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Does the Police Academy change your life? A longitudinal study of changes in socialising behaviour of police recruits.

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Abstract

The current study tracks the social behaviour of new police recruits from pre Academy, after six months Academy training, through to one year into police training (N = 177). The results showed that recruits socialise and drink more with colleagues after entering the Academy than they did pre Academy. The way recruits drank also changed during training with a tendency towards heavier drinking sessions. Further results indicated that recruits did feel some pressure to drink to fit in and be one of the crowd. These findings, based on a longitudinal methodology suggest that the enculturation process encouraging recruits to social and drink with peers begins early in the training process. The findings are discussed in terms of intervention.

Does the Police Academy change your life? A longitudinal study of changes in socialising behaviour of police recruits.

Alcohol is a substantial hidden cost in any organisation in terms of lowered productivity, increased absenteeism, accidents, health and welfare costs (National Health and Medical Research Council Australia, 1997). In a survey of 16 occupations police were ranked third in their average consumption levels (Occupational Health and Safety Commission, 1992).

A developing body of research has begun to form a picture of drinking within the police service. Studies conducted in Australia have shown that up to 40% of officers reported drinking alcohol in excessive quantities (e.g. Davey, Obst and Sheehan, 2000, Elliot and Shanahan, 1994, McNeil and Wilson, 1993, Richmond, Wodak, Kehoe and Heather, 1998). These figures are considerably higher than in the general population where excessive drinking is around 10% (National Drug Strategy, 1996).

Studies into police drinking and other workplace drinking (e.g. Davey et al., 2000, Fillmore, 1990, Shanahan, 1992) have noted the strong influence of a workplace on individual behaviour that has come to be known as workplace culture. The police culture may be important in determining police drinking (Shanahan, 1992).

In an in-depth examination of occupational drinking subcultures, Fillmore (1990) argues that occupational membership is critical to understanding leisure activities in general. Certain aspects of occupations seem related to the existence of occupational subcultures. Fillmore (1990) found that where there is greater day-to-day contact with co-workers, and particularly when teamwork between co-workers is required, occupational subcultures are more likely to form.

Associated with some occupational subcultures are occupational *drinking* subcultures. Such drinking subcultures are more likely when there is high teamwork, with co-worker accessibility having an important impact. Other factors associated with a culture that encourages and perpetuates drinking include social availability of alcohol in the workplace, this refers to the normative support for work related drinking such as peer influence to drink, frequency of work related drinking by peers and approval of personal drinking by peers and supervisors (Ames and Grube, 1999); a tendency to cover up for people who have drinking problems and drinking being part of the job (Hagen, Eagen and Eltringham, 1992). Further occupational identity through camaraderie and/or mutual dependence also has implications for leisure time activities and drinking styles and attitudes (Fillmore, 1990).

Drinking norms for different occupational subcultures will of course differ. Management attitudes and behaviours can influence cultural norms. Some police literature suggests that sergeants and senior sergeants may hold a key influence on the drinking behaviours of officers (Shanahan, 1992). Other workplace factors may also influence drinking norms. For example research has shown that where alcohol use is more closely integrated with the job (i.e., is more available) there is a more permissive attitude to drinking at lunch or on the job (Ames and Grube, 1998). However occupational subcultures may be the moderating variables that determine the impact of workplace factors such as alcohol availability on leisure activities including drinking.

The police service with high co-worker accessibility, high levels of teamwork, and strong occupational identity is quite likely to have an organisational drinking subculture. This is supported by research (Davey et al., 2000; Hagen, 1982, Shanahan, 1992) showing evidence for the influence of culture on police drinking. Police culture then may play a major role in the initiation or maintenance of alcohol use.

The current study provides an examination of the development of police culture, through a longitudinal study of police recruits over their first year in the police service. The study investigates the development of police culture, not only in terms of drinking behaviour, but also in terms of socialisation patterns and other behavioural norms.

Method

Participants

Two groups of police recruits in training formed the basis of the sample (n = 177). Group A were new recruits, surveyed on their first day in the Academy (n = 100, 64 males and 36 females). They were surveyed again after six months in the Academy (n = 97) and again after a further six months of field placement (n = 92). Group B were trainee officers (n = 77) who were first surveyed after six months in the Academy (49 males and 28 females) and surveyed again after six months field placement (n = 72). The groups were comparable in terms of the demographic data collected; namely sex, age, education and marital status; with no significant differences emerging.

Instrument

The survey consisted of a self-report questionnaire. Section 1 of the questionnaire contained questions relating to socio-demographic details. This section asked respondents sex, age, and marital status.

Section 2 asked questions about drinking behaviour. Personal drinking behaviour was assessed by asking respondents how often they drank alcohol (1 = never to 5 = everyday), how many standard drinks (i.e. drink containing 10grams of alcohol) they drank in a typical session and how often (1 = never to 5 = everyday) they engaged in binge drinking (i.e. for females 5 or more standard drinks, for males 7 or more standard drinks on one occasion).

Section 3 examined socialising behaviour. Recruits were asked the proportion of their recreational time spent with police colleagues, and further how much of their week/ weekend recreational time this was. They were also asked the proportion of their drinking time that they spent with work versus non-work colleagues. This section also examined how recruits viewed their non-drinking colleagues.

In addition, the questionnaire given to recruits after six months of Academy training included questions on their experiences during Academy training. Recruits reported what they had learnt about alcohol in the Academy. They were asked if they ever felt under pressure to drink while at the Academy (1 = never to 5 = constantly) and what some of these pressures were. Recruits rated the importance of the most commonly listed reasons for drinking while at the Academy, and the most commonly listed restrictions to drinking in the Academy. Finally in open-ended format recruits reported what they enjoyed most about Academy life.

Procedure

On entering the police service new recruits spend the first six months living and training at the Police Academy. In developing the questionnaire to assess the drinking habits of recruits and their experiences at the Academy, a meeting was arranged with a focus group of police recruits who had been at the Academy for six months. Following the meeting and subsequent discussions, the questionnaire was developed.

Participants' demographic details and the questions designed to examine recruits drinking and socialising behaviour formed the body of the questionnaire. The

questionnaires were administered to recruits during class time, where all recruits in attendance were invited to participate. Participants were informed that completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and that their responses were completely confidential. Group A recruits were given the questionnaire on their first day at the Academy, a follow-up questionnaire was given after six months training and final follow up questionnaire 12 months after the initial survey (i.e. after six months field placement). The questionnaire was given to Group B recruits after six months training in the Academy and a follow-up questionnaire after they had done six months field placement.

Although this data is repeated measures data, due to confidentiality issues the questionnaires could not contain identification markings and as a result could not be matched over time. The data obtained from this procedure is therefore treated as between groups data. While the authors acknowledge a loss in power by treating the data in this way, it would not increase the probability of Type 1 errors. The authors feel that guaranteeing complete confidentiality to recruits allowed for more open and honest answers, enhancing validity and in turn offsetting the loss of power.

Results

Examination of the data revealed that assumptions for parametric testing were met. Group differences were included in all analysis to ensure groups in no way influenced the data. No group differences emerged, therefore to enhance clarity groups were pooled in all analysis reported.

Changes in Socialising Patterns

To investigate changes in officers socialising patterns a series of one-way ANOVAS were conducted. These results showed significant changes in socialising patterns over time in the police service. In examining changes in the proportion of total recreation time spent with work colleagues a significant difference emerged over time ($F(2, 435) = 33.95, p < .001$). Post hoc tests via Tukeys HSD showed that officers at their first day at the Academy reported spending less time with general work colleagues than after six or twelve months training. This can be seen in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1.

Significant changes in drinking with non-work friends or family over length of time in the Academy emerged ($F(2, 435) = 16.26, p < .001$). Post hoc tests via Tukeys HSD showed that officers six months into Academy training spent less of their drinking time with family and friends than on their first day in the Academy or after 12 months training (see Figure 2). A significant difference over time emerged also in the proportion of time officers spent drinking with work colleagues ($F(2, 435) = 32.43, p < .001$). Post hoc tests via Tukeys HSD indicating that the proportion of drinking with work colleagues reported first day at the Academy was significantly less than that reported at six or twelve months into training.

Insert Figure 2

Changes in Frequency and Quantity of Drinking

To examine changes in frequency and quantity of alcohol consumption over time in the police service a series of ANOVAS with post hoc via Tukeys HSD with family wise error at $p > .05$, were run. Results showed a significant increase in drinking frequency ($F(2, 435) = 6.56, p < .01$) at six ($M = 3.39$) and twelve ($M = 3.31$) months training compared to pre training frequency ($M = 2.52$) (see Figure 3).

Similarly there was a significant increase in the number of standard drinks consumed in a session ($F(2, 435) = 3.65, p < .05$) after six ($M = 8.51$) or twelve ($M =$

9.41) months training compared to pre-training levels ($M = 4.58$). The frequency of binge drinking (6+ drinks /session) also increased ($F(2, 435) = 5.64, p < .01$) with recruits six ($M = 2.55$) or twelve ($M = 2.63$) months into training reporting significantly more binge drinking than pre-training levels ($M = 2.12$). Figures 3, 4 and 5 present these results.

Insert Figure 3

Insert Figure 4

Insert Figure 5

Changes in Way Non-Drinkers Treated

No differences emerged between times in the way non-drinkers were treated, with the majority of respondents at all times reporting non drinkers were generally accepted.

Recruits Self - Reported Academy Experience

The following results are based on the questions about Academy life given to recruits only at the end of six months Academy training ($n = 174$). The open-ended question "What did you enjoyed most about the Academy" was coded into major categories. Sixty-five percent of respondents stated camaraderie, bonding, or mateship, 25% the social life, 7% the teamwork and 3% learning new things as the most enjoyable aspect of the Academy.

When asked if they ever felt under pressure to drink during their time at the Academy, 50% of recruits said never, 44% reported being under pressure sometimes, while no respondents reported being often under pressure to drink. Six percent stated they were non-drinkers. When asked what were some of pressures to drink in the Academy, 20% of recruits said peer pressure, 10% said to be one of the boys, 60% said there were no pressures. Ten percent did not comment.

Recruits were then asked to rate commonly stated reasons for drinking during Academy training. As can be seen in Table 1 the most highly rated reason were those relating to socialising and celebrating, while more personal reasons were less highly rated.

Insert Table 1

Table 2 presents mean ratings of importance given to potential restrictions placed on drinking during Academy. In general these restrictions were not rated highly.

Insert Table 2

Academy Education

When asked what they had been taught about alcohol during their time in the Academy 95% said alcohol and health, 91% said alcohol and drink driving, 90% said Police Alcohol in the Workplace Policy and 69% reported learning what is a standard drink.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicate that joining the police service does have a significant impact on recruits drinking and socialising behaviour. This study allows an exploration of socialising behaviour by looking at socialising with work colleagues prior to entry into the police service as well as with their new police cohort.

In terms of changes in socialisation behaviour the amount of recreation time spent with work/police colleagues rather than non-work colleagues increased significantly on entry into the police service. This data indicates an increase in enmeshment with the workplace and colleagues. This is also reflected in changes in

drinking behaviour. Drinking with work or police colleagues increased over time in service while drinking with non-work friends and family decreased.

Of course some of these changes in socialisation practices would be due to the fact that recruits live at the Academy for the first six months. However even after having returned to live in the community and working outside the Academy for six months the rates of socialising and drinking with police remained significantly higher than socialising and drinking with work colleagues on entry to the police service.

This data indicates that in this sample entry into the police service facilitated a higher level of involvement with the workplace and work colleagues. Further, it seems that for these recruits joining the police brought a new culture of socialising and drinking together rather than with non-police colleagues.

In regards drinking behaviour, both the frequency of drinking and the quantity of alcohol consumption increased over time in the police service. The major increase was seen during the first six months after which the frequency flattened out, but remained higher than pre Academy levels. Quantity also increased dramatically in the first six months. Again while not increasing significantly after the next six months neither did it decrease. Alarming the frequency of binge drinking increased significantly over time in service.

These results are interesting, while it would be expected that drinking may increase while living in at the Academy, it would be expected to drop off as officers moved into operational positions with stronger supervisory practices. However, this did not occur, particularly in terms of the quantity of alcohol consumed. It could be concluded that during their time in the Academy recruits actually learnt to drink alcohol in larger quantities. These results may reflect the development of the trend towards the heavy drinking sessions, which have been reported by many studies into police drinking (e.g. Davey et al., 2000, McNeil and Wilson, 1993, Shanahan, 1992).

This data indicates that the indoctrination into police culture may involve this move towards more frequent and heavier drinking. This drinking appears to be carried out mostly in the company of fellow police colleagues. This development of a drinking culture seems to take place in the first six months, while the next six months sees the maintenance and continuation of this trend. This data therefore indicates that a potential beneficial point for intervention and prevention strategies is early during the recruits' time at the Academy when the initial changes are occurring.

The additional data collected from recruits at the end of their Academy training provides further insight into the enculturation process of the first six months in the police service. When asked what they enjoyed most about Academy life most recruits responded in terms of bonding mateship and socialising. This indicates the beginning of these strong feelings of involvement with the workplace and work colleagues. In light of this bonding experience it is interesting to note that around 45% of the recruits stated that they felt some pressure to drink during their Academy training. When asked what kind of pressure this was, 20% alluded to peer pressure while a further 10% said you must drink to be one of the boys. The most common reasons given for drinking at the Academy were again more social reasons, such as to celebrate exams or to socialise and help mix with peers, rather than dealing with personal issues such as living away from home and family. In terms of restrictions placed on drinking at the Academy, all suggested restrictions were rated very lowly. This suggests that recruits did not feel that the organization placed restrictions on drinking, which may lead to the feeling that drinking behaviour was acceptable.

In terms of organizational education, over 90% of recruits did state that they received training on alcohol and health, drink driving and the workplace alcohol

policy. Interestingly though, less than 70% reported being aware that a standard drink is one containing 10grams of alcohol.

While alcohol consumption has been shown in much research to be a substantial cost for any organization in terms of productivity, absenteeism, and health (National Health and Medical Research Council Australia, 1997), for the police service this is further exacerbated by costs in terms of reputation and public opinion. Thus any intervention that can be introduced early in a police officers career, which may moderate any potential negative drinking behaviour, such as binge drinking can only be of benefit to both the officers and the organization.

Taken together the results of this paper suggest that stronger intervention and education is needed during recruits Academy training to combat any potential pressure to drink, which may occur in the initial enculturation process.

While acknowledging the many drawbacks in the design of the current study such as the lack of any control group dealing with issues such as shift work and living away from home, which may also have impacted on the data collected, the longitudinal design has indicated trends in police samples socialization and drinking behaviour that may be areas of concern. The changes reflected through more time spent socialising with police peers and increased drinking with peers may indicate that a workplace culture that develops quickly and strongly. This culture may encourage individual officers to socialise together. However a large part of this socialisation also seems to involve drinking in large quantities. These results suggest that intervention should begin early, in the first six months in the Academy. Such intervention could help officers deal with the pressure placed on them by the police culture and prevent latter alcohol related problems.

Not all police academies are operated or managed in the same fashion. Some require full time compulsory live in attendance whiles other don not, some operate licensed alcohol outlets while others do not. Different police jurisdictions may have differing rules regarding the management and structure of academies and this not only includes living arrangements and life style issues but also the availability of alcohol. What remains consistent across jurisdictions is the importance of academies in the training and education of police. In a recent national review of all Australian police jurisdictions Fenlon, Davey and Mann (1997) reported that it is important to address the issue of alcohol in the police workplace at recruit selection and initial training. Alcohol education at recruit level should emphasise skills training in responsible consumption and peer support. Furthermore they recommended that because of the strong socialisation process operating within academies and during recruit training the organization has one of its best opportunities to demonstrate and promote the responsible consumption of alcohol.

This is an interesting area of research. The current study just touches on the wealth of information that could be obtained from police academies throughout Australia and other countries. More qualitative data could be gathered examining the occupational environment, including peer incentives to drink and toleration of drinking on duty. More in depth information on the nature of socialization and drinking per se such as is drinking a group activity or do officers also drink large amounts alone, does drinking with mixed sex colleagues have any impact on the quantity of alcohol consumed. Thus further research of both a qualitative and quantitative nature, which follows recruits through training and into the field, is much needed to help develop appropriate and effective interventions to obviate any potential negative consequences associated with alcohol consumption.

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Table 1

Mean ratings (1 = not important to 10 =extremely important) given to most commonly listed reasons for drinking at the Academy.

Reasons for Drinking	Mean Rating (1 to 10)	Standard Deviation
Celebrate Finishing Exams	6.23	3.14
Part of Fundraising Nights	5.23	2.96
Socialise With Other Recruits	4.60	2.97
To help mix with new people	3.77	2.62
To Help Relax	3.06	2.38
To Be Accepted as Part of the Team	2.65	2.31
Expected Within The Group	2.36	2.20
Living away from home	1.77	1.79
Living away from partner/family	1.83	1.86
More money to spend on alcohol	1.62	1.41

Table 2

Mean ratings (1 = not important to 10 =extremely important) given to most commonly listed restrictions to drinking within the Academy.

Restriction	Mean Rating (1 to 10)	Standard Deviation
Desire to be seen doing the right thing as police officer	4.86	3.30
Behaviour under scrutiny at Academy	4.56	3.22
Lack of time to socialise	4.24	2.88
Nightly curfew	4.16	3.17
Too tired	4.01	2.96
Penalties for drinking at Academy	3.57	3.13
Loss of contact with non police friends	3.24	2.80

Figure 1.
Proportion of total recreation time spent with work colleagues by time in police service.

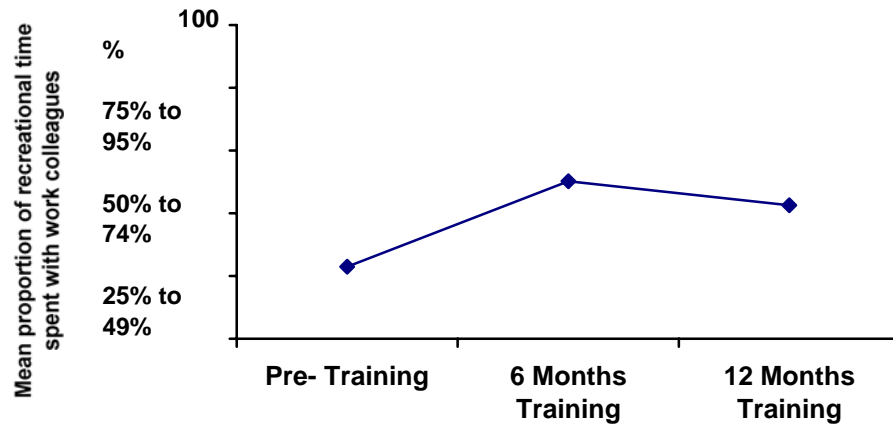


Figure 2.
Changes over time in police service in the proportion of drinking done with work or non-work colleagues.

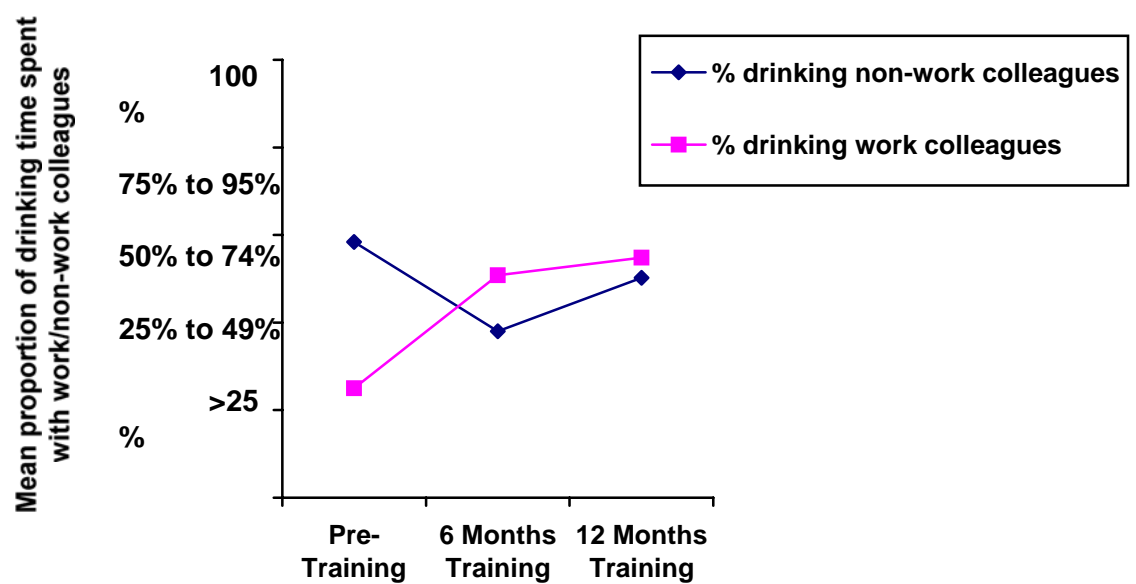


Figure 3
Impact of time in police service on how often drink.

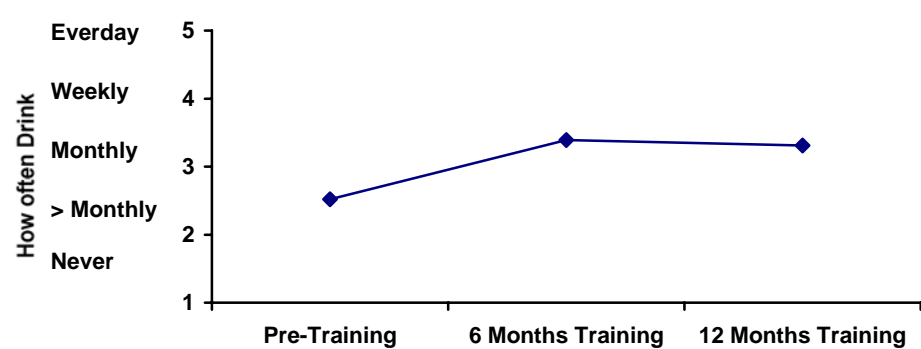


Figure 4

Impact of time in police service on how much recruits consume in a session

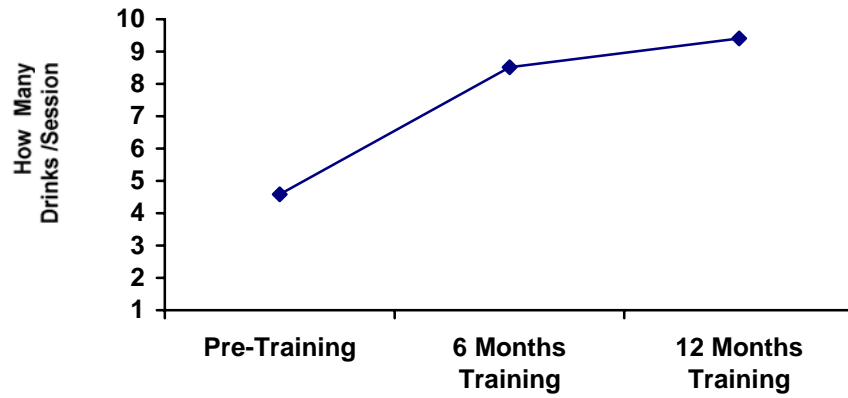


Figure 5

Impact of time in police service on frequency of binge drinking

