

The Police as "A Container" – A Finnish Example

Introduction¹

My doctoral thesis deals with Finnish Police Culture during the Finnish Second Republic (1944-1997). In this paper I will try to open a new psychohistorical plane of thought concerning the Finnish Police culture. My method here is borrowed from the new psychoanalytically orientated feminist research. I try to think through the empirical material², which I have gathered up during in-depth interviews garnered from 53 policemen and from the archives of the Finnish police force. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and six hours. Some informants I interviewed as many as three times at their own request. I usually recruited my informants by placing an advertisement in police personnel newspapers and magazines which reached over four thousand policemen. I also got informants by recommendations from the interviewed policemen. Only two policemen refused to be interviewed. The transcribed corpus of interviews is nearly one thousand pages long.

In addition to the interviews I have also used more traditional sources of information. I have gone through the archives of The National Bureau of Investigation, the archives of The Finnish Special Branch, the archives of The Flying Squad of Finnish Police, the archives of The Finnish Home Office and also archives from two city police departments (Helsinki and Mikkeli).

In my research I have continuously kept my theme of research in mind and have screened the archives thematically. In this paper I present one case study. I hold this case to be quite emblematic regarding my theme. With this case I will try to conceptualise the containing role of the Finnish police culture in a national group-fantasy setting. However I claim that the role of the policemen studied here has some ontologically overarching interfaces with the policing in Britain and Germany, albeit I also understand that there surely are huge differences between the Finnish and the British and also in the German police culture.

This paper was first delivered in the conference "The Future of Psychohistory" at the Ampleforth Abbey, in Great Britain. As regarding to the future of psychohistory, I presented my way as an optional one: That is by listening carefully to the tones of the empirical material. My interest in this paper is how large issues can be represented in small ways. What I am going to do here is to make my informants speak for themselves. That is why I have to quote extensively.³

¹ This paper has been financially funded by The Finnish Work Environment Fund.

² cf. Seigfried (1996), p. 7; Braidotti (1994), pp. 1-14; Braidotti (2002), pp. 2-5.

³ cf. Alford (1997), *passim*; see also Sloterdijk (1987), p. 390.

My theoretical toolbox is filled with psychoanalyst W. R. Bion's concept of container function.⁴ It also includes attachment theories for adults⁵ (originally Peter Fonagy's mentalisation of the unconscious anxiety⁶) and the tripartite model of categories of experience put forward by psychoanalysts Thomas H. Ogden and C. Fred Alford.⁷

Theory and methods

The Professor of Government and Politics C. Fred Alford writes in his book about Evil that "the root of evil is the experience of uncontained, undifferentiated dread." He continues by claiming that "we are evil when, instead of knowing our dread, we become it, trying to inflict it on others, as though it were a thing." Whilst the psychopaths are the extreme examples, Alford reminds us that we all have psychopathic moments of not knowing and just acting out our uncontained unconscious rage. Policemen are no exception to this group psychological rule of containment.⁸

The case presented here⁹ tries to illustrate how a sort of psychopathic identification process occurred in an organisational setting in one municipal police department in Finland and how it is possible to conceptualise it psychohistorically. I use here an idea of a container function. I understand it as a contrasting pair of psychic containment: a psychic process of interaction between container-contained in which people learn to cope with their overwhelming feelings by using others as containers. These almost physically felt feelings come from one's own imagination, but are produced by one's own environment.

"Pertsä" (name changed) is a retired policeman from one municipal police district. He is nowadays on a retirement allowance because of psychic reasons. He was referred to psychiatric consultation concerning his ability to work after there had been several complaints about his way of policing. He told me (after his interview session) that he had some battery cases in court proceedings in the spring of 2002. Pertsä's retirement took place in the mid-nineties. That was approximately at the same time when Finland was partly beginning to recuperate from the Great recession.

I see Pertsä's deeds and actions to represent an emblematic case of distorted containment process in the inter-subjective levels of policing, police culture and society in his immediate surroundings. In a way he can be seen as a native informant in a light which postcolonial feminism studies sees its informants.¹⁰ He set the limits of police culture in his actions. But let us not jump straight into meta-level conclusions about the psychohistorical nature of the Finnish police culture. We must

⁴ Bion (1962).

⁵ Feeney & Noller (1996), pp. 99-135.

⁶ Fonagy et al. (2002).

⁷ Ogden (1989), passim; Alford (1997).

⁸ Alford (1997), 19. From the practice and concepts of police work see also Wright (2002).

⁹ All quotations in the text are taken from "Pertsä's" interview 2. 4. 2002.

¹⁰ Spivak (1999), pp. 4-9.

first listen what this particular policeman has to say to us before making any theoretical interventions. Only after that can we try to verbalize his narration of his past actions in a larger societal setting and understand them psychohistorically to be a form of interconnectedness and attachment.¹¹

Nature of relationship –the empirical data

What kind of relationships existed between police and customers? Let us first explore the "treatment" that the police customers usually were given back in the 1970s:

"Customers got just the exact treatment they wanted. Especially in the 1970s when the police went to keep the peace, there were no other options. You could not tempt or swindle. There was no time to pet or serve the customer. To take the drunkards into custody was the job of fools, but you were forced to do that anyhow because your superiors asked for results. The more we had people in the hut, the more we had worked in the eyes of the gaffers. The chief inspector thought that it meant peace in the city when all the drunkards were collected into gaol. (...) Some customers were so violent that you would get beaten up, if you did not use force on them. There was also this one guy, who had to be beaten up regularly once a year. (...) Some minor tumble in the street or swearing at the copper led instantly to the nick".

One time he had been ashamed afterwards how he had behaved towards one army lieutenant taken into custody. He explains it:

"He was drunk and there were no other options than to take him into custody. He was a first-class man so we put him in the first-class cell. He hacked the door heavily with his knuckles and kept the show going on all the time. One of my mates then said, damn that guy is beating the door. We should beat him up. So we took him away and put him in a private cell and kicked his ass pretty bad. The next morning we thought that after releasing him he'll go straight up to the inspector's room and complain about us. We were a bit scared that afterwards something is going to come up. After a little while we went to the inspector's room and asked what the officer had said to the inspector. Nothing, he replied and continued that the lieutenant had only asked if you guys have some demands from him".

In spite of that he also took a very strict and schematic attitude against ethnic minorities. For example he rationalised bad behaviour of policemen towards gypsies. This can be seen in one instance where he blamed a gipsy taken into custody for the misbehaviour he and other policemen did to this gipsy.

"And then there came these new triers, gypsies. They came to fight here, to brawl. Guys from the Flying Squad followed one big gipsy with civilian clothes on and they got this huge gipsy man in the car, and yet they were losing ground there, eventually they got him into custody and he started to make some serious trouble there, so we beat him up so well and made him crawl here and there zigzagging on the cell floor and we said to him that here is the tip of the shoe of a constable, now lick it! So he licked and haven't seen him ever since".

¹¹ cf. Maturana & Varela (1992); Mingers (1995); Maula (1999, 2000).

However, that is not all. That would be too easy. Here is another quite paradoxical, but very illuminating example. "Pertsa" tells us how he usually behaved with the underdogs:

"Well I used to chat with them in my spare time and I used to treat them with kid gloves while conveying them to jail. In the last days of my duty I worked the day shift many times. So I used to check the list of persons in custody and if there were some well-known guys I brought coffee to these guys into the hut with my colleague. By doing this you could really keep in with these guys: by not doing everything the hard way and just listening to them every once and a while".

He also depicts what kind of business it was: "It was harsh business, when you had to sort out the young and the old drunkards, sometimes the floor was so full of shit and piss; slurry guys who had pissed and shitted their pants, so there were some smells then".

Regarding the weak he explains how he and his colleague improved the quality of lives of the people in custody: "Often these guys who get busted and had to be taken into custody were sort of pitiful guys; and there were in the nick old and ragged mattresses, so me and my pal we got some new and better beds there. Later on the company got some new ones. But our mattresses were much warmer than the old ones".

Theoretical interventions

Now what this officer is verbalizing here is that his own influence concerning policing practices was usually quite insignificant. Of course he battered his customers, there is no question about that, but then again he felt deeply about the wretchedness of the weak. Deep down, he felt, that he really could not make a difference concerning his working practices and that bothered him. There was a conflict of interest in his mind that he could not solve comfortably enough to get on with his work. Furthermore he obviously could not clearly understand why he had to carry on these strange customs: carrying the drunkards into a police cell. So the conflict was ready: there was the regular day to day practice of how the job was usually carried out and the intuitive knowledge of how it should have been done regarding the eyes of the sole performer of the job.

In addition, this chasm between eligible practice and real cognisance of how to engage with people affected him and he tried to find a way out of this conflict. He suffered the loss of meaning in the job. He started to drink heavily, partly because of the pressures caused by the nature of his three-shift work as a patrolman and a cell watch and partly because he felt that no one cared for him in the company. He tells about the hardships of working in the night:

"You get tired and you start by taking first a little slug to get some sleep. Little by little you started taking bigger and bigger tots. The night work definitely affected your drinking habits. I mean that one could be out on the tiles sometimes a whole week if you once started to drink seriously after a period of difficult working hours".

But what makes this analysis at hand psychohistorical? I suggest that it is the quality of the relationship between the policeman and his surroundings. How he

constantly built himself as a person in containing a relationship with others. Something happened between the people described in this policeman's narrations. It is about the way how others were used as a soothing surface in the mind of the informant. I am not very interested here if these stories are "real." Maybe they are. I cannot know that for sure. But that is not relevant here. These stories still have great relevance and meaning in the life of this particular informant. In them he is telling of how he related to other people, institutions and things: how he made these things as his inner objects to contain the rage and misery that he experiences in life, and particularly what his rough and quite unaccustomed job always brings with. I call this phenomenon projective containment because of its relational elements. As a policeman he was used by his environment (the colleagues, superiors and customers) and he himself used his immediate surroundings as a container for his projected rage and disenchantment caused by these phenomena in his work.

Because of this projective pressure he longed for closer relationships between policemen regardless of their rank. He talks about that when he marvels at the behaviour of his superiors: "I was wondering [at the actions of the inspector in the field] and said to my colleague that I thought that we should work together in police work".

The wishes to merge can also be seen when he moans that: "Not a single time anybody has said that we should do this together..."

And when he started to talk more about the superiors he almost chanted: "...our gaffers, then. You never got any support from them. Never any help to do anything. From some inspectors you couldn't even ask what's the time 'cause you couldn't get a definite answer from them. Aye, they definitely could tell you how to fine a car and how many days one should keep somebody in custody, but then again when you tried to ask some simple thing like how to behave with people you never get any proper answer or backing. One had to learn all these things unaided, and through the hard way".

Now this here comes close to my main point of the role of the police as a container in society. This policeman obviously wanted to strengthen the bonding between the policemen to relieve the pressures caused by the relationships at work. In his sayings one can distinguish a wish to merge unconsciously to others to share their solidifying powers in the muzzy faces of the banality of everyday work. He felt that he was not capable of handling the anxieties produced by his psychological position in the society all alone because of this conflict which actualised in his work. Yet he also paradoxically felt that at the same time he had to manage with the projections all by himself.

The next citation proves this preliminary conceptualisation. There was self-contempt in some answers given to me by this policeman. While discussing the reasons he had joined for the police force and how tight the elimination had been, he lamented and belittled himself: "My wife said to me that you have gone through a tight sieve, but I thought that even a good sieve has big holes".

It was like he was not good enough to satisfy the unattainable standards he had set himself for the sake of the society and police organisation. The environmental nature of these high standards can also be seen clearly in the comment he made about how it felt to stroll in the woods with other policemen. Only in the forest, to-

gether with everybody else, one could really loosen up and let go of the psychic armour held defensively in the workplace:

"In the office you have to behave and be so precise, but when you get into the forest, then everybody is, all of a sudden, the same kind of whippersnapper boys wrenched straight from the corner of the drying barn as they are".

Connecting and disconnecting the mental space

Before some concluding remarks I would like to throw in one idea which would first connect and then disconnect us from the conceptual air between me and you. The relevance of this thought has evoked and strengthened in my mind during the making of this paper. The following idea in a certain way sums up what I am chasing here phenomenologically. Philosopher Emanuele Severino once wrote that:

"If we would be convinced that creatures are bundled up with an unbroken bond in a way that it constitutes a web that cannot be torn apart, then we would not decide to take in our hands the most weightless or insignificant things: that kind of an endeavour would enfold with it the whole web where the thing would be contained. To move the least creature would be like moving the whole universe. Confidence that world can be changed (...) is possible only if there is a world where the creatures are separable from each other and without the tie that binds them together in an unbroken way".¹²

The hardest part is not to find, but nourish and keep this creative space of potentialities alive without it to become too engulfing. In a Winnicottian sense it is the area where the true relationships between people are born and also the abstract place where these psychic relations can be elaborated. It is about holding up that fragile moment, the most important of them all, where one can be open and, at the same time, affect and be affected in a solitary way. I claim that this area was partly missing from my informant here due to the group psychological pressures of society in his work. He neither contained the psychic pressures towards him nor could he use the environment as his container.

Conclusions

As a native informant, Pertsu suffered psychohistorically seen from the:

- a) Un-digestion of the projected elements of interaction;
- b) Incapability of reflection. He obviously could not discern where his psychic borders of selfhood were. These two led, put together, first to a withdrawal from the attachment and interaction with the work community and then defensive projections towards the customers (as good = idealisation or as bad = acting out in an assaults).

¹² Severino (1992), p. 40.

What does this mean? Policemen need in a Winnicottian sense good-enough environment¹³ (debriefing in a secure setting) to prevent them from the accumulating stress symptoms which will eventually lead, without proper containment, to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and unconscious acting out. However, usually the crew of the police force denies or is forced to dissociate this effect of their work because of the very nature of their work.

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¹³ Winnicott (1971, 1987).