had gradually started favoring less extreme punishments for problematic police behavior such as bribery, accepting gifts and theft.

A possible explanation for this is that as the participants became more and more socialized into the police subculture, they began to internalize the beliefs of more experienced peers in their occupation, who they worked with on a daily basis. However, as the researcher studied the attitudes and beliefs of the participants rather than their overt behavior, it cannot be conclusively said that permissive attitudes regarding police deviance directly lead to police misconduct. Nevertheless, the study still illustrates the effect of increasing exposure to and/or socialization into the police subculture on the mindset of police officers.

More specifically, a study conducted by Getty, Worrall and Morris (2014) investigated the variation in officer misconduct post-field training programs (FTPs), where newly recruited officers are integrated into their jobs under the training and supervision of Field Training

Officers (FTOs). The aim was to investigate the extent to which the variation in misconduct in new officers post-training was ascribable to their FTOs. Field training officers are experienced or senior level officers responsible for the training and evaluation of new recruits, to ensure that they are prepared to work competently in the field. Through this student-mentor dynamic FTO's are enabled to impart policing principles, standards, norms and beliefs to their juniors in a more significant manner than other peers in the police organization (Tator & Henry). The dependent variable, post-training misconduct (measured by officer complaints), and the independent variable, time spent undergoing training with FTOs (measured via officer FTP records) were correlated to find a possible relationship. It was found that 26.4% of the variation in officer complaints was attributable to the FTOs responsible for training that officer. The results demonstrated the hypothesis that FTOs influence officers in ways apart from just teaching them the basic policing skills (Getty).

Harris (2010) observed the effect of experience and time on the misconduct of police officers. Longitudinal data consisting of citizen complaints against police officers in the United States were employed. Complaints of misbehavior were correlated to the years of experience of the officer to find the 'experience-problem curve'. It was hypothesized that newer police officers would be more involved in problematic behavior as they were "learning the ropes" and were expected to "prove themselves" to veteran officers (Harris 49). Furthermore, Harris hypothesized that deviance in new officers would increase over the first few months of working in the field due to their desire to earn a positive reputation amongst the more experienced officers, and during this time frame they would start to internalize the work ethics of their peers, both problematic and unproblematic (Harris). The analysis of the results proved both these hypotheses to be correct.

In addition, Ouellet et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal study wherein officers' social networks were analyzed to determine whether exposure to other officers with a history of use of excessive force increases the probability of an officer of engaging in similar behavior. In this case misconduct was restricted to the use of excessive force, and using misconduct complaints social networks were mapped where officers were linked on account of being named in the same complaint. The sample consisted of 8,624 American officers who had at least two isolated incidents of use of excessive force over a period of 8 years in order to assess whether the behavior exhibited in one time period had changed by the next upon increasing exposure to deviant peers. It was found that it was more likely for an officer to be named in use of excessive force complaints if they were involved in social networks with a high percentage of peers previously named in use of force complaints themselves. These findings showed to be true even after controlling for officers' individual characteristics.

However, the analysis was limited to the extent to which the officers' *known deviant* peers (with at least one formal misconduct complaint) engaged in excessive use of force, as the researchers were only able to study officers' misconduct networks rather than the wider social network (consisting of the deviant as well as non-deviant officers) that they were a part of. Thus, the measure of an officer's exposure to deviant peers may have been exaggerated if they had a significant amount of non-problematic relationships within the police organization that were not accounted for by the dataset.

Despite the caveats of Ouellet et al. (2019), its findings can be considered reliable as they were resonated by a similar study conducted by Quispe-Torreblanca & Stewart (2019), which examined whether and to what extent an officer's propensity of engaging in misconduct was affected by working in a peer group with other officers having prior records of misconduct. Data

from the records of 35,000 police officers and staff from the London Metropolitan Police Service was utilized to construct peer networks consisting of all police officers assigned to the same supervisor. The effect of adding a deviant officer into the peer network on the misconduct of other colleagues in the same group was analyzed via changes in supervisor assignments. Quispe-Torreblanca & Stewart found through their analysis that a 10% increase in the fraction of peers with a record of prior misconduct subsequently increased an officer's misconduct by nearly 8%. Unlike the research previously described, this study was able to isolate the causal effect of peer misbehavior and clearly demonstrates that socializing with deviant peers increases the likelihood of misconduct by police officers. The researchers inferred from the results that officers' beliefs of what is deemed as acceptable or unacceptable become more permissive when they become members of groups that indulge in deviant behavior.

Many of the conclusions made by the researchers regarding the findings of the above studies can be closely connected with the principles of trusted criminological theories that try to explain deviant behavior, such as Akers' Social Learning Theory (1973).

Akers' Social Learning Theory

Ronald L. Akers proposed the Social Learning Theory in 1973 as a theory of deviant behavior. It can provide a useful framework to understand how socialization with deviant peers influences the mindset and behavior of a police officer. This theory posits that the tendency of an individual to commit deviant acts will increase when they "differentially associate with others who engage in, model and promote behavior that deviates from social and legal norms; this deviant behavior is differently reinforced over conforming behavior; the individual is exposed to and observes more deviant than conforming models; and when the individual's own learned definitions are favorable toward committing criminal and deviant acts" (Akers).

Differential association is the central variable of this theory and it refers to the "direct association and interaction with others who engage in certain kinds of behavior; as well as ... indirect association and identification with more distant reference groups" (Akers and Sellers). Individuals are exposed to a variety of deviant and non-deviant behaviors within these social groups, and they accordingly form their own definitions regarding these behaviors. Definitions under the context of social learning are an individual's own attitudes towards an act to be "right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified" (Akers and Sellers). Through these reference groups the individual may also be exposed to behavioral models that serve as a source for the imitation of behavior, and based on the reinforcement received for modeling that behavior (positive or negative), the individual may adopt it. Furthermore, the presence of a police subculture in police organizations has been acknowledged by most researchers and police officers (Conser). Therefore, according to this theory, this subculture may encourage deviance in police officers through the transmission of attitudes, values and beliefs that depart from the norm.

Evidence regarding Akers' Social Learning Theory and police misconduct

A study by Chappell & Piquero (2004) aimed to examine the extent to which the social learning theory can be applied to police misconduct. The participants consisted of 499 American police officers from the Philadelphia Police Department in USA. The presence of formal citizen reports against officers was used to measure the dependent variable of police misconduct. The independent variables were social learning variables gathered from participants' responses to several hypothetical scenarios presented to them, the scenarios depicted various conforming or deviant behaviors; theft, accepting gifts and the use of excessive force. To test the relationship

between perceptions of peer behavior and behavior of the officers, participants were also asked how they expected their peers to react in each hypothetical situation.

The results proved to be consistent with Akers' social learning theory– firstly, it was found that officers who perceived their peers as more likely to rationalize the use of excessive force were themselves more likely to have citizen complaints. This is consistent with an argument made by the social learning theory stating that peer influence on an individual is determined by the perception of deviant peer behavior and not necessarily the behavior itself. Thus, even if the behavior is misperceived as being more or less deviant than it really is, the peer influence will operate through that perception (Akers). However, and contradictory to the social learning theory, officers that perceived their peers to consider theft as a less serious form of misdemeanor were less likely to have citizen complaints. Secondly, officers who themselves did not consider the use of excessive force to be a serious offence were more likely to have citizen complaints. Lastly, officers who expected a less serious punishment for theft or the use of excessive force were more likely to have citizen complaints.

This study successfully demonstrated a relationship between police officers' attitude towards peer behavior and individual officer behavior; however a limitation of the study is that the measure of misconduct was based on hypothetical scenarios and not real-life events of officer misbehavior. Previous research has shown that responses to decontexualized hypothetical moral scenarios may not accurately reflect moral decisions made in real life (Feldmanhall et al.). Thus, this may affect the reliability of the results.

A similar study conducted by Garduno (2019) aimed to test whether the social learning variables of differential reinforcement and definitions favorable to deviance are stronger

predictors of corruption in a sample of 107 Mexican police officers as compared to economic need or job dissatisfaction. Participants answered a questionnaire that assessed their participation in corrupt behavior (dependent variable) and measured indicators of differential reinforcement and definitions towards corruption, along with their commitment to their job, their economic situation and level of job dissatisfaction (all independent variables). The measure of corrupt behavior of the officers was then correlated with the independent variables to look for a relationship. Results showed that job dissatisfaction, positive differential reinforcement, and positive definitions towards corruption had a significant positive correlation with levels of police corruption. Police officers with relatively better economic conditions were to some extent, more likely to participate in acts of corruption across all models; meaning that social learning variables *can* be a predictor of misconduct in Mexican police officers irrespective of their economic situation, but further study is needed on this to form a definite conclusion. However, the values assessing corrupt behavior had high levels of variation between different independent variables; this might mean that there are other predictors of corruption (such as receiving pressure from criminal organizations, co-workers, or supervisors to participate in said behavior) that have not been addressed in the study.

A drawback of both Garduno (2019) and Chappell & Piquero (2004) is the relatively weak measure of the dependent and independent variables. Perceived deviance of peers was measured rather than the frequency and intensity spent with said peers, thus how much of participants' mindset was influenced by peers is still unclear. It is likely that putting better measures of deviance in place would have been more effective in explaining the variation in corrupt behavior. The sample sizes of both studies were also relatively small which leads to a higher variability in results and therefore a bias, affecting the reliability of the studies. However,

in spite of these limitations the statistical models provided significant information regarding the role of social learning variables in police misconduct, thus providing an avenue for future research.

<u>Methodological Issues</u>

In the above studies complaints against officers are frequently used as a measure of misconduct; however it may not accurately reflect the true state of misconduct as incidences of misconduct may be under or over-reported. Research suggests that only one-third of all citizens that believe they were mistreated by police actually proceed to file a complaint (Walker and Bumphus). It has also been observed that proactive officers are more likely to get complaints, even if those complaints cannot be linked to actual misconduct (Lersch). Secondly, officers assigned to high-crime neighborhoods, and those that are more likely to interact with citizens due to their patrol assignments, are more prone to receiving citizen's allegations of misconduct. On the other hand, citizens themselves may be discouraged to file a complaint when there is a fear of retaliation or low confidence in the complaint process. Thus, the characteristics of the complainants and geographical factors may be a confounding variable in this regard. To rectify this, more controls should be employed such as characteristics of the complainants, details on the outcome of the complaint (whether it was sustained or not) and geographical factors to ensure more valid results.

Additionally, we saw in Garduno (2019) through the high variation of the measures of misconduct between independent variables that other possible predictors of corruption (such as social pressure) that have not been addressed in the above studies could also account for their results. Most of the research cited above only includes short-term or correlational studies, which limits our understanding of causality in peer misconduct. Ideally, long-term data should be

analyzed in order to comprehensively understand the relationship between attitude and behavior; more studies directly determining a causal relationship between the variables such as Quispe-Torreblanca & Stewart (2019) would also be helpful.

Mainly questionnaires utilizing a simple quantitative scale were employed to measure variables, which made it easy for the participants to complete and for researchers to analyze the results. They also enable a wide range of statistical analyses to take place which allowed a greater understanding of the correlation between peer misconduct and subsequent misconduct in an officer. An issue, however, with using self-report methods to measure variables is that the answers can easily be manipulated from the truth. More specifically regarding misconduct or corruption, officers may not want to risk revealing any information that will affect them negatively in the workplace, meaning that the results may be unreliable or invalid.

Most of the available research is also concentrated in the Western world, particularly American states, which raises an issue with the generalizability of these findings across cultures, especially since the structure of police organizations differ in different countries. The sociocultural differences between countries also need to be taken into account. To know if the findings of these studies can be generalized to a larger population, research with more diverse samples will have to be conducted.

Evaluation

One of the main critiques of the social explanation of police misconduct is relevant to the General Theory of Crime (1990), which asserts that the main cause behind an individual's inclination towards crime is a lack of self-control which remains constant throughout life, and instead what changes are the opportunities for participating in crime that are presented to the

individual (Siegel and McCormick). The criticisms claim that deviance is not learned through interactions with deviant peers, but instead the pre-existing deviant tendencies in these individuals with low self-control are triggered when they fall into problematic company. However, this assertion is not inconsistent with the social learning theory as socialization with the reference group still shows influence on behavior, even if deviant tendencies were present prior to group membership (Akers and Sellers).

Presently, there is a lack of research providing evidence against the hypothesis that peer effects are a predictor of police deviance. This is not surprising considering the fact that the general theory of social learning of criminal and deviant behavior has previously been substantiated by a great preponderance of research (Akers). The body of research surrounding this topic find the relationship between the social learning variables and delinquent, criminal, and deviant behavior to be "strong to moderate, and there has been very little negative evidence [found in the research]" (Akers and Sellers).

<u>Conclusion</u>

The findings of this essay illustrate that peer influence can indeed be an antecedent of police misconduct. The results of these studies are consistent with previous bodies of work exploring the role of peers in exhibiting deviant behavior, and they also lend further support for Akers' Social Learning Theory. The research available to support this claim is consistent and builds upon itself. There has yet to be a presented a study contradicting the social explanation of police misconduct, however, our understanding of this topic would benefit from replication of these studies in different cultures and wider samples sizes to account for generalizability, as well as from research with fewer methodological drawbacks. Furthermore, the results of Garduno (2019) showed that police officers were more likely to engage in acts of misconduct if they were

dissatisfied with their jobs. Thus, a line of research that could be explored in the future could be investigating the organizational characteristics that affect police misconduct. The findings of this essay have important practical implications; we now know that the transmission of beliefs may take place when deviant officers socialize with other officers. Therefore, we can assume that transferring a problematic officer to a different unit will only increase the risk of spreading misconduct. These findings will not only help us formulate new policies and strategies to combat corruption in police organizations but also reform current ones.

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