



Gender and Ethics in Policing

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research notes

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Introduction

One of the more significant developments in policing in recent years has been the influx of women into operational roles. Some observers have argued that a long-term benefit of this change will be a general raising of ethical standards within policing because female police officers are less likely than their male counterparts to engage in misconduct or tolerate such behaviour by fellow officers. However, little research has been conducted, particularly in Australia, on the assumptions that underpin this view.

In this paper, we consider whether there are noticeable differences between the ethical perspectives of male and female officers and the styles of policing that they employ. The first section of the paper briefly reviews previous research in this area. The second section presents data on the attitudes and behaviour of male and female rank and file police in the Queensland Police Service (QPS), drawing on three data sources:

- attitudinal data from surveys administered to Queensland police officers of different levels of experience
- police-initiated complaints received by the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC)
- complaints-against-police data extracted from the QPS Professional Standards Unit database.

Finally, we discuss the implications of this research for the development of strategies for promoting ethical conduct among police.

Previous research

Previous research on gender and ethics in policing falls into two broad categories—studies that focus on ethical perspectives, and studies that focus on policing styles.

Ethical perspectives

Several U.S. studies of police attitudes on ethical issues have reported that female officers, on average, express higher ethical standards than do males.¹ According to these studies, women have been largely excluded from participation in graft and isolated from the police subculture because rank and file police perceive women as more likely to expose corruption. This, in turn, has meant that women have been able to operate outside of the informal rule systems and so be in a position to expose rule bending and breaking. Because women are considered to be separate from the culture, and have not participated in its shaping, they have felt less obligation to adhere to its rules than have males.

In 1992, the National Police Research Unit (NPRU) surveyed the attitudes of Australian police officers and recruits toward breaches of ethics.² The findings of the survey were that females appeared to have higher personal ethical standards than male officers of equivalent rank, and saw themselves as having higher personal standards than either a typical officer or a departmental instructor.

These findings were consistent with the view that policewomen tend to see themselves as members of an 'outgroup' which is not part of the 'brotherhood'; however, a more recent NPRU study on ethics and policing did not find consistent gender differences.³

Policing styles

A second group of studies has focused on gender differences in policing styles and associated behavioural indicators such as the number and type of complaints made against male and female police. These studies have generally reported that women bring a distinctive style to policing.

For example, one study concluded that female police maintain better relations with citizens, are more likely to de-escalate potentially violent encounters, respond better to rape victims and battered women, and have a less narrow outlook and a stronger creative drive.⁴ The male policing style, by contrast, has been described as more likely to lead to conflict with the public.

It has been suggested that the traditional police culture resembles the dominant values of a rugby club or a boys' school.⁵ These values place importance on not

losing face in any encounter, masculine solidarity, physical courage, and the glamour of violence.

Several studies have reported that male officers are more likely to be the subject of complaints from citizens or charges of misconduct than female officers.⁶ Female police are said to rely more on their tact and ingenuity in confrontations because, generally, they have less physical prowess.⁷ However, confounding factors that may contribute to the lower proportion of complaints of assault against female officers could be that policewomen are less likely to be deployed to the 'front line', and that male offenders are less inclined to act aggressively when a female police officer is involved.⁸

In summary, most previous research has reported that policewomen tend to have higher personal ethical standards, generate fewer complaints and employ a less aggressive policing style than their male counterparts. We will now consider whether these broad generalisations apply also to female police in the QPS.

Ethical attitudes and behaviour in the QPS

In Queensland, women were first recruited as 'sworn' officers in 1965, but assignment to general duties only became common in the 1970s. By 1995, females constituted 12.6 per cent of the total number of police officers (excluding recruits), up from 5.4 per cent in 1989. However, women continue to be employed mainly in the lower ranks with very few at the Commissioned Officer level and none at the Executive Officer level (see table 1).

To control for this factor, our paper focuses specifically on comparing the attitudes and behaviour of male and female police officers at the ranks of Constable and Senior Constable.

Findings from police ethics' surveys

In 1995, we surveyed 59 police recruits at the start of their training at the Queensland Police Academy, 52 First Year Constables (FYCs) who had been in the

1 For example, Brown et al. (1993); Hunt (1990); Martin (1994); Miller & Brasell (1992)

2 Huon et al. (1995)

3 McConkey et al. (1996)

4 Belknap & Shelley (1992)

5 Smith & Gray (1983) in Sutton (1992), pp. 73-74

6 For example, Bloch & Anderson (1974); Felkenes (1991) in Prenzler (1993); Peak & Glensor (1996); Sichel et al. (1978) in Hale (1992); Timmins & Hainsworth (1989)

7 Bouza (1975)

8 Bell (1982); Johnson (1991)

TABLE 1: RANK DISTRIBUTION IN THE QPS BY GENDER (1994-1995)

Rank	Male		Female	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Executive Officers	13	100.0	0	0.0
Commissioned Officers	255	96.6	9	3.4
Sergeants & Senior Sergeants	1,851	94.9	99	5.1
Constables & Senior Constables	3,383	83.1	688	16.9
Total	5,502	87.4	796	12.6

Source: QPS Statistical Review 1994-95

TABLE 2: RANK AND GENDER CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY GROUPS

Groups	Intake date	Survey date	Number surveyed (n)	Gender	
				Female (n)	Male (n)
Recruits	Jan. '95	Feb. '95	59	23	36
FYCs	Jan. '94	Feb. '95	52	15	37
Experienced Officers	Various	Mar. '95 & April '95	63	12	51
Re-survey sample	Jan. '95	Mar. '96	76	29	47

Note: The re-survey sample is larger than the original recruit sample because the recruit survey could only be administered to three of the four squads in the January 1995 intake.

field for eight months, and 63 experienced officers attending a detective and investigative skills course.⁹ The January 1995 recruit intake was surveyed again in early 1996, after they had completed six months' training at the Academy and eight months' training in the field. The additional survey was undertaken to assess the extent to which recruits' views changed as they came into contact with the rank and file police culture. This group is identified as the 're-survey sample' for the remainder of the report.

Table 2 shows the size and gender composition of the various samples.

The survey instrument contained a series of scenarios (see next page) based on situations in which police might find themselves. The scenarios describe conduct by police which, if proven, would generally result in some form of disciplinary action being taken against the officer concerned. The scenarios were modelled on questions used in the 1992 NPRU survey.

For each scenario, the officers were asked to rate the conduct of the police officer on a 10-point scale, ranging from 'not at all serious' to 'extremely serious', in terms of the respondent's *personal* view of the conduct, the view of a *typical officer*, the view of the *QPS*, and the view of a member of the *public*.

Respondents were also asked to identify what action they might take if they became aware that another

officer had engaged in the conduct described in each of the scenarios.

The options were to:

- report formally (to either the CJC or QPS)
- raise informally with a senior officer
- raise directly with the officer concerned
- take no action
- specify some other action.

We first combined the original FYC sample, the re-survey sample and the experienced officer sample and then compared the responses of male and female officers within this aggregated sample.

Recruits were excluded from this analysis to avoid 'double counting' with the re-survey sample, and because previous analysis of the data indicated that recruits differed markedly in their responses from FYCs and experienced officers.

The second comparison was of responses given by the recruit sample and the re-survey sample, to find out if there were any differences in: (a) the initial attitudes of male and female recruits; and (b) the extent to which male and female officers changed their views once they became exposed to the 'real world' of policing. For the combined FYC/experienced officer sample, we compared average

9 See CJC (1995) for a full description of this study.

Scenarios

1. Off-duty officer tries to avoid RBT

An off-duty police officer who has drunk a little too much is stopped for an RBT by police officers he doesn't know. The off-duty officer is obviously under the weather. He identifies himself as a fellow police officer in an effort to avoid blowing in the bag.

2. Officer at bottle shop pockets cigarettes

The local bottle shop has been broken into for the third time in so many weeks. The responding patrol enters the premises to wait for the owner to arrive and sort out the mess of cigarettes and liquor lying all over the floor. One of the officers bends down, picks up a torn pack of cigarettes from the shattered window display, and puts the pack in his pocket.

3. Officer retaliates against youth who assaulted female officer

In a pub brawl, a young female First Year Constable responding with her partner to a 'disturbance' call, receives a nasty black eye from a tattooed youth wielding a billiard cue. As the arrested youth is led into the cells, the male team member gives him a savage kidney punch saying, 'hurts, doesn't it'

4. Accident by police misrepresented in report

During a quiet period on patrol, two officers decide to test how the rear of the police vehicle would slide on the deserted, wet carpark. Their attempts result in a minor collision with a shopping trolley. Rather than go into full details about the scrape when reporting the damage, the driver states that the car was 'sideswiped' by an unidentified vehicle while they were attending to an inquiry.

5. Words added to a suspected rapist's statement

An offender is picked up for a particularly nasty rape in a local park. There's no doubt he's the culprit. There's an excellent ID but the offender who is 'streetwise' says nothing. To make matters certain, the arresting officer attributes the words, 'OK I was in the park but I didn't touch the bitch' to the offender in his notebook.

6. Pick-up outside of patrol area

On a quiet Saturday afternoon an officer decides to travel well outside his area to get some equipment for his Sunday building job. In radio contact all the time, he picks up the gear and returns to his patrol area.

7. Registration check to get details about a woman

An attractive young woman in a Mazda sports car smiles at the young officer in the patrol car alongside at the traffic lights. The officer, following a couple of lengths behind, radios for a vehicle registration check to find out her address.

male and female seriousness ratings for each scenario using a statistical technique known as analysis of variance (ANOVA). Few items reached statistical significance and those that did failed to show any consistent gender pattern. We then collapsed responses to the scenarios to give overall seriousness ratings for the respondents' personal views and their perceptions of the 'typical officer' view. This analysis confirmed that there were no consistent differences in how males and females responded to the various scenarios (see table 3).

Table 4 compares how males and females in the recruit and re-survey samples rated the seriousness of the various scenarios, and also how these respondents rated the view of the 'typical officer'. It shows that female recruits tended to rate the scenarios slightly more seriously overall than did males, but

the difference was not statistically significant. The table also shows that female respondents tended to modify their views to a greater extent over time.

As noted above, respondents were also asked what action, if any, they would take if they found out that a fellow officer had engaged in the behaviour described in the scenario. Figure 1 shows, for each scenario, the proportion of male and female respondents who said that they would be willing to report the officer, formally or informally.

There were some gender differences in responses to individual scenarios, but no consistent pattern. Overall, female respondents did *not* indicate that they would be more willing to report than male respondents. Regardless of gender, most of the officers surveyed expressed a reluctance to take

TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF OVERALL MALE AND FEMALE SERIOUSNESS RATINGS: FYCs AND EXPERIENCED OFFICERS

Assessment of scenarios	Average seriousness rating	
	Female	Male
Personal view	6.2	5.8
Typical officer's view	4.7	5.1

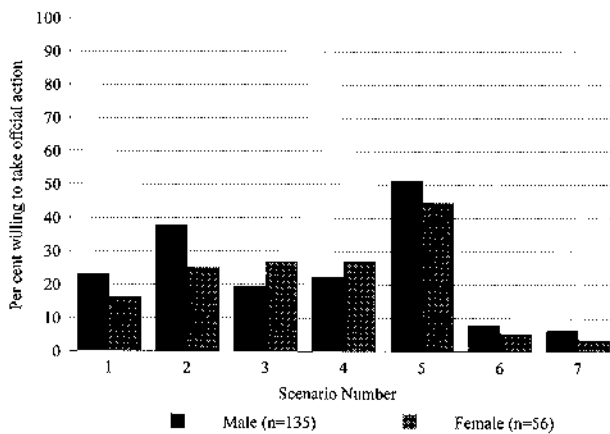
Notes: 1. For this analysis, female (n) = 56 and male (n) = 135.
2. Seriousness ratings were from 1 (not at all serious) to 10 (extremely serious).

TABLE 4: COMPARISON OF OVERALL SERIOUSNESS RATINGS: RECRUITS AND RE-SURVEY SAMPLES

Assessment of scenarios		Average seriousness rating	
		Female	Male
Personal view	Recruit	7.7	7.1
	Re-survey	6.7	6.5
Typical officer	Recruit	6.3	6.3
	Re-survey	5.0	5.3

Notes: 1. For this analysis, female recruit (n) = 23 and male recruit (n) = 36; female re-survey (n) = 29 and male re-survey (n) = 47.
2. Seriousness ratings were from 1 (not at all serious) to 10 (extremely serious).

FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF RESPONDENTS PREPARED TO REPORT MISCONDUCT FORMALLY OR INFORMALLY: FYC/EXPERIENCED OFFICER SAMPLE



action against an officer known to be committing breaches of behaviour. Consistent with this general pattern, our comparison of the recruit and re-survey samples showed that stated willingness to report misconduct by other officers declined markedly after respondents had spent a few months 'in the field'. The extent of change was as great for females as for males.

In summary, our analysis found no consistent gender differences in officers' perceptions of the seriousness of the breaches of behaviour described in the scenarios, or in the stated willingness of respondents to report fellow officers. Moreover, females seem to be no less susceptible than males to changing their views once they had been exposed to the police task environment and organisational culture. These results are contrary to most other attitudinal studies, although they are in line with the 1996 NPRU study. Previous research has also suggested that females are more resistant to the influences of the male-dominated police culture. Our data give little support for this view.

Police complaints against police

What a person says in response to a hypothetical scenario may be different from what he or she does in practice. So it is important to also use behavioural measures, where they are available.

As part of a larger study of the complaints and discipline system, we have analysed all 'police against police' complaints reported to the CJC in 1991-92 and 1994-95. These data allow us to assess the extent to which female police officers are prepared to enforce higher standards and to contravene the 'police code of silence'.¹⁰

In the two years examined, there were 68 police-initiated complaints where the source of a complaint against a police officer was a Constable or Senior Constable and the gender of the informant was known.

Table 5 shows that females were *slightly* more likely than males to report misconduct by fellow officers, but the differences are not statistically significant.¹¹ Few officers of *either* gender at the rank of Constable and Senior Constable were the source of complaints against other officers. Moreover, reporting rates for both male and female police officers remained consistently low over the period examined.

Our research indicates that reporting behaviour is much more a function of rank than of gender. In 1991-92, Constables and Senior Constables, who make up 67 per cent of the sworn strength of the QPS, accounted for only 37 per cent of all police-initiated complaints; in 1994-95 the proportion decreased slightly to 32 per cent. The balance of these complaints were made by officers of the rank of Sergeant and above.

Overall, these findings are consistent with the results obtained from the ethics' surveys. Both sets of data show that male and female officers at the ranks of Constable and Senior Constable are equally reluctant to report fellow officers for misconduct. This is again contrary to the previous research suggesting that female officers are more likely to report misconduct.

¹⁰ The police 'code of silence' was identified by the 1989 Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct (Fitzgerald Inquiry) as a significant factor contributing to corruption in the QPS.

¹¹ The slightly higher proportion of complaints initiated by female officers is due to reporting of sexual harassment matters.

TABLE 5: GENDER OF INFORMANT, POLICE COMPLAINTS AGAINST POLICE: CONSTABLES AND SENIOR CONSTABLES (1991-92 & 1994-95)

Year	Female no. of complaints	Rate per 100 officers	Male no. of complaints	Rate per 100 officers
1991-92	7	1.2	29	0.8
1994-95	8	1.2	27	0.8
Average	7.5	1.2	28	0.8

Source: CJC complaints files

Complaints against police

The third source of data that we used for this study was the QPS Professional Standards Unit database, which contains records of all complaints against Queensland police received since 1 January 1992. We focused on complaints data because they provide the best available measure of behavioural differences, short of directly observing officers. At the end of April 1996, the QPS database contained details on 18,299 allegations arising out of 11,260 complaints involving 10,040 complainants and 5,030 QPS members.¹² For this study, we analysed the three complete financial years from 1992 to 1995.

Complaints against members of the QPS recorded in the database are divided into 'breaches of discipline' and 'misconduct'. A breach of discipline is a breach of any provision of the *Police Service Administration Act 1990* or directions of the Commissioner.¹³ Breaches can commonly be described as a violation or dereliction of duty. Misconduct, which is more serious, is defined as conduct that is disgraceful, improper or unbecoming to an officer; that shows unfitness to be, or continue as, an officer; or that does not meet the standard of conduct reasonably expected by the community of a police officer.

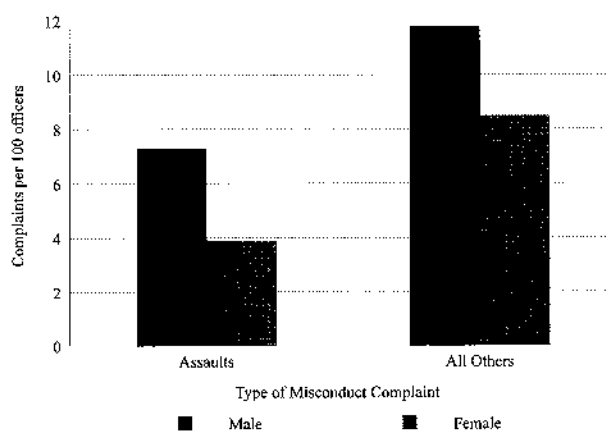
Table 6 compares the average number of complaints recorded against Constables and Senior Constables over the three financial years from 1992 to 1995, according to whether the alleged behaviour constituted a breach of discipline or misconduct. In addition, the table shows the number of complaints per 100 male officers and per 100 female officers. Gender differences were significant for misconduct complaints and total complaints. However, there was only a small difference in the rate at which breach of discipline complaints—the less serious matters—were recorded against male as opposed to female officers.

A complaint may involve several allegations of a variety of different types, such as assault, inappropriate behaviour, duty failure. Because of the small number of allegations in total against female officers, most categories did not show marked gender

differences. The main exception was assault, which accounted for approximately 33 per cent of misconduct allegations. As shown by figure 2, male officers were nearly twice as likely as females to be subject to such allegations.

In summary, female officers of the rank of Constable or Senior Constable are less likely than their male counterparts to attract misconduct complaints, with the difference being most marked in the case of complaints involving allegations of assault. These findings support the view that female police officers are generally less confrontational in their manner and more adept at handling conflict than are males. However, we have not been able to test alternative explanations, such as that female police are less likely to be deployed to deal with conflictual situations, or that members of the public react differently to female officers.

FIGURE 2: MISCONDUCT COMPLAINTS PER 100 MALE AND PER 100 FEMALE OFFICERS: CONSTABLES AND SENIOR CONSTABLES (1992-93 — 1994-95)



Source: QPS Professional Standards Unit database

Note: Complaints where there were both assault and other allegations are counted in both categories.

TABLE 6: TYPES OF COMPLAINTS BY GENDER: CONSTABLES AND SENIOR CONSTABLES (1992-93 — 1994-95)

Gender of subject officer	Average misconduct complaints per year	Average misconduct complaints per year per 100 officers	Average breach of discipline complaints per year	Average breach of discipline complaints per year per 100 officers	Average total complaints per year	Average total complaints per year per 100 officers
Male	591	17.2	1,023	29.8	1613	47.0
Female	78	11.7	171	25.6	249	37.3

Source: QPS Professional Standards Unit database

¹² A single complaint may involve several specific allegations, multiple complainants and multiple officers. An officer may be the subject of more than one complaint over a period.

¹³ This includes the 'Code of Conduct' and 'Code of Dress and Appearance'.

Conclusion

Our research has shown that an influx of women into policing will not, of itself, result in a significant weakening of the existing police culture. There is a need to develop more broad-ranging strategies for promoting ethical conduct in policing organisations, focusing not just on changing the make up of recruit intakes, but also on altering the organisational climate and the task environment of policing, and on counteracting the influence of the prevailing culture on new officers.

Police services could benefit from examining the ways in which skilled policewomen perform their duties and then educating male police officers in these techniques.

Although female police officers may not be inherently more ethical than their male counterparts, our data indicate that greater use of women in operational positions will more likely lead to fewer complaints, particularly about the use of force. This is an important potential benefit, as allegations of assault currently comprise one of the largest categories of complaints made against police.

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