



July 1976

Police Professionalism: Another Look at the Issues

Samuel Walker
University of Nebraska, Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walker, Samuel (1976) "Police Professionalism: Another Look at the Issues," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 6 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol3/iss6/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



POLICE PROFESSIONALISM: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE ISSUES

Samuel Walker

Assistant Professor/Research Director
Department of Criminal Justice
University of Nebraska at Omaha

ABSTRACT

The concept of professionalism is frequently used as a frame of reference for evaluating the organizational status of the American police. Observers generally conclude that the police lack most of the essential features of professional status. This paper questions the utility of using such a standard for evaluating the police. The professions of medicine, law and education are themselves in a state of flux. In particular, the crucial concept of professional autonomy appears increasingly incompatible with the goal of public accountability. Rather than expect the police to strive toward the traditional forms of professionalism, we should think in terms of creating appropriate mechanisms for ensuring public accountability for all service occupations.

The Problem

The subject of police professionalism has received considerable attention in recent years from scholars, elected public officials and police administrators. The problem has generally been presented in the form of a two-part question: to what extent have the American police achieved professional status and/or is it even possible for them to achieve such status on a par with the traditional professions of medicine, law and education?

Investigations of these questions have tended to reach negative conclusions. The questions of course assume a common definition of "professionalism" and researchers have drawn upon the work of sociologists working in the area. Even the most generous observers have concluded that, when measured against a rigorous definition of professionalism, the police have a long way to go before true

professional status is achieved. Still other observers conclude that certain inherent aspects of police work preclude the possibility of professionalism altogether.

The following essay seeks to re-examine the question of police professionalism. Investigations of the subject to date have measured the police against a static definition of professionalism. The terms of that definition, moreover, are defined by the so-called "classic" professions of medicine, law and education. Yet, it is evident that those occupations are experiencing considerable changes. Traditional forms of professional practice are being challenged by new social forces. With respect to professionalism, then, the police are being measured against a standard that is in the process of change. This factor forces us to re-examine the manner in which the problem of police professionalism has been defined and discussed.

It is a commonplace among economists and sociologists that the American economy is increasingly one dominated by the service occupations. A particularly acute set of crises has arisen in terms of the delivery of human services, notably health care, education and police protection. This essay advances the thesis that the issue of public accountability is increasingly the most important problem facing contemporary society. Ensuring that human services are delivered in a manner consistent with the public interest, meanwhile, challenges many of the traditional prerogatives of professional autonomy.

The question of police professionalism, then, is not one of measuring the extent to which the police are capable of emulating the traditional professions. Rather, it is a question of creating mechanisms by which all the human service occupations can be made more accountable to the public. The police may well have more in common with other professional occupations than previous discussions have been willing to admit.

The Police Crisis and the Demand for Professionalism

The quest for police professionalism acquired a new sense of urgency in the decade of the 1960's. A related series of social crises--urban racial disorders, anti-war political protest, and the emergence of a widespread drug culture--thrust the American policeman to the forefront of national attention. The police were principal actors in many, if not most, of the episodes of conflict

and violence throughout the late 1960's and early 1970's. In some instances, it became apparent that the conduct of police officers served to perpetuate and even escalate the violence (National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, 1968; Marx, 1970; Stark, 1972).

In response to widespread criticism of their behavior the police turned to militant trade unionism (Juris & Feuille, 1973). The prospect of a well-organized and politically active police establishment only heightened the fears of those who were already concerned about the role of the police in American society. To many, unionism seemed to remove the police even further from public control.

The extreme polarization of the late 1960's has diminished considerably in the past few years. Violent disturbances, in the ghetto and on the campus seem to have disappeared for the moment. Moreover, the police union movement has lost much of its militant political thrust. While unionism continues to spread among the police, it appears to be moving in the direction of more conventional American unionism, concerned primarily with bread and butter issues.

The apparent surface calm of recent years, however, should not be confused with the resolution of the underlying conditions of social conflict. The basic problems still remain. Relations between the police and the black community are as problematic as ever. The problem of police misconduct, corruption in particular, continues to vex police administrators and the public alike. Strikes by police officers, such as the one in Baltimore in the summer of 1974, dramatize the question of accountability of public employees.

The crises of the 1960's lead to widespread demands for the improvement of the American police. Through LEAA the national government invested an enormous amount of money in police equipment and training. Scholars, meanwhile, devoted an increased amount of attention to the nature of police work and the police role in society, a subject they had largely ignored previously (Sherman, 1974). The quest for improvement in policing touched off a wide-ranging debate over the nature of the police role. As many observers noted, the question of determining how the police should perform necessarily awaits a consensus on the question of what they should do. (Wilson, 1963).

Professionalism as a Frame of Reference

In the ensuing debate over the nature of the police role, the concept of professionalism became a popular catch-phrase for virtually all proposals for change and improvement. One need not look very far to discover the wide usages to which the term has been put. In a statement of "Professional Police Principles", Edward M. Davis, Chief of Police in Los Angeles, California, uses professionalism to suggest that the police should pursue their task with the utmost vigor (Davis, 1971). Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, in Crime in America, uses professionalization as an ill-defined synonym for "improvement" (Clark, 1970). And to the advertisers in the pages of the Police Chief and other law enforcement journals, professionalism means owning the latest and most technologically sophisticated equipment.

Serious discussions of professionalism require a more rigorous definition. While no complete consensus among sociologists has developed concerning the definition of a profession, a general agreement on the various dimensions of professionalism has emerged (Moore, 1970). It is appropriate to review briefly the central points in this definition for it is against this standard that the American police have been measured.

Professionalism consists of several dimensions. The most important elements are those of professional knowledge, professional autonomy and the service ideal. These attributes, of course, represent an abstract ideal type. No single occupation fully achieves the ideal in actuality. Rather, particular occupations hold different positions on a scale of professionalism according to the extent to which they approximate the ideal (Moore, 1970: 3-22). The process of professionalization, meanwhile, is seen as a linear movement across the scale toward the ideal (Moore, 1970: 51-65). This latter point is extremely relevant to the present discussion since it presupposes a fixed ideal type.

Professional knowledge, as distinct from a technical skill, consists of the mastery of an esoteric, abstract and codified body of principles. Mastery is achieved through prolonged study, usually in an isolated setting such as a university-based professional school. Professional knowledge is applicable to practical problems and

practitioners are given a monopoly on the right to deal with those problems.

Monopoly on skill becomes the basis for professional autonomy. The practitioners, organized to conduct their own affairs, assume the responsibility for the creation and dissemination of new knowledge, the recruitment and training of new practitioners, and for the development and enforcement of standards of conduct. Standards are enforced through both formal and informal means. On the one hand, professional associations create and maintain formal disciplinary procedures. At the same time, the profession maintains standards through the informal process of developing a distinct sub-culture. The professional-in-training learns professional norms in the process of being trained.

The professional sub-culture is the most important means by which the service ideal is maintained. The service ideal consists of several different dimensions. On the one hand the practitioner is obligated to serve the client. At the same time, however, the practitioner is obligated to maintain standards of performance that may conflict with the expressed desires of the client. In both instances, the service ideal holds that professionals should be guided by considerations other than those of self-interest.

Evaluating the Police

In the past decade a significant body of sociological research on the American police has emerged. (Sherman, 1974). A number of the most important studies address themselves to the question of police professionalism. In doing so, these works draw upon the sociological definition of professionalism summarized above. The following review of some of the more important of these studies reveals the manner in which that definition has shaped thinking about the American police.

In The Varieties of Police Behavior, James Q. Wilson argues that police work lacks most of the essential characteristics of a profession. Policing, he writes, is a craft occupation. He observes that the police "acquire most of their knowledge and skill on the job, not in separate academies; they are emphatically subject to the authority of their superiors; they have no serious professional society, only a union-like bargaining agent; and they do not produce, in a systematic written

form, new knowledge about their craft" (Wilson, 1968: 30). Wilson is emphatic in his contention that these are inherent attributes of policing, not likely to be changed. In the end, Wilson relegates the police to the category of sub-professionals with a very different set of occupational problems from the true professions.

In another major study of police work, The Police and the Public, Albert J. Reiss begins on a more hopeful note. He declares that "the police in America belong to one of the few occupations that includes all the essential elements to qualify as a profession" (Reiss, 1971: 123). In particular he notes that policing is a "moral call" occupation demanding a high degree of sacrifice and a commitment to service. Moreover, like doctors and lawyers, the police routinely make "decisions that involve technical and moral judgments affecting the fate of people" (Reiss, 1971: 123).

As his discussion proceeds, however, Reiss slowly takes away what he has previously granted. He details the very special circumstances of police work that set the occupation apart from the traditional professions. The most important problem concerns the relationship of the professional to the client. Reiss points out that "unlike most professionals, who deal with clients who are processed to accept the authority of the professional when he enters the situation, the police officer must establish his authority" (Reiss, 1971: 46).

The problem of police authority as it is perceived by the public at large and by "clients" in particular is no small matter. Many discussions of the police "problem" emphasize the fact that there is no consensus as to the proper police role (Wilson, 1963). Reiss himself points out that a significant number of instances of police incivility (verbal or physical abuse of a suspect) occur in situations where the "client" refused to defer to the officer's authority (Reiss, 1971: 53). The authority of the police officer is uniquely personal, without the benefit of support from a broader consensus on professional (i.e. impersonal) authority.

The personalized nature of police authority, and its consequences for police conduct, has attracted considerable attention. Westley (1970), in his seminal work Violence and the Police, and Skolnick (1967) devote much of their analysis to this point. They argue that it lies

at the root of some of the most troublesome problems of policing: secrecy, corruption, violence. Skolnick states most directly the thesis that is implicit in much of the literature on police professionalism: that professionalism will not be achieved until the tight-knit police sub-culture is broken down and commitment to a transcendent code of ethics developed in its place (Skolnick, 1967: 230-245).

Skolnick also devotes considerable attention to the problem of bureaucratization. He points out that "professionalism" in American policing has acquired a special meaning. It has meant an emphasis on the ideals of managerial efficiency and bureaucratic rationality. While this has brought about considerable improvements in the management of police departments, it has also meant that rank and file patrolmen have been subjected to a tighter form of bureaucratic control. That model of professionalism is, in many respects, the antithesis of professionalism as defined by other occupations. (Skolnick, 1967: 235-239).

Pessimism about the prospects for police professionalism is perhaps best summarized in a short contribution to Municipal Police Administration, co-authored by Clarence M. Kelley and David L. Norrgard (1971). The significance of this particular essay cannot be underestimated. Municipal Police Administration, published by the International City Management Association, is a widely used textbook in the field. Clarence M. Kelley, meanwhile, is currently Director of the F.B.I. and achieved that position on the basis of his reputation as an innovative and progressive Chief of Police in Kansas City, Missouri.

Kelley and Norrgard waste no time disposing of the idea that the police are in the same category as other occupations that are generally considered professions. They find the police deficient in almost all the basic categories. They argue, for example, that professional autonomy is antithetical to the idea of a democratic police. As public servants, with a monopoly on coercive force, the police must necessarily remain subject to public scrutiny and control. Kelley and Norrgard further point out that the police are not organized into professional organizations; that they are not characterized by "a high level of educational expectations;" that they are not esteemed by the public; that they are not governed by effective internal codes of ethics; and that there is

as effective lateral mobility, a factor essential to the idea of a career within a given profession. Only in terms of a commitment to public service, the authors argue, can police work be regarded as approximating the qualifications for professional status. (Kelley and Norrgard, 1971: 322-325).

A Reconsideration of Professional Autonomy

The Kelley-Norrgard discussion is characteristic of a pervasive approach to police professionalism. They conclude that the police, measured against a rigorous definition of professionalism, do not meet the basic qualifications. Implicitly, then, they suggest that future discussions of changing and improving the police should be undertaken with reference to a different model. Their own discussion, however, contains important unexamined assumptions. An analysis of these assumptions suggests that the question of police professionalism has been debated in the wrong terms.

The most significant part of the Kelley-Norrgard discussion is their treatment of the proper scope of professional autonomy. Expressing a popular view, they argue that the traditional professions are entitled to an enormous degree of autonomy. "The community is generally not competent to judge the action of individual physicians and attorneys as the community is not involved in, nor affected by, the professional judgments of individual members of the professions" (Kelley and Norrgard, 1971: 322). Police work, on the other hand, does affect the entire community and, therefore, "the community must be involved in both establishing police goals and ascertaining if they are being fulfilled." In short, the police provide a basic public service and must be held directly accountable to the public.

The distinction between the police as public servants and the traditional professions as private practitioners is deeply ingrained in American thought. The issue of professional autonomy, however, contains several dimensions. Professional autonomy is exercised on both the individual and collective levels. The judgments of an individual physician in treating a particular patient do not affect the community at large. But the collective judgments of the organized medical profession affect the community in many vital respects. The medical profession, for example, largely determines

such public issues as the supply of doctors, the availability of services, the cost of treatment and the broader question of how the nation deals with problems of health care.

The medical profession, in the words of one observer, has enjoyed something truly unique: the status of an unregulated monopoly. Events of the past decade, moreover, have brought to light the existence of an acute crisis in health care in the United States, a crisis that has called into question the ability of the medical profession to conduct its affairs in a manner consistent with the public interest. The country suffers from a severe shortage of doctors, a problem that plagues inner city and rural communities alike. The cost of medical care, meanwhile, has skyrocketed. It is also apparent that the United States trails many less affluent countries in such basic indices of public health as infant mortality. Scarce resources have been diverted into expensive research projects and specialized emergency treatment equipment at the expense of general medical practice.

The health care crisis has called into question many of the traditional prerogatives of the medical profession. Moore poses the question in its most direct form: "collective autonomy and individual autonomy may turn out to be inconsistent goals" (Moore, 1970: 130). The task of public policy makers lies in the area of creating new mechanisms for bringing the medical profession under public scrutiny and control. It should be noted in passing similar problems confront other professions. The various scandals that are referred to as "Watergate" have raised doubts about the ability of the legal profession to police its own affairs. Years of conflict and controversy over education (both the public schools and higher education) have raised questions about the ability of professional educators to serve important segments of the client population.

Conclusion

To repeat a shopworn cliché: nothing stands still. Modern society continues to change and those changes create new problems and call into question old practices. The old form of professional autonomy may well be inconsistent with the demands of the present and the future. Those demands, in brief, are that human services be available to all, on an equal basis and in a manner consistent with the dignity of various client populations.

These services include, above all, health care, education, legal services and police protection.

The question of police professionalism has been stated in the wrong terms. Generally, observers have asked what, if anything, can the police learn from the established professions. Their answers have not been overly hopeful.

A more useful statement of the question might be what can the other service professions learn from the police. The problems of police-community relations, police brutality, disrespect for constitutional rights and police corruption are all problems of accountability. A wide variety of strategies have been proposed, and in some cases implemented, to increase that accountability. Civilian review boards, administrative decentralization, "team policing," "community control" are but a few of the proposed means by which the police might be made more accountable to the clients they serve. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that some variation of one or more of these mechanisms might be the appropriate vehicle for enhancing public scrutiny and control of the other human service professions.

"Professionalism", at least in terms of undiluted professional autonomy, may not be an appropriate model for the future. The police, far from being an occupational backwater, may well prove to be in the vanguard for having confronted long before other human service occupations the problem of reconciling individual professional authority with public accountability.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Clark, Ramsey (1970) *Crime in America*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Davis, Edward M. (1971) "Professional Police Principles." *Federal Probation* 35 (March): 29-34.
- Juris, Hervey A. and Feuille, Peter (1973) *Police Unionism*. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books.
- Kelley, Clarence M. and Norrgard, David L. (1971) "Professionalism and Police Service." *Municipal Police Administration*, 7th Ed. Washington, D.C. International City Management Association.
- Kelling, George L. and Kliesmet, Robert B. (1972) "Resistance to the Professionalization of the Police." *Law Officer V* (September): 16-22.
- Marx, Gary T. (1970) "Civil Disorder and the Agents of Social Control." *Journal of Social Issues* 26 (No. 1): 19-57.
- Moore, Wilbert E. (1970) *The Professions: Rules and Roles*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Reiss, Albert J. (1971) *The Police and the Public*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sherman, Lawrence W. (1974) "Sociology and the Social Reform of the Police." *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 2:255-262
- Skolnick, Jerome (1967) *Police Riots*. Belmont, Cal., Wadsworth Books.
- Wilson, James Q. (1963) "The Police and Their Problems: A Theory." *Public Policy* 12:189-216.
- _____ (1968) *Varieties of Police Behavior*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- United States, National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1968) *Rights in Conflict*. Washington: Government Printing Office.
- Westley, William A. (1970) *Violence and the Police*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT University Press.
- White, Susan O. (1972) "A Perspective on Police Professionalization." *Law and Society Review* VII: 61-85.