



Institutional theory of police: a review of the state of the art

John P. Crank

*Department of Criminal Justice Administration, Boise State University,
Boise, Idaho, USA*

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Abstract *One of the important developments in police theory and research is the recognition of the institutional contexts in which departments participate. A body of theory, organized under the rubric of the “theory of institutionalized organizations”, provides a theoretical framework for the conceptualization and empirical assessment of policing contexts and their relationship to police organizational structures and practices. The first part of this paper provides an overview of institutional theory and reviews writings on the application of institutional theory to the police. The second section reviews research conducted on institutional theory across the field of criminal justice. The third part contrasts the competing notions of institutions and utility in institutional theory, and locates police organizations within Giddens’ model of human agency.*

Institutional theory: what is it?

The political pundits love to take a shot at government agencies. The government seems to spend endless time writing reports, holding meetings, and generally wasting taxpayer’s money. Why, they lament, can not government agencies be run more like businesses? Maybe if they were more business-like, more bottom-line oriented, something would actually get done!

The pundits are wrong. Governmental agencies are not like businesses and cannot be recast in their form. Businesses are about an economic bottom line. They have to develop efficiencies in their product core if they want to be competitive in the marketplace. Otherwise a more efficient or creative business will replace them – they will figure out how to make a cheaper or more attractive product.

Institutionalized organizations operate in environments that are complex, with values. The organizations, to survive, turn their focus “outward” to acknowledge influential constituencies and the values they represent (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). They are typically distinguished from technical organizations, in that technical organizations “turn inward”, focused on the efficient and competitive production of a product core.

Mastroski and Uchida (1996, p. 213) described institutionalized organizations as follows:

Here the nature of the organization’s product or service and what constitutes performance are not readily specified in ways that are easy to conform empirically; the technical capacity of such organizations to produce this service is not well known or well established. However, these organizations succeed in their well-developed institutional environment to the extent that they conform to structures (procedures, programs, or policies) that are widely accepted as being right even though the relationship of these structures to actual performance is not well established.



This is a conception of institutionalism according to which institutions are carried in procedurally defined “means” that provide for appropriate or customary ways of acting. Scott and Meyer (1983, p. 149), for example, noted that “in institutionalized environments, organizations are rewarded for establishing correct structures and processes”. This conception is often contrasted against utilitarian or instrumental concerns about ends, which are associated with product marketing in a competitive work-place.

Police agencies are exemplars of institutionalized organizations. When we think about police departments, the focus of this article, we are talking about organizations that do value work. Their constituents, those who are sovereign or whose opinions affect operational and strategic decisions, tend to frame values in terms of public safety first, and then in terms of other values such as due process, hiring and retention, gender equity, and public relations. They also must consider internal constituents, such as line officers who attain sovereignty *vis-à-vis* collective bargaining. The bottom line for police organizations is that they must display, in their organizational behavior and design, that they care about constituents’ concerns across this panoply of groups and the way in which these issues are important to them.

Value work does not convert easily into economics. Consider the following question: how much money is it worth for a police officer to save a citizen’s life? Ask a patrol officer why she joined the ranks of the police and she is likely to say “I wanted to contribute to society” (VanMaanen, 1973). This is a value statement. Values are foundational to the police. Organizational behavior, culture, and structure become sensible in terms of the values of members and constituencies.

Contemporary or neo-institutional theory is typically dated to Meyer and Rowan (1977; see also Meyer *et al.*, 1983). In neo-institutional literature, institutions are conceived as:

... socially constructed, routine-reproduced (*ceretis paribus*) programs or role systems. They operate as relative fixtures of constraining environments and are accompanied by taken-for-granted accounts (Jepperson, 1991).

Institutions are carried by formal organizations, regimes which convey a central authority system, and by culture, which gives meaning to the customary and the conventional in daily life. Institutions are also carried by individuals, and provide accounts of the social and legal constructions of individual identity (Friedland and Alford, 1991).

Three elements of institutionalized organizations are as follows:

- (1) The organization, in its behavior and structure, reflects the values in its institutional environment. According to this element, institutionalized organizations are first and foremost in the service of their constituencies. Hence, complexity in the institutional environment is mirrored as organizational complexity. Police departments, for example, are frequently under pressure, and may be under court order, to hire more minorities or to develop demographic representativeness in their

organization. On the other hand, departments can be sued if they fail to use rationalized hiring procedures, and many want to hire more educated officers. The organization responds to the complexity of the problem through the development of elaborate hiring policy and formal contractual negotiations among many groups on a regular basis.

- (2) To preserve positive relations with their (typically conflicting) constituencies, institutionalized organizations loosely couple formal practices with actual behavior. Complexity of constituent relations are dealt with by loosely coupling the formal position or goals of the agency to the concrete day-to-day working world of its officers. Loose coupling is a derivative of institutionalized organizations. For example, the official policy of police departments – arrest all law-breakers – is loosely coupled to actual line officer behavior, which is highly discretionary and infrequently results in arrest, even with complainant and suspect present (Black, 1980). Informal structures sometimes enable officers to continue to police in highly aggressive ways even when formal oversight protocols aim at preventing such behavior (Christopher Commission, see Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, 1991).
- (3) A logic of good faith pervades organizational practices, impeding critical evaluation and supervision. Organizational members believe in the essential rightness of what they do. In police organizations, this belief can be an obstacle to efforts to critically evaluate ongoing organizational practices. For example, police supervisors tend to uncritically accept the “rotten apple” theory of police deviance – corruption is the result of a few bad police officers who slipped through background screening – though outside inquiries often cite the presence of systemic problems (Knapp Commission, 1986).

Complexity, loose coupling, and good faith are interrelated phenomena. Recall that institutionalized organizations are responsive to their constituents. Many of these constituents are in conflict with each other – for example, city councils may have group members who resent heavy handed police practices because it disproportionately affects their supporters, and an outlying area may want zero tolerance enforcement to protect them from “outsiders”. Loose coupling enables street level workers to carry out the core work of the organization – public security for the police – while the organization turns outward toward its external constituencies and all the conflicts and complexities they bring. It is often enacted *vis-à-vis* mechanisms by which officers avoid administrative oversight. Good faith enables officers and administrators to trust each other and believe in the rightness of the organization in the face of external criticism and challenges to legitimacy.

Institutional theory in police research

Research on the police has traditionally been normative. This means that it has been oriented toward what might be called “best procedures”, seeking

programs, strategies and tactics that produce the best possible crime prevention or suppression results. It had been believed that, through the scientific study of police work, predictable ways of dealing with recurring problems could be identified.

The limitations of the normative perspective began to be recognized in the late 1980s. Langworthy (1986) argued that the search for effectiveness structures or “best practices” failed to account for the mediating effects of context. What might work well for some agencies, he noted, might not work for others at all. When developing local organizational policy, agencies should not assume that general principles of law enforcement will work for them – they should take into consideration a wide range of factors having to do with the community setting. His work has been described as the bridge between traditional normative perspective on police organizations and the new institutionalism (Katz, 2001).

Institutional theory was first used by police theorists and researchers in the 1990s. Crank and Langworthy (1992) argued that reform failure among the police often failed because reformers failed to account for the constraining or enabling effects of the institutional environment on police organizations. They stated that:

A police department participates with other powerful actors, called sovereigns, in its institutional environment, and it receives legitimacy from these sovereigns. Sovereigns are those actors whose views are significant, that is, they are entities that have the capacity to affect the fundamental well-being of the organization (Crank and Langworthy, 1992, p. 342).

Departments select particular goals, strategies and tactics because they helped maintain legitimacy with influential groups and constituencies. To “look and act” like police departments, they engaged in “myth-building” processes. Myths were defined as “widespread understandings of social reality”. These understandings have the ring of “truth” to them. They are advanced by police departments in a “dramaturgy of exchange” through which police departments ceremonially demonstrate their moral legitimacy qua police.

In 1994, Crank used an institutional perspective to describe the community policing movement. The Kerner and Crime Commission reports in the 1960s, both highly critical of “professional” police practices, de-legitimized the police professionalism movement. The professionalism movement was grounded in the legitimating “myths” of autonomy from municipal life and “aloof” professionalism in the fight against crime. The 1960s, characterized by sharp increases in crime, the Vietnam and civil rights protests (and television images of police brutality), resulted in widespread perceptions that the police were either ineffectual or actually contributed to these problems.

The community policing movement emerged as a re-legitimizing strategy. It conjoined two myths – the myth of the “community” – small US home-towns with traditional values – and the myth of the “watchman” with its notion of community protection – the nineteenth century cop on the beat who took care of his or her local communities or neighborhoods.

The myth, Crank noted, was highly mutable. It emerged as a liberal reaction to the police excesses of the 1960s by arguing for bridge-building programs between the police and minority communities. In the conservative 1980s it was re-tailored to crime fighting and order control. This was a sharp reversal in concept:

... from a police officer who would infrequently invoke formal processes of law, even in the presence of law breaking, to one who would arrest to maintain community order, even in the absence of law breaking (Crank, 1994, p. 341).

In a third paper in this series, Crank and Langworthy (1996) looked at how the fragmentation of “authority” over what constitutes good policing across levels of political governance contributes to the expansion of structure in the middle ranks of police organizations. By fragmentation was meant the way different levels of polity – state, federal, and local – affected police organizational budget, policy, and strategies. Because institutionalized organizations tend to mirror the complexity of their environments, fragmentation contributed to the expansion of organizational complexity. This was particularly the case for community policing, which tended to draw resources from several governmental levels. A consequence of fragmentation, Crank and Langworthy suggest, may be an increase in the sheer numbers of organizational structures (for example, the proliferation of sub-stations), increased managerial efforts to control line behavior, and ultimately greater de-coupling of day-to-day police activity with formal oversight coupled with strengthening of the police sub-culture.

Crank and Langworthy’s work has been theoretical. Mastrofski *et al.* have taken the lead in exploring the empirical viability of institutional theory (see Table I). Two of his papers are discussed here. The first is a review of literature on police reform efforts. In this, Mastrofski and Uchida (1996) suggested that police operate in both technical and institutional environments, reviewed existing police reform-oriented writings, and assessed their implications for these environments. Institutional and technical environments, they offered, differed in terms of the locus of change efforts. Reform efforts needed to be tethered to the distinguishing characteristics of the appropriate environment.

The authors first considered Skolnick and Fyfe’s (1993) recommendations for police reform. These recommendations were aimed at the institutional environment, and were particularly concerned with conformance of the police to the rule of law. The revitalization of the law as a basis for police behavior, they stated, should be the focus of police reform. A redesign of police performance standards and rigorous overview of line officer behavior is necessary to bring the police into conformance with this standard. In other words, there is a need for what is called “coercive isomorphism”, that is, an obligated expectation that the department conform. Structural changes in the organization flow from this obligation.

Mastrofski and Uchida next discussed Sherman *et al.*’s (1997) work on crime prevention. Sherman’s work provided a synthesis of kinds and quality of

| Reference | Level of analysis | Dependent variables |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Bayens <i>et al.</i> (1998) | Organization | ISP supervision (intensive supervision probation) contact per week |
| Crank (1994) | Interorganizational field (municipal police agencies) | Community policing movement |
| Crank and Langworthy (1992) | Interorganizational field (municipal police agencies) | Police structures and organizational practices |
| Crank and Langworthy (1996) | Interorganizational field (municipal police agencies) | Police structures and organizational practices |
| Crank and Rehm (1994) | Organization (Illinois State Police) | Vehicular stops related to profiling |
| Engel <i>et al.</i> (2002) | Interorganizational field (municipal, county, state police agencies) | Racial profiling |
| Hagan (1989) | Overall justice system | Coupling of system policy and practice |
| Hagan <i>et al.</i> (1979) | Interorganizational field (court processes) | Court workgroup dispositions |
| Hunt and Magenau (1993) | Interorganizational field (municipal police agencies) | Chief's leadership style |
| Katz (2001) | Organization | Police gang unit |
| Marquart <i>et al.</i> (1990) | Interorganizational field (Texas prison system) | Prison time served |
| Mastrofski and Uchida (1996) | Interorganizational field (LEN, <i>Police Chief</i> magazines) | Frequency of community policing articles |
| Mastrofski and Ritti (1996) | Organization (six police departments) | DUI training |
| Mastrofski <i>et al.</i> (1987) | Organization (four police departments) | Relationship between size and line discretion |
| McCorkle and Crank (1996) | Interorganizational field (parole and probation) | Contrast between organization goals and behavior |
| McGarrell (1993) | Interorganizational field (US prisons) | Incarceration rates |
| Morrill and McKee (1993) | Organization (community mediation center) | Resources for survival |
| Ogle (1999) | Interorganizational field (private prisons) | Private prison survivability |
| Peyrot (1991) | Interorganizational field (Los Angeles drug abuse programs for juveniles) | Specialized versus generalist treatment modalities |
| Ritti and Mastrofski (2002) | Interorganizational field (municipal police agencies) | Frequency of published community policing topics |
| Zhao <i>et al.</i> (2001) | Interorganizational field | Frequency of police functions |

Table I.
Research on institutions,
level of analysis and
development variables

research on police strategies and tactics, and focused on the technical field of policing. However, in spite of the growing body of “what works” research, Mastrofski and Uchida contend that the technical environment of policing continues to be weak compared to its institutional environment. Mastrofski and Uchida (1997, p. 222) concluded that community policing and problem oriented policing reforms cannot serve as technical sources of legitimacy:

Police leaders who encourage the community to hold their feet to the fire of actually solving problems must have well-defined, measurable outcomes or products and the knowledge and technology to accomplish them with some degree of reliability. Police organizations do seem to be wakening to the desirability of research and evaluation although the resources and efforts are modest in nearly all (Klockars and Harver, 1993). And not much beyond its infancy is the scientific research base of policing and criminology, which of late has done more to discredit the old police crime control technologies than validate new ones.

The absence of a well developed technical core was of concern to Mastrofski and Uchida. They noted that new reforms might become new “myths” of policing, adopted by dint of good faith. In the following assessment of community policing, Ritti and Mastrofski (2002) suggested that non-critical acceptance of community policing reforms is happening in the USA today.

The term “community policing”, they noted, first emerged in the mid 1970s. It was initially adopted by a few agencies in response to a growing dissatisfaction with the “reform” or “professional” model of policing. From the mid 1970s to the late 1980s, the ideology and justification of community policing was explicit. Advocates argued for its merits to deal with a variety of known organizational and municipal problems, especially those having to do with minority relations. The second era of community policing began in 1989 and continues to the present. In this era, the legitimacy of community policing has been increasingly taken for granted. Police agencies have been interested in the practical details of its implementation.

The following summarizes Ritti and Mastrofski’s (2002) theory of the transmission of elements of community policing across the USA, elaborated below:

- *Growing dissatisfaction with some problem.* In the community policing case, the problem was police-minority relations and widespread perceptions of increase in violent crime. Existing solutions are found inadequate. Emergence of a new and explicit way of thinking about the problem, that they called a new “ideology” about policing.
- *Growing consensus about what to do about the problem.* A consensus emerged around the need to increasingly involve the police in their community. The term “community policing” becomes an umbrella term for addressing the problems the previous model of policing – called the professional model – seemed unable to deal with.
- *Effectiveness transmission of practices.* “Early adoption by organizations whose characteristics best match the problem as earlier codified” (Ritti and Mastrofski, 2002, p. 26). This was a period in which a few large

departments adopted community policing programs and tactics. This was a period of intense assessment and evaluation of community policing. It was an “explicit ideology”, linking kinds of police behaviors with desired ends.

- *Institutional transmission of practices.* “Later adoption as the ideology becomes taken for granted”. In the review of findings, the authors note that there is “the development of a logic of confidence in the assessments of merits of community policing”. Community policing is the “right” way to do police business because its underlying values – building positive linkages to the community – are taken for granted. And the way in which strategies build those linkages is also increasingly taken for granted. Pressures for institutional conformity facilitate the adoption of elements of community policing.

Engel *et al.* (2001) suggested that institutional theory could provide insight into racial profiling. The authors, reviewing work on profiling, noted three pertinent issues:

- (1) a wide body of research shows the presence of racial profiling by the police;
- (2) profiling is inconsistent with the notion of impartial enforcement of the criminal law; and
- (3) research is theoretically uninformed.

Needed is a way theoretically to integrate this diverse and growing body of research on profiles. Institutional theory is one way to do this, as follows: departments, rewarded for being “tough on crime”, are rewarded for cracking down on particular kinds of offenders. This is profiling, and eventually it comes into conflict with the myth of equal enforcement of the law. Organizations become susceptible to legitimacy crises.

Engel and her colleagues noted that many departments incorporated profiling strategies into their operations after training from Operation Pipeline, a training venture of the Drug Enforcement Administration. Citing Harris (1999, p. 5), the authors observed that “the techniques taught and widely encouraged by the DEA as part of Operation Pipeline have been instrumental in spreading the use of pretextual stops”. The expansion of profiling from government funding in local activities is consistent with “seductive efforts” of the federal government to get the adoption of new organizational elements and strategies through funding-assists and grants.

Katz (2001) applied an institutional perspective to the development and growth of a gang unit in a large Midwestern community. The gang unit was created in response to community pressures from influential community elements. Once the unit was created, the way in which the gang unit responded to the community’s gang problem was drive its “need to achieve and maintain legitimacy among various sovereigns in its environment” (Katz, 2001, p. 65).

The author noted three findings pertinent to institutional theory of police organizations:

- (1) The police department did not actively participate in the social construction of the gang problem. The gang unit was created in response to constituency pressures. Pressure came primarily from the African-American community.
- (2) The gang unit's response to events was highly susceptible to coercive pressures from its institutional environment. Because the development of the gang was created from institutional considerations, it placed greater stock on ceremonial, rather than substantive, organizational structures and behaviors.
- (3) The findings challenge the notion that specialized gang units were created to increase the police agency's technical efficiency and effectiveness. To the contrary, the gang unit studied here came about as the result of institutional pressures, not technical considerations of success.

Katz's (2001) findings are a cautionary tale about the way in which a department's goals can be driven by external considerations.

Zhao *et al.* (2001) were interested in the way police departments prioritized the "core" police functions of law enforcement, service, and order maintenance.

Five hypotheses were generated to assess the relationship between police core functions and changes in jurisdictional factors. A test of these hypotheses using panel data from 1993 and 1996 showed that departments did not change prioritization with corresponding changes in jurisdictional factors, as predicted by contingency theory. Increased prioritization of the order maintenance function was associated with the proliferation of community policing programs, though the statistical relationship was weak. Acknowledging that the length of the panel was relatively short, the authors concluded that:

The contingency theory does a poor job of explaining organizational change in American police departments. In contrast, the findings reported here suggest the utility of the institutional perspective in the investigation of organizational change in municipal police departments (Zhao *et al.*, 2001, p. 373).

The authors concluded that institutional theory provided a reasonable way to explain the effects noted in their findings. It should be noted that institutional theory was recognized in this paper more for the absence of statistically significant effects associated with contingency theory than with the testing of hypothesized institutional effects.

Current state of theoretical development

In this section I attempt systematically to summarize research on institutional theory in policing. Also included are articles on institutional theory in other areas of criminal justice. Bernard and Engel (2001) presented a notion of theoretical development in criminal justice that offers a way to do this.

Theories in criminal justice should be first classified on their dependent variables, followed by assessments of the relative strengths of competing independent variables. They recommend three categories of dependent variable: the individual behavior of criminal justice agents, the behavior of criminal justice organizations, and characteristics of the overall justice system and its components. In this paper, I divide organizations into individual organizations and into the inter-organizational sector (see Meyer and Scott, 1992, p. 137). A sector is a:

[...] domain identified by similarity of service, product, or function. In this sense, the boundaries of a sector are functional, not geographical: sectors are comprised of units that are functionally interrelated even though they may be geographically remote.

Municipal police agencies, for example, make up a functional sector.

Table I presents an overview of research conducted in the fields of criminal justice using institutional theory. A total of 21 articles, books, and monographs were identified that used elements of institutional theory.

The research presented in Table I indicates that institutional theory was not formally developed until the 1990s. Three of these articles were published before 1990. All three focused on an element of institutional theory – loose coupling – and none integrated loose coupling into a broader institutional perspective. In the early 1990s institutional theory was used to conceptualize structures and practices in municipal police organizations and corrections, and expanded to analyses of parole and probation practices in the mid 1990s.

Table I indicates that institutional researchers have tended to select interorganizational sectors as its level of analysis. Of the 21 articles listed, 14 developed explanations at the level of the inter-organizational field, six focused on organizations, and one discussed system wide characteristics. None developed discussions explicitly aimed at individual behavior. This suggests that institutional theory is consistently advanced as a way of explaining the structure, history, and formal behavior of justice organizations. In the next section I will argue that institutional theory, properly understood, is also a way to explain individual-level behavior.

After identifying the dependent variables, the next step in theory building is to look at the predictive strength of independent variables (Bernard and Engel, 2001). Of the articles in Table I that are comparative, institutional theory is contrasted with contingency theory. Though institutional theory is generally favored in this literature, the body of research is too inchoate to draw any conclusions about the relative predictive strength of independent variables derived from the two perspectives.

The articles above have also tended to describe a relationship between actor and environment in which both institutional and contingent effects are causally prior. This may be a mis-specification. What is needed is a theory of action in which both kinds of effects are specified. Below, I will review the way in which institutional and utilitarian notions are used and sometimes confounded with

each other in criminal justice literature. I will then present Giddens' theory of action, and will locate police organizations within that action model.

Toward the future: distinguishing utilitarian and institutional bases for human action

Institutions versus utilitarian action: framing the problem

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Are organizations best conceived as rational actors who make decisions based on a logic of instrumental utilitarianism? Or are their decisions the fruit of institutional logics such as common-sense, taken for granted traditions, and ethical and religious predispositions? By instrumental utilitarianism, I mean a decision maker's ability to articulate the factors affecting his or her actions, understand the constraints on alternative courses of action, and then calculate the most efficient action from among available alternatives. This view is commonly called rational choice.

By institutional, I mean normative assumptions about the way things are and should be, values, symbol systems, rituals that connect socially approved means and end-states, common sense notions linking behavior to predictable outcomes, ways of thinking that are taken for granted, and unreflected knowledge associated with habit. Included are factors that may be recognized by the actor, but that represent values so important that they are compelling on decision making. For example, a person may recognize that his or her actions are motivated by religious commitments, but the values embodied in those religions are themselves not subject to critical analysis and reconsideration.

The issue of utilitarian versus institutional bases for human behavior is called the problem of social action, and is one of the root problems of the social sciences. Dawe (1978) describes the problem of social action as follows. On the one hand, humans have agency – they make decisions that maximize self-interest. On the other, humans operate within social institutions, and personal meanings and goals are predetermined by the values, constructions of knowledge, rational forms, cultural predispositions, and categorizations of social and moral reality embodied in those institutions. At the individual level, the question can be stated as: do people make decisions based on some utilitarian calculus of efficiency or effectiveness, or do institutional factors guide their behavior? The issue extends straightforwardly to organizations when we consider that organizations do not “think” independently of their membership, but decisions are made by individuals – their employees, executives, and constituents – and both individuals and organizations have legal standing.

Utilitarian conceptions of organizational behavior are carried in resource dependency theory, and are embodied in contingency theory in recent criminal justice literature (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Both describe organizations in terms of a strategic autonomy to negotiate resources in the pursuit of organizational survival. Individuals, in a utilitarian conception, are similarly self seeking, pursuing the maximization of their interests. In this way, the utilitarian notion of action in terms of self-interest describes a similar

instrumental rationality for organizations and individuals alike. Both are actors who are “exogenous, ordered, and stable”. The marketplace is an allocative mechanism through which individual and organizational preferences are acted out, as individuals and organizations seek to optimize their access to goods, well-being, and survival.

An institutional perspective reverses the causality of utilitarian self interest. People and organizations are not actors, but are acted on. Institutions are “supraorganizational patterns of human activity” that provide both individual and organizational meaning and identity. Institutions exist inside nation-state systems, and provide social, symbolic, and legal identity for individuals and organizations alike within the state. Both individuals and organizations exist as what Jepperson and Meyer (1991) called “social ideologies with social and legal license”. The utilitarian notion of the “interest-pursuing actor” is itself a social ideology historically unique to western Europe post enlightenment. Indeed, if we were in other times or places, we might be comparing institutional perspective to our core beliefs in the church-infused community or the “city of god” (see MacIntyre, 1988).

Institutional theorists in policing have frequently mixed utilitarian and institutional elements. Crank and Langworthy (1992) argued that organizations select organizational behaviors and structures in order to satisfy the predispositions of institutional “sovereigns”, important actors in the municipal environment of policing. This is an instrumental notion of decision making grounded in utilitarian notions of self-interest. Yet later, they observed that myths refer to “understandings . . . that have an intrinsic quality of ‘truth’ or ‘rightness’ about them”. They are “so integral that their truth is beyond question” (Crank and Langworthy, 1992, p. 347). This is institutional – it refers to values, common sense or situated practices that are taken for granted and not consciously reflected on. “Individual responsibility”, for example, is an institutional “myth” – it is so seemingly obvious to many justice professionals that humans should be responsible that it is taken for granted and provides the “common sense” that underlays a great deal of criminal justice policy.

The instrumental/institutional issue is also present in Ritti and Mastrofski’s (2002) discussion of community policing. Citing Scott (1987, p. 496), they present institutionalization as a social process by which individuals develop a shared definition of social reality: “independent of the actor’s own views but is taken for granted as defining the ‘way things are’ . . .”. Maguire and Uchida (2000, p. 536) similarly describe a mostly pre-rational institutional environment made up of “standards, norms, myths, symbols, knowledge, and traditions”.

The debate over instrumental/institutional bases for action is present in research that contrasts “contingent” and “institutional” sources of organizational structure. In this theoretical debate, institutional environments are frequently described in terms of traditional or taken for granted elements, while contingency perspectives focus on utilitarian adaptive processes (see Mastrofski and Uchida, 1996; Zhao *et al.*, 2001; Mastrofski *et al.*, 1987). This debate tends to frame elements of the organizational environment as either

institutional or technical, and then argue that utilitarian decisions are made about technical elements, while value-based appeals to sovereigns for legitimacy or resources are made in the institutional environment.

What is needed is a model of social action that recognizes both institutional and utilitarian effects, but also locates the individual or organizational actor as both agent of some kinds of effects (cause) while recognizing that the actor is also vulnerable to a wide variety of effects. Giddens (1979) provides such a model.

Giddens' model of human action

Giddens (1979) presented a model of human action that contained both instrumental and institutional elements, presented in Table II.

Giddens described Table II as follows. In day to day activities, people carry substantial knowledge of the workings of their society around them. Their actions tend to have motives derived from instrumental considerations – citizens anticipate what the hoped-for outcomes of their action will be. They carry a vocabulary of motive that links cause and effect. In Western society this vocabulary is utilitarian, based on a social and legal concept of individual and the ordering and pursuit of individual preferences.

Behavior, he noted, also has unknown or “unacknowledged conditions”. This idea is that people do not fully recognize or reflect on all the reasons why they act as they do. Their vocabulary of motive carries religious, familial, and social values, and is rich in symbolisms, rituals, and common-sense ways of thinking that enable participation in social activities. For example, people communicate, but to do so requires a complex signification system. This system is dense with signs that are unconsciously incorporated into communication. It includes notions of personal space, inflections, eye contact, and a host of other significata that clarify the intent of the communicator.

Humans further carry powerful values that may be recognized but are not vulnerable to critical or rational consideration – for example, whether one should be patriotic, or if one should pray to a god or make a circle for a goddess. Very few of us, for example, can rationally consider the contribution to our diets that might be obtained by eating human young, though cannibalism has been central to many human cultures. Social realities are constructed within a linguistic framework – words – that carry powerful moral meanings. The meanings associated with the word “flag”, “individualism”, “human rights”,

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Institutional elements | Intentional aspect of action | Unique aspects of time and space |
| Unacknowledged conditions of action | Reflexive monitoring of action Rationalization of action Motivation of action | Unintended consequences of action |

Table II.
The structure of social action

Source: Adapted from Giddens (1979, p. 56)

“crime”, for example, are emotionally charged. For many people, to inquire into the legitimacy of the moral meanings carried by these words is out-of-bounds. Language highlights the foreground of social life and creates the possibility of meaningful behavior, “meaningful” referring to moral and ethical commitments.

The center of the table shows the different elements that constitute the field of action. Humans reflexively monitor their actions, an activity that Giddens asserts also includes a monitoring of the circumstances in which the act takes place. This is the intentional sphere, by which is meant that humans act within some rationality that associates their behaviors to desired outcomes. The actions are monitored, from which we adapt to our circumstances and develop predictable modes of behavior.

Finally, Giddens locates action in historical context. When we reflect on an action, we do so taking into consideration its particular context in space – our local geographies, and in time – what other things are also going on. Reasons for acting at one time may be different than for another time. For this reason, there can be no general theory of action – and by implication, general theory of crime, criminality, or justice system behavior (see Wallerstein and the Culbenkian Commission, 1996). All action is located in space and time (see also Crank, 2003).

The model in Table II allows for both institutional and instrumental bases for action – things that we take for granted, see as common sense, or simply do not recognize as part of our motivation. The left side of the table is the institutional, and the center, the field of action, is the instrumental. Note that the rational monitoring of action occurs in the instrumental arena – institutional values are not part of the monitoring. They are part of the moral, traditional background. The institutional, simply put, provides the social and self-identity apparatus that does the monitoring. The field of rational decision making tends to take the many institutional factors, those that are at the core of personal identity, for granted.

A traffic stop can be used to describe the complex interplay between institutional and rational elements of action. Bayley (1986) identifies eight initial actions an officer might take, six processing actions, and ten exit actions. This is a total of 480 possible combinations of actions.

The model in Table II suggests that officers will make rational decisions about which of the 480 combinations is most appropriate for any given stop. Officers will not simply randomly select among different actions. They will have observed their training officers, and will have learned from them what seems to work and what does not. Having moved through a series of actions, they will “reflexively monitor” the success of their behavior in the field of action – the traffic stop – and modify them as appropriate for the next encounter.

The officer’s actions at a traffic stop are situated in time and space. This means that their behavior is wholly mediated by its context. In regard to traffic stops, particular actions will be associated with particular kinds of people, neighborhoods, violator behaviors, or times of day. Habituated actions will be

those that are taught to a recruit from a trainer, or that one officer learns from another officer, or perhaps heard after the shift or during roll call as a “story”. Hence, particular, preferred or stylistic forms of actions will become socially reproduced.

Are there unacknowledged or institutional conditions of actions taken during vehicular stops? An officer’s predisposing values may affect her or his decisions. An officer may carry a distrust of particular ethnic groups, of which the driver might be a member, and unintentionally engage in defensive or overly aggressive behavior. Or ethnic differences, such as appropriate personal space, may inadvertently affect an officer’s behavior. Officers may make gender distinctions in approach styles, sensing that women are less dangerous than men. Flirtations during stops are likely to be highly gendered. The officer might be put off by a bumper sticker that reads “Pigs leave me alone!” or alternatively, be friendly to a bumper sticker that reads “DARE to say no to drugs”.

The entire stop, which is the field of action, takes place within a broader context that is values-dense. The authority to stop an automobile and assert basic procedures of identification review, even in the face of a recalcitrant motorist, is embedded in taken-for-granted authority carried by police officers to control one’s territory and enforce the law. The organization of police work is territorial, and is strongly tied to notions of personal responsibility, a linkage between place and personal responsibility described by Crank (2003) as “dominion”. The officer will believe himself or herself obligated to do something. There will be no democratic vote that permits the passengers of the car to decide what the officer does.

The officer uses a communicative language, which itself carries society’s foundational categories of social identity. The presence of a common language enables the officer to chastize, inform, or engage in other forms of informal social control that can offset the impulse to invoke formal sanction of law.

The categories of meaning created by a particular language suggests that the breadth of “unacknowledged conditions of action” can be quite broad. Random preventive patrol, for example, only has meaning within a notion of deterrent justice, which only has meaning within a conception of individual responsibility. What if notions of group responsibility organized people’s ways of thinking about social control? Random preventive patrol would probably not be as meaningful – maybe we would have something like “household” or “family patrol”. The phrase “I am my brother’s keeper” would carry the weight of legal sanction. Indeed, the notion of individual responsibility occurs within a democratizing rationality, and other rationalities construct justice in quite different terms (MacIntyre, 1988). This example shows that underlying predispositive ways of categorizing the world around us – what Searle (1998) calls “institutional facts” – organize our way of thinking about the work of institutionalized organizations.

Finally, auxiliary to language is a complex signification system. The officer has spent a lifetime acquiring signs that mediate social relations, learned for

the most part at a quite early age, that are taken for granted. We have signs that indicate compatibility – eye contact, facial expressions, hand movements, body positions, voice inflections, all of which provide taken-for-granted meanings for our actions. Even the relatively harmless “wink” can carry a great deal of meaning, recognizable only within a cultural context (Geertz, 1973). As Giddens (1979, p. 98) noted: “every act of communication to or between human beings . . . presupposes a signification system as its necessary condition.”

In sum, institutional factors constitute an underlying web of meanings, to use Geertz’s metaphor, through which the police rationally enact “justice”. Police officers make decisions from an individualizing, responsibility assigning, instrumental rationality in which to frame issues of culpability and justice.

Giddens’ model of action applied to police organizations.

In this section, I provide a preliminary sketch of the institutional environment of municipal police organizations. The model, presented in Table III, is an application of Giddens’ model of action in Table II to police organizations and recognizes the importance of both rational and pre-rational elements.

On the left side of Table III is a survey of elements of the institutional environment. It has two general categories that are labeled values/belief systems and linguistic/communications systems. The values/beliefs provide the moral predispositions which provide meaning to the life of members of a police organization. The values provide the “deep background” for the behavior of both the police organization and its members. Note that the law is included. This is because the law is not simply a rational element. Officers believe in its importance – they are committed morally to doing something about lawbreakers (Crank, 1994).

The linguistics/communications category includes many elements. They include rationalities, which are the way in which we connect our behaviors to end-states or “preferences”. Common sense and story language has been described in a variety of literature (McNulty, 1994; Shearing and Ericson, 1991). Such language carries the traditions of local police organizations. Metaphors such as “asshole” infuse police work with meaning (VanMaanen, 1973). Symbols drench rituals and ceremonials such as funerals (Lord *et al.*, 2003). Categorical language structures enable law to be differentiated into serious (felony) and public order (misdemeanor) elements, each with different implications for action (Black, 1980). Non-verbal significations and voice inflections are central to what Skolnick (1994) calls the symbolic assailant. On the right is the outcome – legitimacy, *vis-à-vis* its expressions – budget approval, self-esteem (affirmation of the logic of good faith), positive police-community relations, and general government approval and support.

In the center is the field of action, which in this table is described by the polity and technical environments of police organizations. The polity environment is made up of a variety of organizations who interact within the

Table III.
A sketch of police
institutional
environment and field
of action

| Institutional environment | Polity/technical field of action | Time and space uniqueness |
|--|--|--|
| <p><i>Values: social-cultural (belief system)</i> Individualism and personal responsibility God and church Bureaucratic organization Democracy and freedom Liberal/conservative ideology Capitalist entrepreneurship Law: criminal, due process, civil <i>Linguistic/communications systems</i> Rationalities/rational ideologies Common sense/story language Metaphors Symbols Rituals/ceremonials Categorical language structures (raced/ethnicity/gender)</p> | <p><i>Polity field of action</i> Actors: sovereigns for chiefs Municipal government Other police organizations/leaders Businesses, Chamber of Commerce Citizens and voluntary organizations Courts, prosecutor, P&P Peace officer standards and training Federal government: NIJ, federal grants, agencies Actors: sovereigns for line officers Criminals/suspects Police managers Unions Courts Complainants/victims Troublemakers/misdemeanants/assholes Internal/external investigation <i>Technical field of action</i> Crime prevention research, grants Municipal budget, tax structure Shared laboratories/forensics Information technologies Hospital/medicine technologies <i>Police departments (PD)</i> Technical structures for crime statistics, forensics, research and development, budget, purchasing Polity structures for random preventive patrol, 911-rapid response, functional crime units PD monitors action in the polity for legitimacy PD monitors technical action for legitimacy</p> | <p>Unintended consequences of decision making Police professionalism history</p> |

local jurisdiction, though vertical relations are also present in the model, with state based training (POST) centers.

The polity environment is different for chief administrators and line officers. This recognizes that line officers face different fields of action than administrators, and helps to account for widely cited cultural differences between the two groups (Paoline, 2001). This field of action is confused with the institutional environment in a great deal of neo-institutional literature (e.g. Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Crank and Langworthy, 1992).

The technical environment is made up of contemporary research on policing and its ties to police research and development, the municipal budget and tax base and its effects on deployment, shared multi-agency laboratories, hospital and medicine availability for injuries and infectious diseases, and information technologies for background checks.

Bottom center is the police department, which is a member of these two environments and in a reciprocal relationship with the other members. It contains structures, whose purpose is value based – they carry out core values that justify the organization and the polity of which it is a member. These structures are in a functional relationship with the polity; they are seen as essential to the well-being of the polity, and are here called polity structures. Examples are crime control (carried out by functionally differentiated crime units) and 9/11 rapid response (guaranteeing citizen access to the police). Technical structures align the organization with technical developments. Research and development units, radio communications, forensics, budget, and purchasing are all about efficacy in technical considerations.

A feedback loop provides for monitoring of the efficacy of actions taken by the organization. Institutional monitoring occurs for the purpose of assessing actions taken with regard to other polity members. And technical monitoring is about the assessment of efficient or effective actions within the technical environment. Importantly, the feedback loop returns to the arrow connecting the institutional environment to the polity/technical field of action. This means that decisions are always made within certain value, linguistic, and communicative predispositions. Institutional factors in this way provide a context from which decisions are made. Put differently, there is no value-free point from which crime control or police organizational decisions occur.

On the right side is the unintended consequences of decision making. The history of the police professionalism movement has been described as a history of unintended consequences (Walker, 1977). Unintended consequences are a condition of change within and across fields of action, and locate action uniquely in time and place.

The strength of the model is that it distinguishes between the municipal environment, which is properly understood as a field of action, and the institutional environment, which carries predispositive values and ways of thinking. It is also a step toward the specification of the institutional environment of policing, whose elements have been dealt with mostly anecdotally in the literature. It also locates technical decision making processes

inside institutional considerations, allowing for action to be intentional while at the same time allowing institutional factors to be predispositive. Finally, it points to the historically unique characteristics of decision making and its consequences. The model is pessimistic towards general theories of police practice.

Conclusion

Institutional theory emerged as a way to explain the behavior and structure of criminal justice organizations and interorganizational fields in the 1990s. It has been modeled on the work of Meyer and Rowan (1977), in which institutional theory of organizations focused on the way in which environments provide the enabling conditions for organizational structures and behaviors. It has been primarily applied to police organizations, but has been also applied to corrections and to parole and probation. While loose coupling, a derivative concept of institutional theory of organizations, was first applied to courts processes, to this author's knowledge broader applications of institutional theory have not formally "arrived" in research on that interorganizational field.

The latter part of this paper focused on developing an institutional perspective within a broader action theory. The purpose of this was to address a lack of clarity or consistency regarding specifications of the relations between institutional and technical factors, on the one hand, and organizations and individuals, on the other. Giddens' model of action provided a way to address this issue. The model also suggested that institutional theory can be used as an explanation of individual behavior, a direction not yet taken in criminal justice literature on the police.

When researchers write of institutionalized organizations, they describe organizations whose purpose is to maintain the integument of social conduct. These organizations, such as police organizations, are about meanings and values. Rational decision making, based on a cost-effectiveness calculus, occurs within the context of broader values. This does not mean that cost-effectiveness considerations are irrelevant. On the contrary, they are integral to the day-to-day running of organizations. Budgets must be maintained, and commanders are typically practiced in the art of linking budget considerations and long-term forecasting. Questions such as "should police organizations exist", "is crime control important", or "is it wrong to rob or kill other people" are rarely asked.

Efficiency, however, occurs within a context in which fundamental values are rarely questioned. Put differently, efficiency considerations are always present in "means" considerations – that is, identifying the method is most efficient to achieve a particular end. But goals, organized and stated in terms of institutional values and taken for granted meanings, link the organization to its broader societal or community context. Institutional elements are fundamental to the social glue and foundational to interactional processes; thus, we rationally re-affirm our socially constructed and morally meaningful world on a daily basis.

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