Complicating Police Culture:

Police Perspectives on Blue Lives Matter and the Thin Blue Line

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On my honor,

I have neither given nor received

Unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract…………………………………………………………………………………………....5

Introduction………………………………………………………………………………………..6

Literature Review……………………………………………………………………………….....7

*Monolithic analyses of police culture*……………………………………………………...7

*Mentality* ………………………………………………………………………………...10

*The ‘Thin Blue Line’* …………………………………………………………………,…14

*The origins and Implications of Blue Lives Matter* …………………………………..…15

Theory……………………………………………………………………………………….…. .16

*Nuanced Perspectives*……………………………………………………………………16

*Culture as a Resource*……………………………………………………………………16

Methods…………………………………………………………………………………………..19

*Sample*……………………………………………………………………………………19

*Data Collection*…………………………………………………………………………..20

*Data Analysis*……………………………………………………………………….……22

Results……………………………………………………………………………………………23

*Perspectives of Police Work*……………………………………………………………..23

*Outward Presentation: Blue Lives Matter Proponents*……………………………….....26

*Outward Presentation: Blue Lives Matter Opponents*…………………………………...29

*Discourses of Responsibility and Blame*………………………………………………....31

*Community Networks*…………………………………………………………………….34

Conclusion…………………………………………………………………………………..…...35References...……………………………………………………………………………………...38

ABSTRACT

The characteristics of police culture have been primarily identified by scholars in monolithic and generalizable terms. The myopic lens through which this literature perceives police culture has not adequately allowed for unique officer cognitions and behaviors. My paper addresses this gap in police research by attending to the individual and contingent characteristics of discrete officers. A Bordieuan theory of capital will be employed as a framework in this paper for mapping how 12 police officers across the United States access their social and cultural capital as a resource for making sense of police work, Blue Lives Matter, and Thin Blue Line discourse. This paper argues that the process by which unique police officers either assimilate or reject the dominant occupational ethos is mediated by the positive cultural experiences and social networks they locate within their community. By closely examining police acculturation through a nuanced lens, the present research offers new prospects for police reform.

Keywords: Police, Culture, Capital, Blue Lives Matter, Thin Blue Line

INTRODUCTION

The unequal distribution of power in the United States converges positively on our government officials and police officers. Accordingly, public trust must be placed in the hands of these leaders, trust that presumes an equality of treatment for all colors, abilities, and conditions of Americans. Current events wherein police officers exhibit a misuse of this power towards disenfranchised Americans, however, have threatened to dissolve this relationship altogether (Hendrix et al. 2018, Weitzer 2015).

The emergence of contending Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter discourse in response to such misconduct has fostered negative, generalized, and conflicting pictures to be painted by police and public. It is in this time of contention and mistrust that scholars, police and American citizens alike must come to understand the foundation of these issues. Although Blue Lives and Black Lives Matter groups are differentiated by their relative experience with historic, structural and individual racism, both have been subject to respective villainization. Rebuilding the trust and connection between public and police will require taking steps which unveil stereotypical imagery of Black Lives Matter proponents as well as Blue Lives Matter proponents to see them, rather, as individuals with individual cognitions and desires. Further, this generative, uncharted moment in police history serves as a valuable moment to conduct such an investigation because the disruption that police culture is experiencing at this time in history is considered by scholars of culture “to be a prime moment to examine social patterns; both habitual and renegotiated routines” (Campeau 2015:670).

Using qualitative interviewing, this study aims to capture the processes by which 12 American police officers, sampled from across the nation, come to understand police work. Contrary to scholarly analyses of police culture that have drawn a generalized, monolithic image of police officers, the present research contests the existence of this identifiable police attitude. Rather, I take up a nuanced framework, advanced by scholars Chan (2001) and Campeau (2015), based in the Bordieusian theory of capital, for mapping the idiosyncrasies of discrete officers. Through this lens, officer acculturation to Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line ideology is assessed in order to build scholarly literature that does not take police culture for granted. In this thesis, interviews with these 12 police officers revealed that the processes by which they come to make sense of their police role, Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line discourse are mediated by their individual connection to the public. The nuanced dimensions of these findings hold promising implications for rebuilding connections between the police and the individuals they serve.

LITERATURE REVIEW

*Monolithic analyses of police culture*

Starting in the 1940s, scholars identified a worldwide, monolithic ‘police character’ wherein a unitary police character is ascribed to all officers (Paoline 2003). The core, enduring features of police culture, that researchers have accepted as fact, generalize an inflexible, uniform American police system across the nation. Whether the binary conception of the ‘police character’ is invoked to describe the “overarching occupational ethos” or “individual officer typologies,” this monolithic framework equates all police officers with characteristics of cynicism, exaggerated displays of masculinity, zero-sum thinking, distrust and suspiciousness of the public, isolation, strong solidarity with fellow officers, and conservativism (Campeau 2015:669, Marier and Moule 2018, Paoline 2003, Bock and Figueroa 2018).

Police researchers have found that prior to entry into the police profession, applicants undergo a phase of “anticipatory socialization” by which friends, neighbors or relatives, either tangential to the police occupation transmit knowledge to the applicant (Bennett 1984). This knowledge: values and attitudes, self-conceptions, and role expectations, if adopted, ostensibly work to re-orient recruit’s values and inculcate among applicants a preliminary acceptance of policing (Bennett 1984). The amount of time an officer spends in this initial stage and the accuracy of the information conveyed are shown to mediate officer’s affiliation with the dominant occupational ideologies (Bennett 1984). Institutionalized socialization of this kind tends to inspire conformity, effectively inculcating officers into the ethos of the institution, an acculturation process that is ensured by way of control (Chan 2001, Bennett 1984). Scholars revealed that senior officers engage their control by way of withholding group approval and subsequently, integration from recruits until they have sufficiently proven their cultural commitment to veteran officers (Paoline 2003). In this way, the degree of successful authority wielded by veteran officers dictates the degree to which recruits heed group norms and their consequent success within the occupation (Bennett 1984). However, the process by which recruits either effectively absolve or reject police culture cannot be extrapolated to apply for every police officer. This research, in effect, fails to adopt a nuanced framework for conceptualizing the diverse processes by which police officers come to make meaning of their socialization.

Additional studies of police behavior find that where there is public support for police practices and police culture, officers are motivated by a sense of connection to their communities (Marier and Moule 2018). Conversely, this implies that where antipathy over policing presides, the officer often retreats into the fraternity of their colleagues “where he finds both physical and psychic security from a hostile public” (Marier and Moule 2018:839). The values and behaviors of police culture that have recently come under increased scrutiny from the public, and the subsequent withdrawal of officers into the safety of their blue brotherhood as a “coping mechanism” has been theorized by police scholars to produce two distinctive and compounding products within police culture: social isolationand group loyalty (Paoline 2003:200). Accordingly, the learned values of solidarity and support during recruit training would encourage officers to perceive their relationship with the public as us-vs-them. Such a perspective promotes strict solidarity with peers whereby one must protect the mistakes of fellow officers in order to be protected from mistakes of your own (Chan 2001, Fielding 1988). In this occupational environment, riddled with the stress and anxiety associated with police work, group isolation is justified in the name of protection (Pauline 2003, Manning 1977). This dual interpretation of officer’s reaction to dissent, however, sufficiently takes for granted the contingent process by which group loyalty and social isolation are inculcated in individual officer’s orientation towards the world. The present study aims to complicate the idea that all officers react and conceptualize police work in indistinguishable ways.

Social identity theory posits that individuals strongly identify with groups to which they feel they belong and make a corresponding effort to distinguish themselves from others, out-groups with whom they feel at odds (Brown et al. 2018). According to scholars who apply this framework to policing socialization, in associating strongly with the police identity, officers gain a sense of belonging and worth that generates and reifies dichotomies between the decided in-group and out-group (Brown et al. 2018). This insular bonding, analyzed by police researchers, can be bolstered when officers share similar sociodemographic backgrounds, a prevalent circumstance that would foster an enhanced feeling of belonging, trustworthiness among one another, and a dominant conception that one’s peers will consistently behave in accordance with the dominant goal and values of the group. (Hendrix et al. 2018). The experience of internal solidarity within the police subculture, coupled with an entrenched isolation from the rest of society often serves to deepen for members the magnitude of the subculture and its values. (Lynch 2018, Kappeler, Sluder, & Alpert, 1998). As American police officers develop a strong group identity, research shows that a rigid identification of out-group identifiers can be subsequent (Wortley and Homel 1995). Upon this foundation, prejudice is prone to flourish, whereby denigration of the ‘other’ is often used by in-group members to bolster beliefs in their own superiority (Wortley and Homel 1995, Brown et al. 2018, Heslop 201). In light of police-citizen unrest in the United States, an understanding of prejudice’s breeding ground and a cognizance of the conditions for its survival is essential in combating its effects.

Missing in the research presented above is a consideration of police culture as a contingent and iterative process by which each officer negotiates this occupational culture according to the cognitions and values that they bring to the job. The qualitative study at hand seeks to complicate these rigid frameworks of understanding police conduct and cognition, treating police as the varied and independent individuals they are. As such, this study works to investigate how officers find ways to express personal individuality (moral, ethical, political, psychological) at work within and in spite of the dominant organizational and cultural climate of American policing. Subsequent sections will outline multiple organizational ideologies identified by police scholars in order to understand the various ethos’ working together within policing to foster unique officer perceptions and subsequently, officer behaviors.

*Mentality*

Analyses of many American law enforcement agencies reveal that police training programs are modeled in the image of American military boot camps. Officers from across the nation trained in this curriculum emerge from this program with the mentality of a warrior: equipped for battle by way of following orders and rules without so much as a question (Rahr and Rice 2015, Carlson 2020, Stoughton 2014). Research into the merits of the ‘warrior’ curriculum shows that this training ultimately has little to do with officer’s daily reality, a reality that is much more mundane and much less treacherous than proponents of a ‘warrior mentality’ would have people believe (Herbert 1998, Lynch 2018, Stoughton 2014). As a result, officers are physically and ideologically trained primarily in obedience and self-preservation tactics that are impractical for a job filled with office work and unsupervised field work (Rahr and Rice 2015, Lynch 2018, Herbert 1998). Once placed in the field, their warrior training is insufficient or ill-suited for the thoughtful conflict negotiation, de-escalation and critical thinking needed to resolve most daily or routine exchanges with civilians. As a result, police officers report that they are left to learn these skills on the job – a condition that sometimes leads to critical mistakes and destructive consequences. (Rahr and Rice 2015, Lynch 2018). The present study uses a critical lens into the anticipatory socialization phase (that some officers experience) to garner a better understanding of how the beliefs and behaviors of police officers are informed by the occupational assimilation processes they undergo.

Despite the violence-oriented training and highly militaristic treatment they received throughout recruitment, when trainees are finally endowed with the power of their profession at graduation, they are expected to treat the vulnerable community members they serve with the dignity and respect that they were not endowed as recruits. (Rahr and Rice 2015). The warrior mentality fostered in officers has been used to encourage officer identification with in-groups, encourage confrontational, antagonistic policing, and frame the public as inherently threatening, an us-vs-them orientation that scholars show to result in in decidedly punitive officers and negative police-citizen interactions (Rahr and Rice 2015, Carlson 2020). Such aggressive policing, confirmed by scholars of police misconduct, converges on minority communities already distrustful of police, further concentrating punitive state control among disadvantaged communities that feel overpoliced and under protected (Sierra-Arévalo 2018, Rahr and Rice 2015, Stoughton 2014). Communities that feel the brunt of this type of policing are, and have historically been, disproportionately communities of Black and Brown people (Fridell 2016). This kind of prejudiced policing can be connected to the us-vs-them orientation that our, majority white police forces, have maintained towards out-groups (Rahr and Rice 2015, Carlson 2020). The condition of discontented public and a cynical police force coincide to exacerbate a growing rift between police and citizens that has proven difficult to mend. Just as officers enter their profession as individuals with unique cognitions and needs, so too are the residents of the communities they serve. In the process of identifying the divergent realities of individual police actors, the study at hand aims to implicate individual officers and the institution of policing to see their communities in this same light – as diverse, complex, and as worthy of understanding.

The warrior mentality taught to police recruits that encourages aggressive enforcement with an us-vs-them framework, converges positively on white victims and perpetrators. Carlson (2020) outlines police orientation towards white citizens as a ‘guardian mentality,’ a framework which “emphasizes assertive protection on behalf of white victims” (400). This

guardian’ orientation towards policing focuses on moral obligation and the protection of lives rather than the domination of them (Stoughton 2014). Consequently, dominant framing of white violence as rare serves to de-naturalize it’s occurrence, and subsequently naturalize Black and Brown crime (Carlson 2020). Although the guardian mentality observed by Carlson demonstrated a strong racialized character, the concept of police as guardian maintains the possibility of re-direction toward an accepting relationship with and dedicated commitment to the defense of diverse communities (Stoughton 2014). The study at hand will seek to differentiate individual officer mentalities, aiming not to generalize but to diversify scholarly frameworks of police. As the world changes around American policing, police scholars must allow for re-interpretation of their field, a goal that cannot be achieved without allowing our police to each display their own unique character.

Encouraged by ‘warrior’ training that emphasizes survival strategies while understating de-escalation and communication tactics, officers are daily reminded of the difficulty, insecurity, and dangerous elements of their occupation (Lynch 2018, Paoline 2003, Stoughton 2014). A vast amount of qualitative research reveals that most officers, however, acknowledge that injury on duty is unusual in their day-to-day policing experience. Scholars of police work have discovered that the very potential of harm is what generates the enduring perception of policing as a uniquely treacherous occupation (Carlson 2020, Lynch 2018, Herbert 1998). This is particularly manifest in police survivability discourse which uses symbols, language, and occupational rituals to evoke the possibility of officer mortality “and the entitlement to violence that accompanies ensuring the avoidance of injury or death” (Lynch 2018, Stoughton 2014). Studies of survivability discourse show that in the employment of police survivability discourse, officers are effectively mobilized by fear, a reminder of their own mortality that engenders legitimized, wanton aggression and violence in the name of self-preservation (Stoughton 2014, Lynch 2018, Paoline 2003). Police survivability has, thus, been effectively enacted during times of unrest by officers as an internal occupational code, a code that threatens to take precedence over the higher laws that the police have sworn to enforce. Opposition to police ideology, however, has resulted in a manifestation quite disparate from ideological support, encouraging our officers to protect those that identify with the police ideology while denigrating and punishing those who oppose their ideology (Paoline 2003). When officers are met with an expanding rift between police and public that generates elevated public scrutiny, police survivability discourse is often deployed (Lynch 2018). This narrative typically invokes the dangers associated with police work, honors the lives of fallen officers, and claims the police experience as utterly unique (Lynch 2018). Such an organizational ideology, espoused in times of contention, is endowed a certain legitimacy (Bock and Figueroa 2018). Viewed through structural Marxist lens, “discourse from those in power is itself a form of power”; a power employed by police departments under scrutiny to evade culpability (Bock and Figueroa 2018:3098). In doing this, police scholars show that officers have the ability to construct narratives that ensure plausible deniability for all misuse of force acts committed in the name of guardianship. This power is particularly troubling in consideration of policing’s monopoly on sanctioned and naturalized use of force, conditions made insidious as they coalesce under the “unique coercive power and authority” police hold over civilians (Paoline 2003:201, Bock and Figueroa 2018, Lynch 2018, Ericson 1989). Police survivability discourse will be analyzed for the present study within officer interviews as a way to understand how participants come to conceptualize their role as a protector. Just as the character of each police officer is unique, this research will work to complicate scholarly conceptualizations survivability discourse. As such, I do not aim to generalize police survivability mentality as a central component of the ‘police character,’ rather, I aim to assess how this kind of discourse is employed by different officers in disparate capacities.

*The ‘Thin Blue Line.’*

Scholars of police culture have described the ‘Thin Blue Line’ (TBL) as a metaphorical line between lawful society and chaotic civil unrest (Wall 2019). Under this definition, American policing’s ‘Thin Blue Line’ discourse is a foundational component of police survivability, as an articulation of deep-rooted beliefs that the police are a prerequisite for the mere existence of civilization and thus, a prerequisite for society to thrive (Wall 2019). Police, therefore, are purported to “make possible all things said to be at the core of ‘human’ existence: liberty, security, property, accumulation, law, civility, and even happiness,” a correlation that is intensely affixed to discriminatory treatment of Black and Brown people in the United States (Wall 2019:321, Valayden 2016). The ‘Thin Blue Line,’ thus serves to symbolize the essentiality of the police role, for police do not merely serve to maintain the line between regulated citizenry and chaotic savages, but they *are* the line; without the precondition of police authority, society is anarchic (Wall 2019, Taussig 2010). In the past, American police have invoked TBL discourse in the name of peace, security, and order, “universal justifications” used to naturalize officer self-defense and self-preservation (Wall 2019:328, Vardoulakis 2013). In this position of immense power, valorized officers are endowed the role of arbiter; deciding who is human, whose lives matter, and whose lives do not (Wall 2019). Accordingly, ‘Thin Blue Line’ discourse can be deployed by police officers to leverage public support and respect for police This binary is often deeply racialized not only because those identified as ‘uncivilized’ are physical and psychological antithesis of police, but because of the fear of ‘racial feralization’ (Wall 2019, Valayden 2016). What scholars of ‘racial feralization’ reveal is that it’s invocation threatens the very civilization of our humanity; a failure to maintain the ‘Thin Blue Line’ would threaten a regression to an uncivilized, violent, feral nature, a nature deeply intertwined with white perceptions of Brown and Black people (Valayden, 2016, Wall 2019). Due to the violently exclusive and strict application through which the Thin Blue Line has been used, the marker of civilization disproportionately converges on a privileged, white population. The implication foundational to such a conception is that one “*becomes human*,” in their submission to police authority, leaving citizens at odds with this authority on the wrong side of the ‘Thin Blue Line’ (Wall 2020:326, Valayden 2016).

*The origins and implications of Blue Lives Matter.*

The Black Lives Matter movement began as a hashtag on twitter, garnering national prominence during 2013 Ferguson unrest following the acquittal of the police officer (George Zimmerman) responsible for Trayvon Martin’s murder (Herstory N.d). As public discontent and visible acts of police misconduct accumulated, the Black Lives Matter hashtag became an agenda, a platform, and a tool for organizing people “to amplify anti-Black racism across the country, in all the ways it has shown up” (Herstory N.d.) In direct opposition to the formation of Black Lives Matter, police discourse began to formulate a platform for their cause: Blue Lives Matter. Blue Lives Matter ideology, much like the ‘Thin Blue Line,’ positions the police as central to the functioning of society and effectively invokes police survivability discourse (Bock and Figueroa 2018). Individual officer conceptions of Blue Lives Matter will be analyzed in this research in order to garner a better picture of how American police officers come to understand Blue Lives Matter discourse in connection their unique police role.

THEORY

*Nuanced Perspectives*

According to opponents of traditional value-based picture of police culture, a rigid framework cannot accurately capture how contextual changes shift the ways in which officers understand the world they are embedded in (Campeau 2015). Further, research has shown that occupational socialization is never completely finished, a “final perspective” does not take formation, because the process of identity development is continuous (Chan 2001, Fielding 1988). This reveals that police acculturation is a “much more complex and contingent process” than previously theorized, indicating that officers are dynamic actors in negotiating their self-identity, a process by which they individually navigate their integration or rejection of police occupational values. (Chan 2001:129). Officers operate, therefore with “competing value positions” that are consistently and uniquely drawn upon as a repertoire of resources for making sense of their world (Chan 2001:116, Fielding 1988). This study will center socio-cultural perspectives of police culture in an aim to challenge pervasive monolithic conceptions which paint officers into a corner of formularized ideology and behavior.

*Culture as a Resource.*

Pierre Bourdieu, an influential French sociologist and anthropologist (b. 1930, d. 2002), developed cultural sociological theories that have been increasingly used by scholars to understand the reproduction of police culture (Campeau 2015, Chan 2001). Three of Bourdieu’s concepts: field, capital, and habitus, have been essential in conceptualizing the way that cultures function at multiple levels. A social “field” is defined as any environment, physical or metaphysical, in which competition and conflict occur between individuals (Bourdieu 1986, Heslop 2011). A police officers’ ‘field’ is in continual flux, as people and conditions change daily. One’s orientation within their ‘field’ can thus be difficult to negotiate at first, a condition that often draws officers to acculturate themselves to the occupational culture where they learn and foster connections in a new field. Within a field, individual actors fight to acquire ‘capital’; social (connections with people), cultural (experience in the field), or economic currency (Bourdieu 1986, Heslop 2011). ‘Capital’ functions like a network, providing access to support, power, resources, etc; acquiring this ‘capital’ allows officers the resources they need to succeed in their ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1986). Finally, an individuals’ “habitus” refers to how one is socialized by determining structures in their lives such as family, education, or occupation. These dispositions, ideologies, behaviors, etc. are learned and ingrained in individuals from birth. As one is continually exposed to new fields, however, the habitus can shift and expand as new rules are learned, adopted, and naturalized (Bourdieu 1986, Heslop 2011). The ‘habitus’ that police officers bring to bear in their job is influential in their assimilation and success in the policing ‘field’, however, exposure to the policing ‘field’ works conversely to broaden and alter the officer’s habitus. The combination of these two social forces effectively transform the individuals who choose policing as their occupation in disparate, divergent, and unique ways. Today, American policing is experiencing changes to the field wherein officers are being asked to develop a more appropriate habitus and re-consider their network of capital (Campeau 2015, Chan 2001).

This age of police-citizen mistrust has invariably impacted the policing field, police capital, and officer’s habitus. When contexts and fields change, Bourdieu’s framework suggests that habitus adjustment must follow (Chan 2001, Fielding 1998). Ethnographic and interview research conducted by police scholars, Chan (2001) and Campeau (2015), respectively employ socio-cultural perspectives based in Bordieusian concepts to generate an understanding of how police culture can be used as a resource by individual actors. These scholars agree in their findings that the interaction between field and habitus is what generates practice (Chan 2001, Campeau 2015, Fielding 1988). This knowledge encourages those in police cultural studies to conceptualize how officers deploy a ‘repertoire’ of skills to make sense of and justify their experiences – skills that are negotiated between self-identity and group association (Chan 2001, Campeau 2015, Fielding 1988).

The present distressed times, this “generative moment” we are in, offers an opportunity to examine how officers engage their culture as a resource to negotiate a changing, uncharted field (Campeau 2015:670, Chan 2001). These alterations generate new necessities for officers that require them to develop new coping mechanisms for understanding their cultural world. The subsequent socialization process thus becomes “less a process of ‘fitting in’ with the dominant habitus, rather, one of negotiating a changing and uncharted field” (Chan 2001:131). While some scholars suggests that the on-the-ground reality of such a divided world is that the cultural resources of police are only exacerbated, whether officers continue to lean on their Blue brotherhood during this time of reorientation or they look to other ways of understanding, a positive change in police culture requires a change in both habitus and field (Heslop 2011, Loftus 2010). The study at hand applies a Bordieusian theory of capital in combination with Campeau’s framework for relating culture to accessible resources and complicating monolithic and static conceptualizations of police culture (Campeau 2015). This perspective offers an opportunity to understand the individuality of officers in new ways using a nuanced framework to map idiosyncrasies within the police culture we have come to know. Applying qualitative interviewing as a tool to generate a broad and diverse picture of America’s police officers, this research works to tease out the decision making, thought processes, and application of resources that these 12 police participants make on a daily basis. The seemingly innocuous cognitions of police officers will help to garner a deeper understanding of how Blue Lives Matter and ‘Thin Blue Line’ discourse is invoked or rejected by uniquely habituated officers.

METHODS

*Sample*

In-depth interviews were conducted with current and former police officers from across the United States about police officer attitudes regarding personal experience, Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line discourse. In order to recruit this hard-to-reach population, entrée into the community was initially achieved by the researcher through convenience sampling: reaching out to contacts to inquire if they had any connections to police officers in their social circles. Once connections were identified, initial communication occurred between the contact and the police officer in which the prospective participant was briefed on the content of the study. Once officers willing to participate were identified, the researcher contacted them via their preferred method of communication, to schedule a interviews. Following each in-depth interview, the researcher utilized snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. The results of snowball sampling were successful, providing nearly half of the interview subjects included in this research. Of the 12 interview participants in this study, all 12 were male and 9 identified as white. The other three participants identified as Hispanic, African American and mixed race (Native American and white).

*Data Collection*

The interview guide was generated in an iterative fashion both prior to beginning interviews and throughout the interviewing process. Questions covered internal police culture, experience of employment outside of work, and perceptions of Blue Lives Matter’ and ‘Thin Blue Line’ discourse. Each question was formulated to encourage open-ended responses and garner a deeper, thorough understanding of how participants use culture as a resource to come to understand Blue Lives Matter rhetoric. The technique used in this study “aims to reach the discursive consciousness of respondents in order to unveil the justifications they bring to experience” (Campeau 2015). Following preliminary interviews, ‘Thin Blue Line’ discourse appeared as a meaningful concept to interview participants, as it was continually brought up by officers in interviews. Because of this, questions were developed and added to the interview guide which inquire about officer’s conceptualization of the ‘Thin Blue Line.’ Each interview was audio recorded with consent from participants and subsequently transcribed into text files for coding data analysis using Nvivo software.

Coming into the study at hand, I was cognizant of maintaining an open mind when learning about the experiences of each participant. In-depth interviewing was selected as the method of this research because of its unique ability to capture multiple dimensions of experience, an essential perspective when working to garner a deeper understanding of such a hard-to-reach and misunderstood population as American police officers. In probing for the rich details, the interview aims to glean the emotional and logical state of the participant, details critical in perceiving the framework of social processes and internal motivations (Lamont 2014). Particular to American policing, an institution under public scrutiny of their actions, interviewing methods of this kind have the potential to reveal “emotional dimensions of social experience that are not often evident in behavior” (Lamont 2014). For many critics of the interviewing method, individual’s imagined meanings obstruct the subjectivity of the data (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Proponents of this method argue, however, that “the *imagined* meanings of their activities, their self-concepts, their fantasies about themselves (and about others)” reveal dimensions of the officer’s experience that are unreachable without asking or talking to people (Lamont 2014). As such, interviewing police officers has the power to reveal salient features of officer’s reality because the researcher is empowered to “probe about facts or about ideal responses or situation, as well as imaginary scenarios and fantasies” not always visible in external reality (Lamont 2014). By nature of the interview process, however participants can impose an ideal, more coherent, image of themselves than their real lives actually exhibit (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). While this can be a complication in the eyes of some scholars, in this age of police misconduct, officer’s ideal projection of themselves contain the possibility of communicating the intentions behind police actions. In this way, valuing such subjective experiences of each participant in the interview process offers more nuanced information to demonstrate how the institutionalized character of policing manifests in the worldviews of unique officers (Lamont 2014).

In service of this goal, I aimed to leave my personal opinions outside of the research process, an aim I reached by generating neutral interviewing questions. Because of my race, undergraduate education, and normative sexual and gender identification, I suspected that the population of (majority white) police officers that make up my interview participants, due to the many identities that we share, may be more comfortable discussing such sensitive topics. This comfort, however, could easily be jeopardized if participants were to feel offended or attacked by interview questions or by my interviewing demeanor. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to conduct in-person interviews with police officers in my local area. Consequently, these interviews were conducted via online video conferencing and the online platform served as additional component of comfort for participants. In this way, the participant could voluntarily choose to be interviewed in an environment particularity private, comfortable, and familiar to them and they were allowed to skip questions or end the interview if uncomfortable.

*Data Analysis*

Once collected as audio files, all 12 interviews were then transcribed into text documents and uploaded to Nvivo software for analysis. In Nvivo, the interviews were coded under 3 categories: conceptual/analytic, substantive, and “In Vivo” (codes deriving from the text). Findings presented in this paper are generated from analyzed codes within the 12 interview transcripts. As the topic of this study, codes were generated for the purpose of understanding how officers employ their cultural knowledge/habitus in the field of policing as a resource to understand the ‘Blue Lives Matter’ phenomenon. Throughout the coding process, 38 codes were used to analyze interviews; subsequently, patterns regarding misconceptions of police work, discourses of responsibility and blame (among many others) became prominent. The following section will serve to outline these patterns and explain how this population of police officers access their capital resources to understand the police experience in this age of ‘Blue Lives Matter.’

RESULTS

*Perspectives of Police Work*

In the United States’ current era of police scrutiny, it is police officers as much as any American who are increasingly cautious about their actions and statements. As such, an interview of this kind, which regards police experience and perspectives of Blue Lives Matter, could likely cause participants to present a preferred image of themselves and their profession. Although the outward opinions of the police officers in this study presented as extremely diverse and individually contingent, what underlies each officer’s outward presentation of themselves are the internal processes through which they make sense of their occupational world. A deeper look into each participant’s statements reveals that the way they navigate their decision-making, and opinion-making is deeply connected to the social capital they foster (or do not) in their communities in combination with their experience (in the policing field or out) or cultural capital.

The ways in which every police officer interviewed perceived their role in the community appeared to be mediated by their diverse experiences in the field. A preliminary look at these differences in capital resources reveals that the cultural capital accessed by officers, when working to understand their role in policing, vary in content and implication according to the number of positive interactions the participant had with the public. Without such positive interactions with his community, officer Larry effectively accessed moments of pride associated with his time in the occupational field. These moments of pride extend from the anticipatory socialization stage, wherein expectations about police work are learned prior to entrée into the subculture, to Larry’s daily decision-making. When describing the anticipatory socialization he had at an early age, Larry displayed an orientation toward his community members that is shaped by his introduction to the field:

Well, kids, boys especially, we'll play cops and robbers. I always liked being the good guy. And, then as far as being a police officer, I saw where I could go in, you know arresting bad guys was the first thing just see in Adam 12 and that type of stuff. But you can also, you can make a difference…Well, there's a satisfaction you get when you can take somebody who is absolutely evil and do the job right and put that person away. I mean, with that one case that we're talking about, there's tremendous satisfaction in the job I did and was able to put this guy away.

Taught through television shows and childhood play that centered police survivability discourse and perpetuated us vs. them (cops and robbers) frameworks, Larry’s field experience and mindset was consequently deeply intertwined with a “warrior mentality.” Rather than focusing on the benefit that his arrest could bring the victims and his community, this passage reflects a preoccupation with the arrest and prosecution of criminals. Police survivability discourse and warrior mentality work together to instill in officers a fear for their lives, while simultaneously promoting aggressive self-preservation tactics in service of personal safety. These orientations towards police work coalesce to generate binary conceptions of policing. Consequently, rigid decisions are made by officers that maintain inflexible conceptions of criminality. Accordingly, what Larry exhibited in this excerpt was an orientation toward policing that has been reinforced and reified since the anticipatory socialization stage. This an abiding outlook on policework and, effectively, the world, worked to cement Larry’s warrior mentality.

Larry’s intense association with the warrior mentality was not shared by the vast majority of interview participants. Comparatively, when discussing how they perceived their role in police work, most officers expressed a keen desire to help with community- and care-centered perspectives. Rather than drawing on the pride these officers receive from taking criminals off of the street, officers Calvin, David, Eric, Harry, and Isaac highlighted positive experiences and personal connections they made with individual community members. Forging social networks with individuals in the field ostensibly allowed these officers to strengthen connections to the community, invigorate passion for the job, and reinforce the good they do. Isaac discussed a transformative moment in his career that came about from building social capital with a struggling teen:

So being able to take time in the last 17 years, I've seen how powerful the tool is just listening to somebody and really trying to figure out a solution to their problems. Because sometimes throwing somebody in jail, probably not the best solution in the world, we see that, right? The criminal justice systems are a mess. So yeah, the most important aspect is being able to listen to somebody and just hear them…I could've just given him a ticket and moved on, but it would be right. It would be just and... I mean, it would be lawful, but it wouldn't be the moral thing, I think in my mind at the time. So being able to just go back and seeing the impact I had on just one kid and from one decision, that kind of showed me that I couldn't just be black and white.

In this quotation, Isaac reveals that he conceptualizes himself not just as a moral enforcer of the law, but also as somebody with the moral responsibility to make his community better. It is these responsibilities which drive officer Isaac’s actions, a desire to do good for his community that is exemplified in the meaningful encounter he recalls with this teenager. In noting that the “criminal justice systems are a mess,” Isaac accesses a comparatively negative field experience that helped to inform the actions he took toward listening to and understanding the young boy in his custody. The networks that Isaac made within the community altered his perspective of police work, underscoring the inequality of the criminal justice system and cementing his orientation against it’s strict rules. Ultimately, Isaac discovered a more contingent and care-centered framework that is not just “black and white.” These experiences now serve as resources for Isaac, cultural capital that he is able to draw from when making difficult decisions and having difficult conversations centering police work.

It was these same types of meaningful interactions with community members and their continued communication with them that helped officers across the board come to understand their job as a police officer in a new light. When communicating how he perceives his role in the community, officer Harry similarly employed social capital as a resource for conceptualizing his role in the field. Within the advice he gave to prospective police officers, Harry suggests that it is vital that the police get to know the people they are serving:

I want Ms. Smith to know my name, and I want to be revered as someone who is here to help, oppose to someone we just call when we need to clean things up. Then, it feels good to be a police officer.

Citing the importance of building positive, trusting relationships with community members, Harry communicates the centrality of community care to his conceptions of police work. When he knows the people he serves and they know him, Harry feels “good” about being a police officer, a testament to the value he places in the strength of his social networks. The disparate access these officers had to resources of cultural and social capital in the community are important indications of how these officers use the same resources when working to understand Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line discourse according to their own conditions and cognitions. Following sections will compare the outward expressions and internal thought processes of officer proponents and opponents of Blue Lives Matter for the purpose of garnering an enhanced understanding of the unique ways in which American police come to understand and enact this discourse.

*Outward Presentation: Blue Lives Matter Proponents*

The pattern of social and cultural resource access revealed in officer perceptions of their community role are deeply intertwined with all participant’s discussions of Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line discourse. Accordingly, participants that identified themselves as proponents of the meanings and implications of Blue Lives Matter/TBL and primarily accessed personal experiences in the field, their cultural capital, when making sense of what the phrase means to them. While this population of participants additionally located social networks with friends, family, and co-workers to conceptualize Blue Lives Matter, they did not access social capital within the community they police. As such, the storytelling they exhibited reflected an abiding binary thought process through which police survivability discourse is invoked to assign responsibility/blame for the tensions between police and public. This discourse of responsibility/blame was prevalent in David’s assessment of the ‘defund the police’ movement:

[Policing is] a necessary job. And you can't just defund the police. It makes my stomach turn when I hear that. Who's going to protect you? Who are you going to call when you need help? If you want to remove law enforcement, well, there's a word for that. It's called anarchy. And if you look back in history, I challenge you to show me one time when anarchy is successful. But that's now what's popular. Now it's popular to hate the police. It's popular that the police officer parks for nothing else than to go to the bathroom, comes out and he finds feces all over his car, tires slashed. And what's more, it's caught on film from the surveillance camera, right outside wherever he stopped and nobody presses any charges.

In noting that suggestions for defunding the police “makes [his] stomach turn,” David clearly exhibits negativity towards public opinion that disrespects the essentiality, the vitality of the police to the lives of the public they serve. In this way, David invoked anarchy, violence experienced by police officers, and the impunity of such violence to emphasize the danger inherent in police work. Additionally, David’s assessment of the public’s violence toward police effectively identifies himself as an unfairly targeted victim. This use of police survivability discourse works to enhance the value of Blue lives while simultaneously devaluing the lives of the public that they police. In accessing this example of violence towards police officers, David demonstrated binary thinking that deflected responsibility and blame toward groups that are skeptical of police. Finally, his insistence on the essentiality of police assumes that defunding the police would lead to complete absence of emergency response personnel, a line of thinking that jumped to defense of the Blue brotherhood. David’s discourse ultimately reifies not only the value of police work, but the necessity of their maintenance of the Thin Blue Line.

Another participant, Greg, similarly understood Blue Lives Matter through his negative experiences with public in the field. In addition, however, Greg accessed social capital in his brotherhood of officers to make sense of public scrutiny. The way in which Greg enacted these resources is revealed in his explanation of his attendance to an annual parade held for officers killed in the line of duty:

I mean I think that would be, in that situation I don't think you disrespect someone's family like that. This [parade] wasn't something new. [New England police departments] had been doing it for two years. To disrespect someone's kids and family, a fellow colleague in the town next to me that was murdered, I think it's beyond disrespectful…It's pretty disturbing to watch that stuff unfold in larger cities where, like I said, you could have an officer like myself go in there just to kind of keep the peace and you could have someone coming up to you and screaming at you and spitting at you for no reason for something that I didn't do or an isolated incident that occurred somewhere else and they generalize. But to see those things going on and the level of violence associated with it is pretty disturbing to watch

In line with the storytelling employed by David, Greg’s reference to the harassment experienced by police effectively sets up a rigid structure for understanding the behavior of police and the community. Just as Greg expressed “disturbance” about how such confrontations unnecessarily generalize police under one personality, his discourse works to generalize opponents of policing as characteristically aggressive and disrespectful. Under this structure, opponents of police are painted as violent and confrontational against the officers that are just there to “keep the peace.” Greg’s focus at the beginning of this response on the disrespect paid to police officers reflects how the social network he has in police officers informed the way he understands Blue Lives Matter. While the social networks demonstrated in the present quotation were not exhibited by David, the way Greg accessed his social capital to make sense of this experience illuminates how proponents of Blue Lives Matter discourse act on their experience. Rather than demonstrating concern for the multitude of Black and Brown lives taken by police and the lack of justice paid to the loss of their lives, this participant displayed a stronger loyalty to the lives of his co-workers. As such, his concern was with disrespecting the families of fallen officers, not with disrespecting the lives of fallen citizens. The discourse used by David and Greg seems to be borne of negative experiences in their occupational field as well as in their personal lives. Feeling unsupported and disrespected by their communities, it follows logically why these officers were drawn to protect their Blue brotherhood. It is in this way, through a denigration of the out-group/police opponents, that police proponents of Blue Lives Matter reified group loyalty.

Unlike monolithic perspectives of the ‘police character,’ it is of critical importance that the statements of Blue Lives Matter proponents not be taken at face value, as approximately half of interview participants comparatively displayed a matrix of capital resource use that is clearly at odds with their colleagues. As such, it is this population of police officers that require an enhanced analysis to understand the ways in which they came to orient themselves against Blue Lives Matter rhetoric.

*Outward Presentation: Blue Lives Matter Opponents*

The group of interviewees discussed above identified themselves as supporters of Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line discourse through their explicit statements and unconscious cognitions. Nearly half of participants, however, positioned themselves in direct opposition to these beliefs. As such, the outward as well as the internal processes of these opponents took on different dimensions than their police colleagues. While these disparate groups shared the technique of accessing their cultural capital, these officers introduced social capital as a resource in new ways. This new social capital centered on the community served by police, as these officers exhibited stronger social network ties to individuals and groups that they work to protect. Such ties during this era of police-citizen tension reflect these officers’ desire to work towards mutual understanding, respect, and trust. Participants Eric and James similarly communicated their disagreement with the politicization of policing, underscoring the inability to mend relationships with connections to divisive discourse, imagery, and behavior:

Eric: Whether police officers like it or not, the Thin Blue Line has become a political statement to some. My response to them was that we're not Republicans, we're not Democrats. We don't do politics. We serve the community and we're not going to get caught up in something that is potentially divisive for people.

James: I think, until real action is made, this problem is not going to be solved. And I know Blue Lives Matter is, I appreciate the support, but it's not authentic. It's not real. It's divisive, and I think it's insulting to anyone that has an opposing viewpoint.

Demonstrating a concern for the impact that Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line discourse have on police-citizen relationships, these police officers called for a de-politization of policing. This call for de-politicization is simultaneously a call for an elimination of binary thinking among police, as removing politics from the occupational field could allow for the consideration of new ways of understanding and interpreting police work. In this way, they took on a nuanced view of these issues that sought to respect, understand, and initiate active discourse with the community they protect. James and Eric’s orientation towards the unbiased treatment of their community reflects a strong divergence from the group loyalty exhibited by proponents of Blue Lives Matter and TBL. Rather, these officers tended to see this opportunity for enhanced open-mindedness as achieved through active community discourse.

Discussing George Floyd’s murder, Harry highlighted this opportunity for open mindedness:

That's the most disturbing part of that video, is [the officer’s] indifference to what was going on. Like, ‘Go ahead and tape it. I want you to see it.’ That's the type of things that make it almost impossible for police to recover from. That's why it's so important for us to go out and give that best community service we can. That's why it's so important for us to, whether they want it or not, to train our folk in diversity training. Have people from different communities come in and talk about their experience. You don't have to like what they say, but you need to respect what they say. You got to understand, that's their truth. It's hard to have to prove that we're not like that. Is that the public's job to say, ‘Well, we should really back them?’ It's our job to prove it, every day, every minute, every interaction, that we are not like that, that they don't have to be in fear every time they see a police officer, because that is a true reality for a lot of people.

In this passage, Harry underscored the importance of respect, a value that he saw as glaringly absent from the arrest and subsequent murder of George Floyd. Further than respect, he commented on the importance of working to understand life from another’s perspective, a vital step in proving to the public that the police are deserving of their trust. As is understood by Harry, building social networks among community members with the foundation of mutual respect and understanding is vital for broadening police perspectives and experiences. When officers maintain a binary, politicized framework of their occupational field, they effectively encourage a parallel response among citizens and exacerbate the mistrust between themselves and their community. Conversely, a mindset of openness toward the implications of policework on the public opens doors for communication. Harry’s social and cultural experiences in the field working to understand and build trusting relationships with his community opened his mind to the nuances of police work, something that he developed a passion for sharing among his colleagues. It is this kind of social connection to the community that every officer opponent of Blue Lives Matter discourse exhibited in their interviews (and proponents did not). This understanding reveals important implications for the future of policing, particularly the prospect of community policing to encourage fostering social networks between police and community. Such a promising indication, however, is complicated by results that reveal more nuanced dimensions to this revelation.

*Discourses of Responsibility and Blame*

Although the outward opponents of Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line rhetoric discussed above accessed capital resources in a way that appears quite disparate from proponents, both groups of interview participants ultimately displayed some sort of language which abided by TBL discourse and deflected responsibility of police-citizen tension. When discussing the implications of this summer’s protests and ‘defund the police’ movement, officers Eric and Fred expressed a deep fear for the safety and order of our future cities:

Eric: I certainly support people's rights to peacefully protest. I think that what's happened in some cities, like Portland, where there's essentially been, what I would call, nightly anarchy for over 150 days or what's happened in Seattle is not very helpful to our democracy and is not good for our society.

Fred: I think what you see is, you got to go, ‘Okay, that was bad. It looks bad. It did look bad.’ But there's always something more to it. And I try and keep that in mind when I look at stuff like that. Let the truth come out rather than jumping to conclusions and burning down Minneapolis.

While the opinions displayed in these quotes do not outwardly adhere to Blue Lives Matter ideology/discourse, the negativity surrounding citizen unrest in Seattle and Minneapolis effectively employs Thin Blue Line discourse to verify the essentiality of policing. The logical thread drawn by Erica and Fred between protest and “anarchy”/“burning down Minneapolis” works to equate protest with the complete absence of emergency personnel. As such, this discourse rejects protest as a valuable tool for change to instead reify narratives that uphold the police as a prerequisite for lawful society. Although their language suggests that protesting is not inherently offensive to Eric and Fred, they effectively generalized protesters as anarchist, detrimental to society, and destructive/violent. The contradictory opinions and implications made in these quotes serve to exacerbate the rift between police and public, as the disparities between outward presentations of belief and internal beliefs seem insincere and manipulative to disenfranchised Americans.

Along these lines, nearly all of the participants in the present study participated in a discourse of responsibility/blame that invoked themselves as the ‘good’ police officer misidentified according to generalizations of the occupation. Using this fixed narrative of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ officer, a binary mindset is again displayed by these officers in service of deflecting responsibility. Another quotation by Isaac showed a confliction between an adherence to this binary narrative and a nuanced way of understanding his role in policing:

I believe I like the Thin Blue Line and that's been around for years and years and years and decades because it represents like the blue uniform, but it represents like we're going to stand between chaos and order and we're going to give our lives for anybody no matter what, and we're going to wrap... But Blue Lives Matter...I just don't believe in it. I think it was just a defense. Somebody felt uncomfortable by BLM, which is their burden and they should have just slowed down and realized what people were talking about. And yes, I think people have weaponized Black Lives Matter and turned it and there's some... I mean, we've seen that right in Atlanta, the guy was funneling money, the guy was spewing hay. But that's not everybody in the organization. It's not fair.

While clearly aware of some of the negative implications of Blue Lives Matter discourse and, ostensibly, opposed to what it stands for, Isaac simultaneously accepted Thin Blue Line rhetoric by stating his role as a protection from chaos. It should be noted, however, that Isaac makes an important distinction when employing Thin Blue Line imagery of his role. Rather than viewing his police role through a binary framework under which certain individuals are endowed police protection and others are not, Isaac conceptualizes his role in the Thin Blue Line as a position which requires him to “give [his life] for anybody no matter what.” Isaac’s argument ultimately, however, returned to a discourse of responsibility that identified himself as a ‘good’ policeman. Isaac was not alone in this tendency, as almost all research participants made reference to rampant generalizations of the ‘police character’ which overlooks the ‘bad’ employee in any profession or circumstance. What this argument ignores is the responsibility of every member of the police community to make steps toward understanding and respecting the lived reality of Americans. While it is, ostensibly, true that a ‘bad’ egg exists wherever you look for one, it is this deflection of responsibility on behalf of police officers that inhibits police reform and public trust. Individual officers must come to a place where they are able to recognize their own shortcomings and work to find ways of engaging thoughtfully with the individual people they police. As the results of this survey indicate, it is this kind of positive engagement with the public that engenders social networks with the public and fosters the cultural capital required for our police to adequately appreciate the unique characteristics of the populations they serve. It should be noted, however, that it is this same openminded engagement that is required of the public for police to feel supported in their efforts to reform. It will be a mutual growth effort from police departments and the American public from across the nation that can effectively engender the positive, diverse social networks and cultural experiences necessary for reform.

*Community Networks*

The results presented in this section reveal that individual officer cognitions regarding acceptance and/or rejection of occupational reform are extremely diverse and contingent. Results also reveal, however, that this kind of work *can* and *has* been done. Two interview participants, Harry and James, are examples of officers that have effectively embraced an outlook towards police work that accepts personal responsibility. Such an acknowledgment of policing’s structural, ideological, and behavioral flaws should serve as an inspiration, a roadmap for public and police to find our way toward genuine accountability for the implications of our words and actions:

Harry: If you're on the other side, and you're like, ‘Well, see I knew this was going on, and it probably got exposed.’ Well, I can understand that too, because we do make mistakes and stuff does get out there. Now, I'm not one of the officers to make excuses or say why it's not our fault. I'm more into acknowledgement, and how we're going to improve and not have those things happen again.

James: The thing I won't say to you is I won't say, well, teachers, because I guarantee an officer is going to say this to you. ‘Well, there are bad teachers, there are bad doctors, there are bad this.’ I don't think there's any room for bad police officers. There's no room for that. And I don't think we should just accept that as the answer. I think we have to say, how do we change the system to ensure that we don't get bad police officers?

What James and Harry demonstrated in their acceptance of responsibility was a degree of humility that was absent among the rest of this study’s participants. With the willingness to implicate themselves as part of the problem, these officers effectively and vitally implicate themselves as part of the solution. James’ suggestion that we "change the system to ensure we don’t get bad police officers” is simplistic in light of the present study’s findings. Rather than uniformly acculturating to a generalizable occupational ethos, the interviews in this study highlight that one’s orientation towards police work is deeply intertwined with the capital that they bring to and build within this occupational field. Fostering social networks and positive experiences between police and public will be central to a future in which trust, understanding, and respect are reciprocally shared between the American public and their police officers.

CONCLUSION

The present research study has discovered that monolithic analyses of police acculturation fail to accurately map the cognitions of American police officers. This qualitative examination, rather indicates that the opposite is true. Through the interviewing process, each of these 12 police officers revealed both the external and internal dimensions of their thought processes, from how they perceive the communities they police to how they make meaning of Blue Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line discourse. Chan (2001) and Campeau’s (2015) respective applications of Bordieuan capital theory are taken up by this study to similarly assess how police make meaning of their field. Social and cultural capital are, therefore, employed as a theoretical lens through which this study’s police interviews were analyzed.

Accordingly, the patterns revealed in the findings section above center around how these police participants access social and cultural capital in disparate capacities. The participant’s multi-dimensional, unique perceptions of police work ultimately coalesce to reveal four important patterns of cognition and behavior. Firstly, individual officer perceptions of their role in the community is mediated by their socio-cultural connection to the communities they police. This trend additionally prevailed in officer cognitions of Blue Lives Matter, revealing that officers who presented themselves as ideologically opposed to this rhetoric accessed positive cultural and social capital within the community. Third, proponents of Blue Lives Matter discourse, comparatively accessed negative cultural experiences in the community as well as positive social networks in the police community. Finally, both proponents and opponents of Blue Lives Matter ideology participated in a discourse of responsibility/blame that centered around Thin Blue Line dialogue. Ultimately, the present research converges with scholars of Bordieuan cultural theory in finding that it is the interaction between habitus and field which generates practice (Chan 2001, Campeau 2015, Fielding 1988).

The way these officers came to negotiate their individual policing habitus’ generated the subsequent behaviors they exhibited in the field. While it would prove impossible to assess the cultural experiences that each unique police officer brings to the job, this finding maintains promising implications for future police reform. It is possible that fostering positive cultural and social connections between the police and public could serve as a small step towards rebuilding trust among these groups. For, in the end, it will require vulnerability on both sides to engender genuine reform in police habitus and field (Heslop 2011, Loftus 2010).

Limitations to this study are noted below. Firstly, the sample size of 12 participants is not large enough to be representative of the entire police population. Additionally, the self-selecting nature of interviewing means that this study’s participants could have a vested, biased interest for participating that would skew findings. To combat these factors, both the officer’s outward presentations of themselves and their internal thought processes were analyzed. Future studies, however, could take further steps to control unknown variables by significantly increasing the quantity of interview participants. The findings presented here, however, should not be dismissed for the stated limitations. Rather, the frameworks used and results presented in this research should be absolved into popular analyses of police culture for the purpose of growing a broader collection of literature that conceptualizes police officers as individuals undergoing an iterative and contingent process of cultural assimilation and/or rejection. It is from this lens that we can begin to understand American policing from a new perspective. An abiding scholarly commitment to the ‘police character,’ coupled with a nation-wide, rapid escalation of police mistrust has proved to be an obstacle for investigation and publication of nuanced police analyses. It is in these especially unsettled times, however, that the police experience of negotiating a changing, uncharted field, is exacerbated (Campeau 2015, Swidler 1986). Without research dedication to fully conceptualize this generative moment in police culture, scholarly and public understanding of our protective institution will continue to confound the unique meaning-making processes of discrete officers with the accepted police caricature. Such a fate would prove tragic for a future wherein Americans restore their trust in those sworn to protect them, police genuinely reciprocate this trust and work *continues* between public and police that seeks mutual understanding, respect, and connection.

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