

Making the Connection: Critical Literacies and Police Officer Identity

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Abstract— This paper details the critical literacies that aid in forming police officer identity. Beyond what is typically thought of as literacy (reading and writing texts), the knowledge and practical application of various literacies is needed daily by police officers. Literacy of the street, of negotiation and persuasion, of technology, and of law are all needed to safely and effectively enforce peace and order. Police officer identity can be threatened or completely disrupted if critical literacies are not acquired. Using a framework of identity as linguistic practice, the chapter identifies critical literacies in forming police officer identity.

Keywords—Literacy, identity theory, literacy event, police, linguistic practice, workplace literacy

I. INTRODUCTION

POLICE officers respond to calls, work traffic accidents, investigate crimes, and sometimes interrupt our busy lives with tickets or stern warnings. What is often unseen in police work is the amount of reading and writing officers perform on a daily basis. Law enforcement requires multiple literacy skills to be effective, skills that must be practiced in the field, on the computer, and in the courtroom. An officer's aptitude and ability in working with multiple literacies and discourses shape his or her identity as an officer and law expert. Reading and writing literacy, technology literacy, and literacy of the streets are all needed to safely and effectively enforce peace and order and to establish a police officer's sense of identity.

For the past six years I have been actively engaged in the study of police writing and police practices. The methodologies used in my line of research have included ethnography, interviews, police academy observations, discourse analysis of reports, and other qualitative methods. I have found most of the police officers that I spent time with to be incredibly adept, intelligent, and perceptive. It was troubling then when their written reports so often undermined their authority and their identity as qualified police officers. In this chapter, I rely on my extensive experience observing police officers on the job, writing reports, and in court, in order to offer a picture of how police officer identity is obtained, practiced, and jeopardized through the acquisition of critical literacies.

In terms of identity, social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) [1] offers an excellent place to start in examining identities that cross workplace and personal spaces. Police officers display external cues of authority and these are the ones most noticeable to private citizens such as their uniforms, guns, and badges. They drive police vehicles, carry ticket books, and communicate via police radios. However, these outward signals of authority and identity are only one-half of the full picture of what constitutes police identity. Officers also have an internal sense of authority that is derived from an officer's belief that he or she is authorized to act on the government's behalf. Part of the belief comes from what the officer possesses, such as the badge, but another part of the authority identity comes from the officer believing that he or she performs the job effectively and competently as part of the police community. The police officer identity though initially created for the workplace, can also carry-over into officer's other spaces. This is partly because an officer is never effectively "off-duty." They are required by law to intervene anytime they see illegal activity, whether or not they are actually on duty and in uniform.

In addition, identity theory that recognizes discourse and linguistic activities as pivotal to identity formation is also crucial to understanding police officer identity. Bucholz and Hall (2005) offer five different views of identity including one as an "emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices"[2]. This view of identity positions the linguistic product as the source of identity rather than identity residing in an individual prior to the construction of a text. I would argue that officers are often judged based upon the reports they write, and so their identity as police officers is founded in their written products and other linguistic/literacy activities for others. Police officers can only effectively establish a sense of identity if they feel prepared and well qualified to perform the duties of writing reports, negotiating police technology, and navigating the tough terrain of human behavior on the streets. A firm and confident sense of police identity is established through the acquisition of specific critical literacies. A failure to acquire all or some of the literacy requirements of police work can endanger an officer's confidence in his or her police identity, authority, and job performance.

II. LITERACY IN CONTEXT

I suggest combining two specific definitions of literacy in

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order to understand law enforcement and police officer needs. The first: A person is functionally literate “when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group” (Gray 1956)[3]. This definition is effective because it highlights an officer’s responsibility to be literate among his peers and the legal culture, i.e. lawyers, judges, and others. The people in these positions must share a common legal language and knowledge in order to conduct the business of law enforcement.

While this definition is helpful in understanding how police literacy can be viewed, it is more useful when paired with a later definition. A definition for literacy that best explains the type of literacy police officers use in their daily job functions in which literacy is: the possession by an individual of the essential knowledge and skills which enable him or her to engage in all those activities required for effective functioning in his or her group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing, and arithmetic make it possible for him or her to continue to use these skills toward his or her own and the community’s development (UNESCO 1962)[4].

This better outlines the role literacy plays in an officer’s daily practice. He or she must not only be literate in reading and writing but also in body language, computer skills, street knowledge, the art of negotiation, and often, in a language that is not their own. Therefore, it is not enough to say that police officers must be able to sufficiently read and write. Many of the literacy skills needed for safety and the preservation of their own and others’ lives involve more than reading, interpreting, and writing texts. Officers’ multiple literacies are attained through training, mentoring, and learning on the job. If they are not acquired (which is sometimes the case) officers may suffer in their ability to gain authority in the courtroom, obtain promotion, or more seriously, protect themselves or others. It is the acquisition and demonstration of their literacies that affect and construct police officer identity.

In addition to defining literacy, the notion of “literacy events” is pivotal in the discussion of police work and the role literacy plays in their daily duties. Shirley Brice Heath defines a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (Heath, 2001)[5]. Almost all police interactions end or begin with a written text, typically a report or a warrant. Literacy events in law enforcement link the victims, suspect, officer, supervisor, lawyers, and judge to a written document created by the officer. The literacy event can call into question an officer’s abilities to correctly evaluate and respond to police calls and situations. Such scrutiny of his or her written report could have detrimental consequences to officer identity.

Let us take the example of a typical call for many police officers in Jackson, Arkansas (USA). In my time riding along with officers and following the outcomes of their activities in court proceedings, domestic violence cases were common.

One of these instances involved a husband who punched his wife several times in the back as she was trying to escape the house through a window. Her children had called 911 to report the incident, and officers arrived on scene to find them in the house, the husband attempting to leave in the car, and the wife at a neighbor’s house. All of the people involved had to be interviewed so that a report of the event could be made. In this case, the children reported the incident to the officer. They were not asked to make an additional written statement, but their mother was asked to write down the incident. Witness statements are written narratives made by a witness after an officer’s request. The witness statement can collude with an officer’s own narrative in order to prove a suspect’s guilt or culpability. The officer used the information from the children to later fill in and substantiate the claims made by their mother in her written and oral statements. While questioning her, the lead officer was careful to ask her questions that would indicate the nature of the crime, so that he could charge her husband appropriately. All United States legal statutes are very specific about elements of different crimes. For example, in the case of Battery there must be physical injury, but for Assault there only needs to be the creation or apprehension of potential violent behavior. In questioning, an officer must be careful to obtain the details of the event so that his or her report can reflect and substantiate the correct arrestable offense. The husband was charged with domestic battery and taken to jail.

The officer returned to the station to write up the arrest report using the woman’s written statement, the officer’s notes, and the children’s verbal statements. Many of the events that take place on the street are discussed with other officers prior to being written as reports in the patrol room. In this instance, literacy events center on a report narrative or other documents managed by officers and their supervisors. In the patrol room, officers work collaboratively to produce the highest quality documents of which they are capable. Officers with more time in the department help new officers by reading their reports and offering suggestions. Supervisors read all of their subordinates’ reports and often send them back to the corresponding officers for editing and revision. The patrol room contains dictionaries, legal statute books, sample reports, and other documents to aid the officers in the writing of reports.

In this example, the officer discussed the event with other officers in the patrol room. Once he felt he understood the events and how to write the report, he sat at the computer and created the narrative of the event. The report was then read by the officer’s supervisor for errors before being passed to the prosecutor’s office. The prosecutor filed the charges of Domestic Battery, and the suspect was required to appear at an arraignment date in front of the judge where he pled not guilty. The case was then set for trial. Since the suspect pled not guilty, the prosecutor reviewed the report for the details and information of the event, as she would need these for the trial. Here the prosecutor, based upon the information in the report,

must decide to proceed to trial, drop the case, or offer a plea deal. Already, the report is a pivotal literacy event in the many lives involved in this one incident. In this case, the prosecutor was informed that the woman had decided to deny that she had any injuries. Without her testimony and written statement, the prosecutor dropped the original charge down to Domestic Assault. Thus, before the case even went to trial the report has been the only linking element between the officer, the children, the women, the husband, the defense attorney, and the prosecutor. All are tied undeniably to the one report the officer made on the night of the incident. Since none of the people involved know the officer adequately enough to judge his character and work, his entire police officer identity resides and rests within his written report. All of the parties involved can make their own judgment regarding his ability and his ethic solely based upon the one document. Police officer identity for men and women who hold this job is thus an insecure and unstable construct.

In the court room more participants join in the literacy event. Here, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, witnesses, and suspects all work with the report the officer has written. This one document often forms the foundation of a prosecutor's case. Likewise, the defense looks for missing information, errors, and inconsistencies in the document in order to prove his client, not guilty. No document is more critical in a police officer's responsibilities and no place is this clearer than in the courtroom. At trial, the literacy event expands to include speech events. Heath (2001) explains, "speech events may describe, repeat, reinforce, expand, frame, or contradict written materials, and participants must learn whether the oral or written mode takes precedence in literacy events"[5]. This is a useful description of what happens with police reports in court. The written document is referred to while questioning witnesses, victims, the suspect, and the officer at the scene. The judge or jury must decide whether the written report or the testimony they hear takes precedence when determining innocence or guilt.

The prosecutor in this case called the arresting officer to the stand during trial and reviewed the details of the report with him on the stand. The officer reviewed his original report and testified to the events he witnessed and reported that evening. The defense attorney then questioned the officer on details found in his report. He asked the officer how he had written quotations from the defendant in the police report since the defendant spoke only Spanish. The officer testified that the defendant had no problem speaking English that night and reiterated what he had heard him say and repeated in the report. Here, the report becomes a speech event in which the officer must defend verbally what he has written. The defense attorney tries to find an error in the written document in order to attack the facts of the case with the officer on the stand. This is the critical nature of the police report and its link to an officer's identity. If an officer cannot hold up on the stand under questioning, or if his document becomes merely a flimsy pedestal upon which to stand, his or her credibility, ego, and

confidence will be damaged in court. This damage and its impact on police officer identity can lead to problems for individual officers, police departments, and entire judicial courts.

III. POLICE OFFICER LITERACIES

James Paul Gee (2001)[6] argues that literacy by definition must be plural: Literacies. It is clear that police officers require training that normal citizens do not, such as defensive ground fighting techniques and crime investigation; however, officers' multiple literacy needs are often ignored in their training. For police these skills include "traditional" reading and writing literacy, technology literacy, street literacy, and law literacy. The "traditional" reading and writing skills that officers must possess include critical reading of legal statutes, reports, witness statements, and departmental training manuals. A thorough knowledge and ability to read laws and statutes is needed in order to write reports that will be upheld and honored by a judge and establish an officer's authority in court. Their writings include reports, emails, proposals, narrations of events, and other writing tasks. Technology literacy includes a thorough knowledge of police equipment and computers, not only for the production of their own reports and documents but to identify and solve computer and internet related crimes, as well. Street literacy includes the ability to persuade and negotiate in tense situations, verbal and non-verbal skills in order to conduct interrogations and question suspects and victims, and foreign language ability depending upon the population in which the officer works. Finally, legal literacy encompasses knowledge of the law, including the Constitution, legal statutes at the State and Federal level, and a complete picture of how the justice system operates. Police work necessitates the comprehension and retention of volumes of legal statutes at both local, state, and the federal level. Officers use this information to build cases and justify their detention or arrest of citizens.

a) Critical Reading

The ability to read correctly, critically and comprehensively is an important facet of any successful police officer's skill set. The need for reading skills is apparent in an officer's ability to read and understand civil rights, property rights, and state's rights. Many departments require competency exams for all new police personnel that test for reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. These skills are critical in trying to determine a judge's ruling, an attorney brief, or a legal statute. Critical and active reading by officers is required in order to understand the important documents they encounter daily.

Officers must have a thorough knowledge and understanding of all local, state, and federal statutes. They must read and comprehend the volumes of statutes in order to properly prepare their reports and identify crimes on the street. These volumes are first introduced to candidates at the academy. They are later housed for reference in the patrol and computer rooms of police departments. Many officers also choose to carry a volume in their car, so they can look up the elements of specific crimes when they are deciding how to charge individuals on the streets. The best officers can

comfortable read and navigate legal statutes and apply them accurately on the job.

Along with legal statutes, those in law enforcement are required to read and retain court cases that set precedents in regards to police work and interacting with the public. These court cases establish everything from how long an officer can legally detain a citizen on a routine traffic stop to how a juvenile suspect must be questioned. If officers are not aware and well-read of these precedent cases they face the possibility of violating a citizen's rights which could lead to the officer's dismissal and a lawsuit for the officer and department. Likewise, all officers read and understand the Constitution and Bill of Rights. These documents form the foundation of our legal system and organize each citizen's rights along with the rights of the state. Most of the time officers are more knowledgeable of personal rights than the citizens that they encounter on the streets. This plays to their favor, as citizens that do not know their rights often volunteer to waive them without realizing what they have done. Officers use their reading of the fundamental rights of citizens to their advantage in these situations; an officer who understands the law can often get a citizen to relinquish his or her rights by asking certain questions or making requests. While this may be manipulative, it aids an officer's investigation if he can effectively read, navigate, and comprehend the legal documents of the government.

Officers must also read their own documents critically and comprehensively. Each officer must revise and edit his reports before submitting them. The supervisors then review each report before logging it in as an official police report. These reports become public documents once they are logged, so it is important that all facts are correct and grammar acceptable. The supervisors often send the reports back to the officers for revision after reading them.

Critical reading skills are imperative for effective policing activities. Officers must be knowledgeable of the laws they are sworn to uphold. Critical reading of their own writing ensures that public documents are correct and appropriate for the public forum. Both officers and their supervisors must master the skill of critical reading in order to guarantee the protection of citizens and law enforcement.

b) Reading

Perhaps the most important skill an officer needs to perform his job well is writing. Officers must write clearly, include all relevant details, and present themselves professionally in their reports in order to ensure conviction or plea. Writing skills are critical to the development of every effective law enforcement officer, only second in need to the skills that keep them alive on the streets. The ability to write well and capture the details of a crime in a report are the very elements that make police departments possible. The conviction of criminals and the protection of the innocent are all documented through police reports, warrants, affidavits, and narratives. Police officer identity is rooted in an officer's ability to investigate a crime, arrest the suspect, and prepare a report that effectively results in justice for the victim. Officers, in my experience, take their role in "getting bad guys off the street" very seriously.

Police document in writing nearly every citizen encounter. Most of these documents are in the form of a police report, which include the facts of the event, details about the people involved, and a police narrative of the occurrence. The reports that officers write face an often unfriendly audience. After becoming public documents, they are inspected by the district attorney in order to determine if a person should be charged with a crime and prosecuted. Once that determination is made, a report ends up in the hands of a defense attorney that is looking to derail the prosecution by finding errors in the police report. The defense can sometime rely solely upon the errors in a police report as a means to find a not guilty result from a judge or jury. Devallis Rutledge, special counsel for the Los Angeles DA's office, claims that "criminal defense attorneys try to make police officers look dumb, dishonest, untrustworthy, confused, ambiguous, hedging..." (qtd in Kanable, 2005)[7]. However, a well written report can diminish a defense attorney's opportunity to find error and create doubt. In fact, well written and clear reports have been statistically linked to increased conviction rates [7]. Thus, an officer's ability to write well is directly connected to their ability to police well, that is, to convict the criminals they encounter on a daily basis, and this ability forms their police officer identity both socially and intrinsically.

c) Technology

Like many other professions, law enforcement has become much more technologically advanced in the last thirty years. The introduction of computers, internet, cell phones, forensic tools, and other devices have changed the nature of policing and the skill needs of officers. In addition, officers must be computer savvy. It cannot be assumed that because officers live in a technological society that they automatically gain the computer and technology skills they will need on the job. This is especially true of older law enforcement agents who entered a very different police force twenty years ago, one that seldom relied on technology to solve crimes.

Today, technological devices are used for almost every facet of a police officer's daily duties. Reports are written on computers in the patrol room computer lab or on laptops that officers carry in their cars. Cell phones and the corresponding call logs, text message records, and cell tower tracking allow officers to discover where a suspect has been, whom he or she has been talking to, and the nature of the discussions if text messages were involved. Similarly, investigations now often rely upon evidence discovered on suspects' home computers and through their email messages. Many officers also use onboard computers in their cars to check vehicle license plates and driver license numbers for previous criminal activity or active warrants. This clears up important dispatcher time and radio airspace by eliminating the need for officers to contact dispatchers who then return this critical information via the police radio. The introduction of technology into law enforcement business has created many important advancements in solving crime and streamlining police work; however, technology must be understood and appropriately used, creating a demand for technology literacy in law enforcement work.

Robert Snow (2007) [8] notes other significant uses for computers in police work. These include searching police databases for similar reports that would identify a suspect's criminal pattern, employing a device that takes a driver license and prints out a ticket without the officer having to resort to pen and paper, and operating Auto-CAD software that allows traffic officers to map and draw traffic accidents [8]. The role of computers and technology in police work cannot be overstated. Officers need a specific set of computer skills in order to work effectively and efficiently. As more criminals use computers and technology to commit crimes, officers must use their computer literacy to solve crimes along with reporting on them.

d) The street

Officers possess certain skills and knowledge that the regular public never attains and, hopefully, never needs. These skills form their own type of literacy, a literacy I have defined as "street" literacy. These skills are similar to those known as "street smarts" or "criminal thinking." Taken as a whole, these special skills form a foundation that keep officers safe while allowing them to act as human lie detectors, interpreters, and negotiators. I propose that four main elements make up street literacy; nonverbal communication, deception detection, negotiation, and some multilingual ability. I define these skills as "literacy" because they fit the definitions given prior in the paper. These skills form a set of knowledge that is shared and understood by the law enforcement community, and all of the skills revolve around a type of "language."

The knowledge of nonverbal communication, or body language, is vital for officers to determine what a suspect may do next. This can keep an officer safe in a tense situation where a suspect's next move must be forecasted through the use of body language. Ed Nowicki (2001), a use of force expert, explains that nonverbal communication skills "are an important part of an officer's training since that form of communication is more indicative of a subject's true intentions than verbal communication. Officers must know how to approach a person so as not to invade their personal space, and they must understand the importance of eye contact, gestures and posture"[9]. Those working in law enforcement need to possess an ample knowledge of body language in order to handle situations that would be impossible for the general public. This element of street literacy is necessary for officers to return home safely and keep others safe, as well.

Knowledge of nonverbal communication can not only keep an officer safe, but it can also help him or her identify when a suspect or witness is being deceptive. The ability to determine who is telling the truth is an essential skill of police work. When questioning victims, witnesses, and suspects, officers use several methods to detect deception. While one of these methods is the reading of nonverbal deception cues, officers also must rely upon verbal cues and questioning techniques. Officers pay attention to these verbal cues while asking interviewees the same question in different ways. They can often catch a suspect or witness in a lie through this method.

Part of street literacy includes the ability to persuade and negotiate with citizens. Situations may call for an officer to

convince one party to leave a house or area in order to avoid future violence. He or she must be able to negotiate this despite the fact that the party may not be legally obligated to leave the premise. Likewise, officers negotiate with informants in order to gain information about crimes, including the criminals that are involved in them. Officers need to convince informants that they are trustworthy and will protect them from retribution. They do this through active listening as a part of their persuasion, an engaged form of paying attention to how a person is speaking in addition to what he or she is saying. Active listening also involves asking pointed questions in response to answers given by those being questioned. Many cases have been solved by an officer negotiating and persuading a witness to "give up" the suspect's name and/or location. These are situations that an officer could encounter on a daily basis. There are circumstances, however, where an officer's ability to negotiate is even more critical, including hostage and kidnap situations. Here, the lives of many may depend on an officer's knowledge and skill in the area of negotiation. Thus, an officer's ability to negotiate can save time, police resources, and even lives.

Street literacy also includes the "language of the streets". For each department this language will be different depending on the location. City cops may be required to understand several languages. My definition of language is both traditional and unconventional. Police officers working in heavily Hispanic populated areas will need to have a survival knowledge of Spanish, while cops working in heavy gang populated areas need a working knowledge of gang graffiti, signs, and expressions. Both of these areas require officers to have a base understanding of the multiple languages they encounter daily.

Street literacy composes basic elements of officer and public safety. Dale Cibron explains that "the uniformed police force in this country really is a paramilitary organization. They are organized in a military-style system of rank and can be considered as a form of street soldier." (qtd in Freeman 2008)[10]. The officers on the street must possess a different mentality and skill set than a typical citizen. Taken together, the skills involved in street literacy incorporate nonverbal communication, negotiation, lie detection, and language acquisition to provide a comprehensive literacy set. Police officers use these skills on the rough streets of their jurisdictions to protect and serve the public and their departments.

IV. CONCLUSION

Reading, writing, technology, and street literacies form the Discourse of law enforcement. Gee defines Discourse (with the capital "D") as, "a way of being in the world...forms which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes"[6]. It is obvious that police have their own way of communicating with each other, which often includes special code words and meanings when speaking on the radio and police jargon. They wear uniforms that separate them from the rest of the public, as well as hold certain beliefs and values

about the law and their conduct. They represent a separate segment of society and engage in their own private Discourse. All of this aids in the formation of the police officer's identity. The outside appearance and speech is not the only important aspect of defining this identity. Knowing and utilizing the Discourse in written police reports and other documents is critical in shaping identity. Officers must be trained on how to do this effectively. Their job performance requires it and their identity as police officers depends on it. In addition, the very nature of the justice system demands that qualified, fair, and well-trained officers be at the heart of the institution.

Their training must not only prepare them for police Discourse, but it must also prepare them for the Discourse of the court. Police reports are reviewed and poured over by lawyers. The Discourse of the court includes lawyers and judges who have their own values, beliefs, and ways of communicating. Police officers must be able to speak and maneuver in this Discourse as well, an area in which they sometimes fail. If officers are unable to become fluent in the Discourse of the court, they resort to what Gee describes as "pretending" to be in the Discourse. When this occurs officers end up using a "simplified or stereotyped version" of the secondary Discourse [6]. This can result in officers feeling insecure and incapable of defending their actions on the stand or presenting evidence in court. This would also affect their police officer identity. The gap between the literacy of the streets and the literacy of the courtroom is one that officers must tackle successfully.

Police officer literacy practices are critical to their role as authority figures, their departments' professionalism, the judicial systems' effectiveness, and public safety. Deborah Brandt maintains that "what people are able to do with their writing or reading in any time and place—as well as what others do to them with writing and reading—contribute to their sense of identity, normality, and possibility (2001, 11). Writing clearly for officers, then, becomes not a casual convention in order to avoid confusion, but a critical skill that determines their authority and identity. If the literacy training of officers does not address all of their multiple literacies and discourses, then officers may fail to effectively perform their duties. Individual officers can find themselves constantly defending their written reports in court. Departments can struggle with officers that cannot effectively read law statutes and write reports, and the entire judicial system can suffer from a lack of judicious, fair, and qualified judgments.

The gap between the literacy of the streets and the literacy of the courtroom is one that officers must meet daily. While lawyers can specialize in one, police officers must know both. Their world is one of extremes and contradictions, but they must navigate this landscape and develop authority through their written texts. The authority in which they conduct their business forms their sense of identity, and this sense of identity can only develop in conjunction with an officer's knowledge and practice of multiple literacies and discourses.

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