

Constructs of Self within the Emerging Professional Identity of Beginning Police Officers

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Professional identities emerge from complex interactions between ontogenetic selves and socio-historical and socio-cultural dimensions of the practice setting. This paper presents results from a longitudinal qualitative study of six early-career police officers as they transition from the Police College into the practice setting(s) of policing and in determining their specialisation. This research employed a combination of interview and observation methods within a case study methodology, exploring the learning of the participants over a three-year period. This paper presents the experiences of three of these case studies. Evident in this research was a complex relational interdependence between the self and social in the processes of learners constructing understandings of professional practice and identity.

Keywords: professional identity, constructs of self, workplace learning, socio-cultural learning theory.

Introduction

Understandings of learning and development within the Vygotskian tradition provide great insights into the relationship between the person/learner and the social and cultural contexts in which learning and development occurs. Models of development that extend from this tradition include such ideas as cognitive apprenticeship (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and activity theory (Engeström, 1987). Each of these attempt to explain the processes of learning in and through situated practice. In particular, the advent of communities of practice marked the passage from a perspective of learning as an individual cognitive event to one which is socially situated (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010). Most of these models, though, tend to privilege the social over the individual often as a counter-response to the predominance, at the time in Western literature, of individualised cognitive viewpoints of learning (Billett, 2009). However, understanding development, as proposed by Vygotsky, is at the point of intersection of the various elements of development (e.g. nature, sources, results, etc) in which we can witness the complex changes occurring (Veresov, 2010). As Veresov (2010, p. 84) emphasis added) writes, 'no other developmental theory in psychology ... describes and theoretically reflects all these aspects of the process of development in their interrelations and unity'. Likewise consideration must be afforded to the interrelation and unity of the individual self with the socio-historical/cultural space. Central to this idea is the agency of the individual learner in drawing upon their previous experiences to place value upon, and shape future learning opportunities. This paper presents a framework of analysis, extended from the work of Billett (2006), which

attempts to present the relational interdependence between the individual and social, and applies this framework to an investigation of the development of identity within early-career police officers through the examination of three case studies from a three-year longitudinal study.

Understanding adult development

Development, understood as a complex process of qualitative change and reorganization of certain systems of thought and being (Veresov, 2010), is not isolated solely to an examination of the changes in children. If the premise of an argument of life-long learning is accepted then it is reasonable to lay claim that development continues throughout life, including adulthood, rather than ceasing at the realisation of an ideal adult form. Such an argument is not new with authors, such as Bonk and Kim (1998), arguing, in particular, for the consideration of socio-cultural theories of development considered within adult contexts, in particular the extensions of concepts such as the zone of proximal development and scaffolding. Although adult development has resonances with the ideas of the Vygotskian tradition, it should be noted that Vygotsky worked only with children, and their development. Therefore, a direct translation of ideas, such as scaffolding, from the work of Vygotsky to an adult environment is not necessarily possible, or favourable. As Malloch & Cairns (2011, p. 7) contest, 'sophisticated adult learners may operate as self-scaffolders or even without any necessary scaffolding as it is current conceptualized'. Adult learners bring to the new experience a range of previously formed dispositions to learning and practice. Therefore they are more able to critically assign value to particular

learning opportunities and discount others (Billett, 2006). Unlike development in children, adults have acquired complex and sophisticated approaches to learning as a legacy of previous interactions and experiences. Adults therefore have greater independence in their learning approaches, and although developing in both thought and being, require a new conceptualization of the complexities of development beyond that which is offered by Vygotsky.

A particularly useful Vygotskian concept for the consideration of development in adults is the 'double process of learning' where the development of each function occurs twice, on the interpersonal, or social level, and then the intrapersonal, or individual level (Greenfield, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). The double process of learning can be understood through the description provided by Vygotsky (1978) of the experience of a child unsuccessfully reaching for an object (Veresov, 2010). The meaning of such an action is interpreted by the mother to be representative of pointing; an action to which the mother has already attached meaning. The reaction to the child's action, and therefore the representation of meaning, comes from the mother. The primary meaning of the action is established by others, however this meaning is interpreted and understood by the individual actor (the child) in relation to their previous experiences. The new child, it can reasonably be suggested, has limited experiences to relate to, but through repeated reinforcement comes to understand the expected meaning in their actions. Only later does the child begin to associate the action as having this other function of pointing at which stage they internally translate the meaning and utilised this in future events as an action of pointing. The action and meaning are transferred and tested in new settings with both elements being refined over time to contribute to an array of possible options and meanings in pointing (e.g. expressing anger such as a parent pointing their finger at a naughty child, requesting an object to be passed, or merely pointing direction). The making sense of a particular action resides with the individual, but is constituted within their understanding of expectations of the social world (Schatzki, 2002).

Such processes of learning can be somewhat understood within the domain of adult development, and, with respect to this study, the development of police officers. For example, a new police officer's actions in the daily tasks of policing, such as talking to drivers when they stop vehicles or people they suspect of breaking the law, are shaped by the responses they receive, both from these people, but also fellow police officers. Where the new officer's actions delivery a desired response (e.g. a loud assertion brings about compliance) then this action becomes associated with a meaning, which is then refined to the myriad of situations where an officer requires a similar response. The difference in the example of the police officer to the young child is that the officer often brings to the situation of policing previous actions that already carry a range of meanings developed outside the policing context.

The new police officer brings to the experience of the practice setting pre-existing dispositions and histories formed through the many interactions of their life. The foundation of the understanding of self is socially influenced and founded in socio-historical, socio-cultural and situational sources (Billett, 2001). The individual's perceptions and beliefs are founded in the reinforcements afforded by the social worlds in which they have come to learn. As contended by George Herbert Mead (as cited in Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000), the individual is an other before they are a self. Knowledge, learning and intelligence are the products of the mutual reorganisation of the individual and the environment (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000) with the social and individual being interdependent and inseparable. Learning is an interaction between the social community and individual mind, it is therefore able to viewed as the outcome of an 'enabled active intentional interactional engagement in experience and thinking (Malloch & Cairns, 2011). Learning within a workplace is an interplay between the individual's dispositions and engagement in practice and the affordances of the context and workplace (Billett, 2002). An individual's dispositions determine whether they value a particular form of knowledge enough to be willing to engage in the effortful activity required to create and develop that knowledge. As stated by Billett (2006, p. 56), 'participation and learning ... are linked ontogenetically to individuals' subjectivities and identities, and also to their development'.

Study approach

This study was undertaken as longitudinal case studies with six beginning police officers within the New South Wales Police Force, over a period of three years as they transitioned from the Police College, to confirmation as a constable and the beginning of processes of specialisation. A focus on policing as a practice setting provides a unique opportunity to consider the relational interdependence of the self and social, as, the police context is heavily dominated by social and cultural expectations of behaviour and conduct (Chan, et al., 2003; Fielding, 1988; Loftus, 2010). The very nature of the constructs such as uniform and hierarchy, seniority and rank, provides a fertile ground for a dominant social norm. Therefore, it is suggested that if evidence exists within this context for a role of the individual in co-constructing practice and understanding then such should also be evident in less socially dominant settings. The aim of the study was a focus on the formation of identity and the creation of self in relation to the social and cultural influences present within the practice setting.

By utilizing a case study approach to this research it is possible to extend previous work in police settings and undertake a deeper exploration of the individual's experience. Working within a case study methodology there is a need to extensively draw upon multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). The sources of the information in this research were a combination of field observations and participant inter-

views, which were able to be compared through the process of data analysis. These approaches are similar to the collection strategies of previous studies focused on policing practice (Beck & Wilson, 1998; Chan, Devery, & Doran, 2003; Reuss-Ianni, 1984; Shanahan, 2000). The observations and interviews were conducted with each participant in six monthly iterations across a three-year period, from the time the participant attested from the Police College. This paper presents the experiences of three of the cases from within this larger study. The cases, known as Lachlan, Patrick and Eloise, are representative of the larger study group, but with case study approaches it is not possible to lay claim that these are generalisable to the entire New South Wales Police Force (Stake, 2000). Instead traits within these cases can be transferred to understandings of others, as is the intent of this research. Each of the presented cases highlights different aspects of the complex interrelatedness of the self and social in learning and development in workplace practice settings at a depth of understanding not possible through quantitative methods. The selected cases present a diversity of experience and are able to be used to describe the nature of the interrelation between the individual and the social.

Transitioning into a new workplace

A large number of new recruits to the New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF) come with previous workplace experiences. This comes as a result of the legal requirement for a person to have reached the age of 19 prior to being able to perform the role of a police officer, as well as a strategic recruitment program that has targeted experienced people. Within the cases studied in this research all participants had had a range of previous work experience, ranging from senior leadership roles, to a number of years working in a family business or packing shelves at a local supermarket. The participants, though, did share in common a process of transition from their previous self, often described with relation to their family, friends and employment, to a new 'policing' self, which placed new boundaries around each of these groups. Soeters (2000) asserts that a primary function of the traditional police or military academy is to isolate the new recruit in an environment designed to have them shed their previous self constructing in the process a new self and identity founded in the socially expected behaviours of the institution. These behaviours include deference to authority and respect for hierarchy, knowledge of the role and rank, and a permeating attitude of solidarity. Within the education of police entering the NSWPF this 'traditional' model is somewhat challenged by the parallel of a university education, though elements of this disciplining of the self are still evident. These elements take the form of the use of explicit tools such as uniform and rank as constructs of placing the individual within their role and daily parade and marching, but also less explicit discourse of identifying all members of the 'force' as being

part of a 'family'. Such dynamics create an interesting challenge to the new recruit in constructing a new identity whilst still aspiring to maintain individualised critical thought.

Lachlan

Within this study all participants made some transition from their 'old' selves to 'new' selves, however, the extent of this varied considerably and usually as a consequence of their reasons for joining the police. Lachlan, a male in his early 30's, decided to join the police after, what he describes, as a series of jobs with no hope or challenge. He had undertaken previous university studies, graduating in applied mathematics, but was most recently working packing shelves at a supermarket. He felt a social expectation, given that he was recently married, and expecting children, to begin working in a 'real' job. For him policing was a viable option that he had sometimes considered in the past, but it was not a passion of his. Therefore, although he accepted the expectations of the policing institution (expressed in rank, uniform, etc.) he was never really committed to seeing himself as part of the 'policing family'. Consequently he was quite critical of the dominant social practices and acutely aware of the pressure these were applying to his reconstruction of identity.

As a result of this critique of the social norms Lachlan initially struggled to succeed within policing. His first Field Training Officer (FTO), who was responsible for his initial workplace assessments, found him frustrating to work with, and, likewise, Lachlan had an equal response. Lachlan expressed that he found it difficult working in an environment where he was simply expected to just follow what he was told and not to question those of higher rank. He held strongly to a conviction, somewhat founded in his early work in mathematics, that there was a clear and factual truth that existed outside of an individual. This truth, in his opinion, overrode any socially constructed expectation. As such, he readily came into conflict with his FTO, and other police, as Lachlan could not understand the nature of social conformity expected. His construct of a police officer, as an act of employment, was founded in his previous workplace experiences with an expectation of independence and professionalism. Although he had difficulty fitting within the social norms he was able to slowly develop approaches to policing practice, which accommodated the cultural expectations and his personal desires and dispositions. Lachlan rationalized his behaviour considering the benefits of 'playing the game' that was expected. He did not sacrifice his individual identity to the social world, instead Lachlan participated in, and controlled, a complex process of negotiation of acceptability of practice accounting for both social and individual desires, whilst continuing to remain honest to his personal perspectives.

Patrick

Patrick presented as somewhat the polar opposite to Lachlan. Although being of a similar age to Lachlan, Patrick had long desired to be a police officer. For him the choice of joining the police was much more than simply an occupational decision, but a deliberate act in

realizing a long held image of himself. He was not simply 'joining' the police, but aspired to 'be' a police officer, i.e. act, think and be seen within his construct of the ideal police officer (e.g. authoritative, strong). Since he was quite young Patrick had been developing an image of what he understood it meant to be a police officer. His first recollection of interest in the police was when he met an officer as a young child in a shopping centre who was undertaking a promotion of police in the community. Patrick, from this interaction, began to form an idea of police as highly capable, physically strong, and intelligent members of society; an image almost akin to Plato's guardians. Upon leaving high school he doubted his ability to fulfill this aspiration as he felt that his academic results were not good enough. This hesitation was reinforced by his first wife who actively discouraged him from becoming a police officer. To replace the idea of being a police officer, Patrick engaged in similar work, at one stage being employed as security in the hospital industry, eventually working his way into management. Following the demise of his first marriage, and finding a more supportive partner, Patrick finally made the decision to apply and become a police officer.

Given his long held conviction to this role Patrick undertook to work hard to realise what he expected a police officer to be like; this was most clearly realised in his 'stats'. Each month the Local Area Command (LAC) publishes the 'stats' for individual officers and particular offences. Such reports record the number of arrests made, incidents attended, task completions and a range of other data. Patrick aspired to always be the top of his command's 'stats'. As such his daily practice was to undertake regular business checks, licensed-premises walk-throughs and to always respond to any incidents where possible. Patrick held strongly to a belief that a police officer should be responsive and visible. Therefore such practices were manifestations of his concept of his policing self, which were subsequently reinforced through the published 'stats' and social praise of his fellow officers. Patrick, unlike Lachlan, saw value in the social world of policing and therefore willingly conformed to the social norms and expectations as a way of ensuring that when the time came he would be supported by those around him. He strategically employed these approaches to ensure that he was appointed to a permanent role in his LAC, which was not normally possible for someone with so little experience. His approach was successful with his Commander creating a position for him to stay within the command. Patrick's approach was not naive conformity to dominant social norms, but a critical engagement with the social interpreted through the lens of aspirations and dispositions of his ontogenetic self.

Eloise

Eloise came to policing following a career in nursing spanning over 25 years. Her most recent role had been as a Nurse Unit Manager (NUM) within a large midwifery unit at a regional hospital. Within this role Eloise was a manager for over 30 staff and also responsible for the care of numerous patients. Through this experience she had

acquired formal qualifications in nursing, including post-graduate work in midwifery, as well as post-graduate qualifications in management. Therefore Eloise had, over a number of years, developed a clear sense of self as constructed within the social forms of nursing and management. Her transition to policing presented for her a challenge to this sense of self. For Eloise the challenge that presented for in policing was both in facing the physical demands of the training and work practice, but moreso reconstructing who she was and how she was seen by others. She was required to enter as a probationary constable, a rank described by a senior officer as being lower than that of a police dog, losing her role as leader and manager, and adapt to a practice which was about enforcement and control rather than care and nurturing.

Whilst this change presented as a challenge for Eloise to develop and create new senses of self, her responsiveness to the opportunities around her was very much viewed through the lens of her previous experience and understandings. Eloise, like Patrick, came to policing with preconceived notions of what a police officer should be like and how they should act. Some of these ideas came through her relationships with family and friends who had been police officers, as well as popular media and other sources of information. An important source of this construct was how Eloise had seen police act within her previous workplace, often in response to her calls. This also provided for her a driver to join the police as she saw, sometimes first-hand, the capability for police to make a difference in the world. Eloise came to understand police with the constructs of action and control. For her an ideal police officer was able to be in control of any situation and to subsequently make a difference to the ways people interacted. Therefore she entered policing with an anticipation and desire to make a difference and bring people, who had strayed, towards a defined understanding of acceptability.

Unlike both Lachlan and Patrick, during her early career phases Eloise continued to work part-time in her previous role. Therefore she did not have to make an absolute transition from the old to the new. However, it was within this unique arrangement that the transition, at least in Eloise's understanding, from a caring nurturing nurse to an authoritative police officer became most evident. Eloise began to attribute the skills that she already had as a NUM to her new identity as a police officer. In particular she retold the incident of one night when she had challenged a doctor's decision and also evicted a person from the ward, as being skills that had transferred from her role as a police officer, despite these same practices and skills being evident long before her police training. Likewise, for Eloise the opposite held true when she spoke about responding as a police officer to mentally ill people through drawing on her nursing identity (constructed as caring and nurturing) and skills. Eloise's practices as a police officer emerged as a complex interaction between her nursing and management knowledge, her preconceived notions of the role of police in society, and the cultural norms of the practice setting.

Implications

Extending socio-cultural learning theory into adult learning is possible, but unlike perspectives of child development greater consideration needs to be given the complex relational interdependence between the individual and social. The individual adult brings to the learning opportunity a range of pre-developed dispositions to learning, and constructs of self, which place particular value on certain practices and ways of being (Billett, 2006); such was clearly evident in the presented case studies. Lachlan had an understanding of policing solely as an occupation with little personal meaning beyond its immediate monetary rewards, and to a lesser extent the social status that being a police officer provided. Patrick, however, came to policing with an invested personal identity in what it meant to be a police officer. Consequently his openness to particular learning was quite different to that of Lachlan. For example Patrick strongly desired to be accepted in the social world and therefore aspired to please those around him so where he gained a level of acceptance into the world of policing, and reinforcing his identity. Lachlan, on the other hand, attempted to navigate the social world so where there was a level of pleasantness to his daily work routine, but he held no real desire for acceptance beyond that of a competent work colleague. Hence the evolution of his practice as a police officer was quite different to that of Patrick. It can be concluded that the adult learner is discerning when approaching particular practice settings interpreting and understanding the various social practices through a lens of personal histories and dispositions.

The dispositions, and histories, of the adult learner are grounded in their previous socially mediated experiences. They provide to the learner (and learning) a mechanism through which they can scaffold experience and subsequent development. As Malloch & Cairns (2011) suggests, the adult learner, as evidenced in this

study, can be self-scaffolding of their learning. For example, with Eloise her nursing knowledge, and experience in management, allowed her to interpret the intent of instruction from her superior police officers, and her experience allowed her to develop a structure within which her development could occur. She was also able to critically reflect between her two 'sites of knowledge' (i.e. nursing and policing) utilising knowledge and skills developed in one setting to compliment and extend her practice in the other. More importantly, the frameworks and experience of learning within nursing provided for her scaffolds to guide and assist her learning as a police officer. The same is evident with Lachlan and Patrick. Within each case study there was clear evidence of the learner being the designer, developer and responder to learning opportunities, often attempting to direct the teaching of the assigned FTO, and practice opportunities, to suit their particular learning needs and desires.

Conclusion

Understanding of development in adults needs to account for the pre-existing dispositions, histories and ontogenetic selves which the adult learner brings to the new practice experience. These constructs guide and shape the effortful task of learning and therefore determine the pathway and outcomes of processes of development. Whilst different people may act in similar ways, the meanings and intent of these actions are interpreted and understood through the myriad of lenses that constitute the individual's identity. The adult learner is not completely subjugated to the socially dominant culture and practices, but instead exercises agency in determining the most valuable pathway of learning for them. There is, therefore, opportunity for further exploration of the role of individual agency in shaping development, as suggested by Vygotsky in his analysis of play (Billett, 2006).

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Образы «Я» в условиях становления профессиональной идентичности начинающих полицейских

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Профессиональная идентичность рождается в результате сложного взаимодействия между личностью и социоисторическими и социокультурными факторами той среды, в которой происходит ее становление. В данной статье представлены результаты лонгитюдного качественного исследования, в центре которого находились шестеро начинающих полицейских, завершающих обучение в колледже полиции и приступающих к своей профессиональной деятельности, одновременно определяясь со специализацией. В трехлетнем исследовании становления молодых специалистов были использованы интервью и наблюдения в рамках метода конкретных ситуаций (casestudy). В статье рассматриваются три случая из шести и делается вывод о сложной взаимозависимости между личным и социальным в процессе формирования профессиональной деятельности и идентичности.

Ключевые слова: профессиональная идентичность, образы «Я», профессиональное обучение, социокультурная теория обучения.