

Police Responses to a Course in Psychology

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Although much police activity involves dealing with human behavior and mental health, policemen typically receive little training in behavioral science concepts and techniques. Recent events have dramatized the need for such training, and some efforts are being made to provide it.

This paper describes a psychology course which was tailored to meet the needs of policemen. The goals of the course were to provide a better understanding of human behavior and to promote police interest in further education and training. Police evaluations of the course are analyzed with reference to these goals, and the implications for further training of policemen are discussed.

IN THE LIGHT of recent national events, the relationship between police activities and human behavior has become increasingly more apparent to the community. As an institution for mediating human behavior, the police have had a long history of sanctioned intervention in the activities of the community, but the public has generally been unaware of much of this work. However, the proliferation of mass media and rapid communication, the growth of population, and the increasing concern with social problems have heightened the sensitivity of more citizens to the workings of society, including the activities of the police.

Since the police deal with some of society's most dangerous problems, their activities become more subject to public scrutiny as the problems themselves become more threatening.

On the other hand, since most citizens' contacts with the police are in the area of traffic control, there is little general understanding of the scope and significance of police work or its relationship to the mental health of the community. Similarly, the policeman's need for some knowledge of psychology may not be widely appreciated.

Those familiar with police activities, however, can readily attest to this need, and there is evidence to bear them out. It has been estimated that about half of the requests for assistance received by urban police departments involve domestic and family problems.¹ Moreover, these problems are among the most dangerous

¹ Elaine Cumming, Ian M. Cumming, and Laura Edell, "Policeman as Philosopher, Guide and Friend," *Social Problems*, Winter 1965, pp. 276-86.

which the policeman faces. Over 20 per cent of line-of-duty fatalities and about 40 per cent of line-of-duty injuries among policemen, nationally, occur during responses to family disturbances.²

It has also been found that the police and courts play a significant role, particularly among the lower social class, in bringing psychiatric patients to treatment.³ These figures do not include the numerous encounters between the police and people with momentary or prolonged emotional disturbances, "crank" characters who call to complain about imaginary injustices, or genuinely needy persons whom the police may help to contact social agencies, find jobs, or obtain temporary meals and lodging.

Some city government and police officials have recognized this need, and various programs have been implemented to improve the policeman's skills in dealing with human behavior. These include attempts to improve screening procedures for the selection of police candidates,⁴ on-the-job training in human relations,⁵ and continuing consultation and training for police officers about problems they encounter in the line of duty.⁶ Such programs attempt to

bridge the gap between the knowledge and skills policemen need and their often extremely limited training in human behavior.

This paper reports some of the results of a psychology course for policemen which was designed to meet the problem. Members of the Austin (Texas) Police Department recognized the need for additional police training. In the past the training staff of the department had held several workshops and training sessions to improve specific aspects of police work. The training staff hoped that a formal course in psychology which offered university credit would achieve two results. First, it would provide better understanding of a subject directly relevant to police work. Second, it might stimulate those enrolled in the course to take further university-level courses, thus upgrading the overall level of the police department.

One apparently unique feature was that, unlike most such innovative programs, this one was not prompted by a pressing community conflict. Austin and its police department were not free from problems, of course; no city or police organization enjoys such a condition. But the absence of heated conflict permitted the kind of planning that is not always possible under more urgent conditions.

A survey of the police department found that about forty of the approx-

² Morton Bard, "Extending Psychology's Impact through Existing Community Institutions," *American Psychologist*, June 1969, pp. 610-12.

³ S. M. Miller and Elliot G. Mishler, "Social Class, Mental Illness and American Psychiatry," *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 1959, pp. 174-99.

⁴ Clifton Rhead, Arnold Abrams, Harry Trosman, and Philip Margolis, "The Psychological Assessment of Police Candidates," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, May 1968, pp. 1575-80.

⁵ Melvin P. Sikes and Sidney E. Cleveland, "Human Relations Training for Police and Community," *American Psychologist*, October 1968, pp. 766-69.

⁶ Morton Bard and Bernard Berkowitz, "Training Police as Specialists in Family Crisis Intervention: A Community Psychology Action Program," *Community Mental Health Journal*, August 1967, pp. 315-17; Irving N. Berlin, "Mental Health Consultation with a Juvenile Probation Department," *Crime and Delinquency*, January 1964, pp. 67-73; Philip A. Mann, "Establishing a Mental Health Consultation Program with a Police Department," *Community Mental Health Journal* (in press).

imately three hundred members expressed interest in such a course. The training staff of the police department contacted the dean of the Extension Division of the University of Texas at Austin to discuss the possibility of a psychology course specifically for policemen to be offered by the University. The dean arranged for me to serve as instructor for the course and also found that some funds were available to defray part of the tuition costs.

Two sections of the course were offered at different times of the day so that officers could attend one or the other section on their off-duty time. The policemen themselves paid a small portion of the tuition and purchased their own textbooks. Each participant earned three semester hours of credit at the University of Texas.

During enrollment, ninety-four police officers, representing every level of the department, from recruits through assistant chief, signed up for the course. In addition, a few officers from the state police force and from neighboring cities also enrolled. Seventy policemen completed the course; the others dropped out because of scheduling conflicts which prevented them from attending the required number of class meetings.

Design of the Course

In light of my previous experience as consultant to an urban police department, I designed the course to provide an introduction to psychology that would be particularly relevant to the needs of policemen. The content of the course consisted of readings and lectures in introductory psychology, human development, social psychology, and abnormal psychology. Special emphasis was given to social interaction processes at the interper-

sonal, group, and community levels. Problems in racial and ethnic relations were discussed; social class differences in attitudes, values, and behavior were examined; and the phenomena and treatment of behavior disorders were studied. Group discussions focused on problem situations which policemen might typically encounter. The discussions were structured by presenting problems in police work which illustrated one psychological point or another. They served an important function by offering members of the department a rare opportunity to share their experiences and attitudes in spite of differences in level of command and area of specialization.

Evaluation of the Course

At the end of the course, an evaluation form was filled out by fifty-five of the policemen. Evaluations were not obtained from the remainder, who missed the session for various reasons. The replies to the questionnaire were anonymous; the officers were told that their responses would in no way reflect on them and that they could be completely frank and honest in their evaluations.

OVERALL EVALUATION

The policemen were asked to rate the overall value of the course on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing "Very Poor" and 5 indicating "Excellent." The average rating given the course was 4.25. Four participants rated the course "3" and the remainder rated it "4" or "5."

Another index of the value of the course was provided by three questions designed to assess the participants' desire for another course. Of the fifty-five respondents, fifty-two answered "Yes" to the questions, "Do

you think another course like this should be offered?" and "If another course were offered, would you attend?" Somewhat fewer, forty-two, said they would attend such a course even if no college credit were offered for attending.

When asked to indicate their goals in taking the course, the policemen's responses ranged from "desire to obtain college credit" to "want to improve my effectiveness as a policeman by understanding better the people I work with." Fifty-one of the fifty-five said their goals in taking the course were at least partially fulfilled by the course.

OTHER EFFECTS

One question was especially pertinent to the goal of improving the policeman's effectiveness in doing his job. The policemen were asked, "Has taking this course changed you in any way? If so, how?" Thirty-eight participants answered "Yes," eleven answered "No," and six did not respond to this question. Those answering "Yes" indicated that they felt they had changed in the following ways: Seventeen said they felt they had a better understanding of behavior which they had previously considered bewildering or senseless; eight said they felt they were more tolerant and sympathetic toward others (three of these attributed this change to a better understanding of themselves, their own immaturities, or their own families); and six said they now took more time to evaluate a situation than they had previously and felt themselves more patient and receptive to other ways of looking at behavior. In addition, three said they understood their own children better, two said they had become interested in learning more about psychology,

and two indicated that they now had more confidence in dealing with educated people.

To determine whether the program had fulfilled its goal of stimulating interest in further education, we asked the following question: "If another course were offered, what topics would you like to see covered?" Responses to this question included fourteen areas of study, which were further classified into three categories: (1) courses directly related to police work and criminology, (2) psychology courses, and (3) other courses, including the humanities, sciences, and languages. A desire for courses in the "other" category was regarded as an expression of interest in the general pursuit of knowledge, in contrast to a desire for police and criminology courses, which was considered to indicate a preference for specific, work-related training. The officers were also asked to indicate the grade they had received on the midterm examination. Table I shows the relationship between course preferences and grades.

Chi-square analysis of the figures in Table I reveals a significant relationship between the grade received and the type of future course preferred: $X^2 = 12.09$, $df = 4$, $p < .02$. Those who received a grade of C voiced a

TABLE I
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FUTURE COURSE
PREFERENCES AND GRADE RECEIVED

Future Course Preference	Grade Received			
	A	B	C	Total
Psychology	8	11	1	20
Police Topics	3	6	8	17
Other	7	13	2	22
Total	18	30	11	59*

* Some respondents listed more than one future course preference.

disproportionate preference for courses that deal directly with the criminal aspects of police work rather than with psychology or other courses. Those receiving A's and B's indicated a preference for police courses much less frequently in proportion to their numbers. This finding suggests that those who did well in the course were more interested in broader educational goals. Whether this is cause, effect, or a combination of the two cannot be ascertained from the data.

Discussion

The responses to the evaluation form suggest that the course was highly attractive to the policemen and that they felt it met an important need. However, this enthusiasm might also have tended to make their estimates of favorable change in themselves stronger than any actual changes which took place in their behavior. In any case, the fact that the number of policemen who reported changes in themselves was smaller than those who expressed a desire to attend another course suggests that these estimates of change were not entirely due to enthusiasm.

Evidence of real behavioral change is more difficult to obtain. Supervisory personnel in the department have reported noticing changes in the handling of disturbed persons and improvements in interrogation procedures which have led to better police work. They report that the policemen make more of an effort to understand the subject's point of view than they did previously and that this is directly a result of the course. In addition, a Spanish language course for policemen has been planned in an attempt to improve police relations with the large Mexican-American community in the Austin area. Sweeping changes

in behavior cannot be expected, of course, and the long-range benefits of such courses can be assessed only after a greater period of time. Moreover, the psychology course is only one of several recent changes in orientation and procedures.

Some immediate effects of the course can be found in the fact that several participants are now enrolled in other courses through the extension division of the university, and arrangements have been made with a nearby junior college to provide a more complete curriculum in police science, leading to an Associate of Arts degree.

That those most interested in broadening their educational goals were those who did best in the psychology course might be considered only a reflection of increased confidence among those who did well in their ability to do further college-level work, and an inclination among those who did not receive higher grades to concentrate on their immediate work roles. However, there was also a tendency for those with greater police experience to achieve higher grades than did the younger members of the department. This was somewhat surprising to the policemen themselves, since they expected that younger members, being more accustomed to studying, would perform better. To some extent, this phenomenon may reflect both the nature of the course and the situation of the men taking it. Since the course was oriented toward police work specifically, those with more experience in the field probably had more specific examples in their own work to which they could apply the course material, thus making the course more relevant and understandable. Younger policemen may have had their hands full

simply with learning some of the more basic procedures, thus being able to give the psychology course only secondary attention.

One way to overcome this problem, which was suggested by some of the younger officers, is to offer such material from the very start of recruit training, thereby making it more continuous and also enabling the men to participate in situational training so that they can more readily apply psychological principles to their daily work.

This suggestion has been implemented by means of a program of psychological consultation in which policemen have an opportunity to discuss psychological aspects of their

work with a consultant on a continuous basis. Not only will this promote better practical application of psychological concepts, but it will also enable the psychologist to become more useful to policemen because of his greater familiarity with their activities.

The course itself, then, may be seen as one of a series of important steps which can lead to improved police effectiveness beyond mere efficiency in making arrests, and can also serve to promote broader interest in raising the educational level of policemen. Although this course was a significant beginning, it is only part of the answer to the need for continuing police training in human relations and behavioral science.