



Improving misconduct reporting in the QPS: the importance of ethical culture

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In 2013, the Applied Research and Evaluation unit of the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) surveyed 371 Queensland police officers to examine the relative contributions of job-related factors and ethical culture in influencing officers' intention to report misconduct. In this study, intention was used as a proxy measure for behaviour.

This sample comprised a broad range of officers — from recruits and First Year Constables (FYCs) through to Commissioned Officers — with different work duties (for example, general duties or specialist), and from different geographic locations (the Brisbane area, regional urban centres and rural centres). To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the influence of job-related factors and ethical culture on officers' intention to report misconduct in a general sample of police officers.

We found that:

- officers whose professional values were more aligned with the values of the Queensland Police Service (QPS) were more inclined to report misconduct because they considered misconduct to be more serious than other officers did
- officers who viewed the QPS ethical culture in a positive way were more inclined to report misconduct
- officers who found the QPS's expected ethical standards to be concrete, comprehensive and understandable were more inclined to report misconduct
- officers whose supervisors provide a good model of ethical behaviour were more inclined to report misconduct
- the other job-related factors (such as work duties and geographic location) were less important than we thought in influencing officers' intention to report misconduct
- there was no evidence of "key change points" in officers' responses across the police career.

These results showed that the perceived QPS ethical culture was a more powerful and more consistent predictor of officers' intention to report misconduct than were job-related factors. This was a somewhat unexpected finding, as several previous studies have showed the importance of a range of job-related factors in understanding issues relating to police ethics and misconduct.

Overall, the study suggests that focusing on improving the ethical culture of the organisation, particularly by improving the communication of expected ethical standards and the extent to which supervisors promote and act as models of ethical behaviour, is likely to improve misconduct reporting in the QPS.

Introduction

For almost two decades, the CMC has conducted regular surveys to monitor the ethical attitudes of QPS recruits and FYCs. This program of research aims to gauge officers' attitudes on a range of issues related to police ethics and misconduct, and track changes over time. The CMC has a special interest in monitoring police attitudes, as they give an indication of how an officer may behave in specific situations. From this research (CMC 2010), we have learned that there is:

- a general view that police misconduct is serious and inexcusable, but a somewhat lenient view towards some other types of unethical behaviour
- a perception that officers who engage in unethical behaviour are generally unlikely to be caught
- a reluctance by some officers to report misconduct
- an apparent deterioration in officers' attitudes to police ethics and misconduct after exposure to the operational policing environment.

Rationale for the research

Although the CMC's police ethics research program has identified both improvements over time and some ongoing concerns, our understanding of QPS officers' attitudes about ethical issues remains incomplete.

Our previous research has focused on ethical attitudes, but another body of evidence suggests that values may help shape attitudes and behaviour. At the same time, previous studies suggest that factors relating to an officer's current tasking and position — job-related factors — and the ethical culture of the organisation may shape officers' ethical attitudes. However, we do not know which job-related factors are most important in shaping these attitudes, nor do we know the relative contributions of job-related factors and ethical culture. This study examines these questions in an effort to remedy this knowledge deficit.

Key research questions

The study aimed to answer the following key questions:

1. **What is the relationship between values, attitudes and behaviour?**
2. **What are the relative contributions of job-related factors and ethical culture in shaping officers' intention to report misconduct?**
3. **Considering one job-related factor in particular — length of service — is there any evidence of "key change points" in officers' intention to report misconduct across their career?**

Methodology

To answer the key research questions, we surveyed 371 officers and recruits in February and March 2013.¹ A total of 273 officers from four police districts and one command responded to an email inviting them to complete an electronic survey. Fifty-two FYCs and 46 recruits attending the Brisbane police academy participated in the survey. These surveys were administered in person by a CMC researcher. All surveys were voluntary and anonymous.²

The sample comprised male and female Queensland police officers of different ranks (ranging from FYCs to Commissioned Officers), with different work duties, from different geographic locations and with a range of different lengths of service.

Measuring values

In the workplace, the professional values of the individual are not important in themselves. Research suggests that it is the alignment or *congruence* between the values of the individual and the values of the organisation that underpins employees' attitudes and behaviours (Liedtka 1989; Meglino & Ravlin 1998; Ruiz-Palomino & Martinez-Canas 2013).

The QPS has a set of official organisational values, but they are so broad (from a measurement point of view) that they do not assist in measuring officers' professional values. For the purposes of this research, we developed a detailed set of organisational values, based on the QPS Standard of Practice, the QPS Client Service Charter, the QPS information booklet *Ethics and ethical decision-making in the Queensland Police Service*, the *Public Sector Ethics Act 1994* and the Code of Conduct for the Queensland Public Service 2011.

To measure the alignment between individual values and the values of the QPS, we asked respondents to rate these values on a five-point scale from *not important* to *extremely important*, according to how important the values are to them in their role as a police officer. We combined officers' responses to the items into a single measure of value congruence.

Measuring attitudes

Previous research indicates that employees' attitudes or perceptions about the seriousness of a situation are a key factor that influences unethical behaviour in the workplace (for more information, see Rest 1986 in Rajeev 2011).

1 The survey was based on the CMC's Police Ethics Survey (2013 version).

2 Please contact Applied Research and Evaluation if you require more detail about the survey instrument, the analytic approach or the results.

To measure officers' perceptions of the seriousness of a situation, respondents were presented with 16 scenarios intended to reflect a range of unethical behaviour by police officers (some instances of which constitute misconduct) (see, for example, Huon et al. 1995; Klockars & Kutnjak Ivkovic 2003). Respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of behaviours presented in the scenarios on a five-point scale from *not serious* to *extremely serious*. We combined officers' responses to the 16 scenarios into a single measure of perceived seriousness of misconduct.

Measuring behaviour

Previous research shows that employees' attitudes are indicators of how they will behave in given situations (Kish-Gephart, Harrison & Trevino 2010; Rajeev 2011). The attitude that is considered to most closely reflect actual behaviour is *intention to act* (for more information, see Rest 1986 in Rajeev 2011).

To measure intention to act, respondents were asked to indicate their intention to report a QPS officer who engaged in the behaviours presented in the scenarios mentioned above on a five-point scale from *definitely not* to *definitely yes*. We combined officers' responses to the 16 scenarios into a single measure of intention to report misconduct.

Measuring ethical culture

To measure officers' perceptions of QPS ethical culture, we used an established scale designed to measure the ethical culture of an organisation, with language adapted where necessary to suit the QPS (Kaptein 2008, 2011). We measured six different dimensions of ethical culture:

- clarity of the organisation's expected ethical standards
- ethical role modelling of supervisors
- commitment to behave ethically
- visibility of (un)ethical behaviour
- openness to discussing ethical issues
- reinforcement of ethical behaviour.

For each dimension, a series of statements were presented. Respondents were asked to respond to each statement on a five-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. We combined officers' responses to form measures of the six separate dimensions of ethical culture and one overall measure of ethical culture.

Recruits were not asked any questions about QPS ethical culture, as they had not yet been exposed to this in the normal policing environment.

Measuring job-related factors

Based on the findings of previous research, we measured the following job-related factors:

- years of service as a sworn officer in the QPS
- current rank (*First Year Constable, Constable (other than FYC), Senior Constable, Sergeant, Senior Sergeant, Commissioned Officer*)
- supervisory role (*yes/no*)
- current work duties (*uniform, plain clothes police officer, officer in charge/manager, specialist or other*)
- current work location (*Brisbane, urban area other than Brisbane, rural area*).

We also asked respondents their age (from a range of age groups) and their gender.

Key findings

For QPS officers, there is a pathway from value congruence to intention to report misconduct

Our results found a three-stage pathway — from value congruence, to perceived seriousness of a situation, to intention to report misconduct. This is consistent with theory and previous studies. Specifically, these results indicate that officers whose professional values were more aligned with the values of the QPS were more inclined to report misconduct because they considered misconduct to be more serious than did other officers.

Officers who viewed the QPS's ethical culture in a positive way were more inclined to report misconduct

Officers' perceptions about the QPS's ethical culture influence their intention to report. In fact, officers' perceptions of the ethical culture influenced all three stages in the pathway from value congruence to attitudes to behaviour.

Job-related factors, on the other hand, were not as important as we had expected in influencing intention to report misconduct. Over and above the effects of ethical culture, the rank of the officer was the only job-related factor that influenced officers' intention to report misconduct. (To analyse the influence of rank, we compared the responses of FYCs with the responses of all other ranks, as FYCs are the rank that is newly exposed to the QPS ethical culture.) We found that Constables and Commissioned Officers were significantly more inclined to report misconduct than were FYCs.

Two dimensions of ethical culture were particularly important in understanding intention to report, as described in the following two sections.

Officers who found the QPS's ethical standards to be concrete, comprehensive and understandable were more inclined to report misconduct

The first dimension of ethical culture that was significant was clarity of ethical standards. Officers who found the QPS's ethical standards to be concrete, comprehensive and understandable were more inclined to report misconduct.

Some job-related factors influenced the extent to which officers found the QPS's ethical standards to be concrete, comprehensive and understandable, but again they were not as important as we had expected. Officers' geographic location, rank and length of service influenced their perceptions of ethical culture, but the contribution of these factors was small. This means that, although these factors go some way to influencing officers' perceptions of ethical culture, other factors (that is, factors that we did not measure) were more important in shaping officers' perceptions about QPS ethical culture.

Officers whose supervisors provide a good model of ethical behaviour were more inclined to report misconduct

The second dimension of ethical culture that was significant relates to the role of the supervisor. The more an officer considered that their supervisor provided a good model of ethical behaviour, the higher their value congruence, and the more serious they considered misconduct to be, when compared with other officers. Because we know that there is a pathway from value congruence to perceived seriousness of misconduct and then to intention to report, we can conclude that officers whose supervisors provide a good model of ethical behaviour are more inclined to report misconduct.

Other job-related factors were less important than we thought

Our results indicate that some job-related factors influence officers' intention to report and their perceptions of QPS ethical culture. However, in all instances the contribution of these factors was small.

Previous research shows that two job-related factors — the work duties of the officer and whether or not the officer is in a supervisory position — are important in understanding police values and attitudes. Unexpectedly, these two job-related factors did not help us to understand officers' intention to report.

There was no evidence of "key change points" across the police career

This study provided an opportunity to explore the extent to which officers' intention to report misconduct varies according to one job-related factor in particular — length of service. However, results of statistical analyses provided no convincing evidence of "key change points" across the police career.

Conclusions

This study confirmed a pathway from values to attitudes to behaviour. Specifically, officers whose professional values were more aligned with the values of the QPS were more inclined to report misconduct because they considered misconduct to be more serious than did other officers. Values and attitudes are therefore substantial influences on officers' intention to report misconduct.

Another key influence was how officers viewed the QPS's ethical culture. An in-depth examination of this indicated that two dimensions of ethical culture in particular influenced their intention to report. Officers who consider that the QPS's expected ethical standards are concrete, comprehensive and understandable, and officers whose supervisors provide good models of ethical behaviour, were more inclined to report misconduct than are other officers.

Surprisingly, job-related factors were less important than we had expected. A significant body of previous research shows that characteristics of an officer's usual task environment influence their attitudes and behaviour. However, our results indicate that officers' perception of the QPS ethical culture had far more influence on their intention to report misconduct. Notably, two of the job-related factors that we measured had no effect on intention to report: the work duties of the officer, and whether or not the officer was in a supervisory position.³ The relative unimportance of job-related factors also indicates that there is no convincing evidence of "key change points" in police values, attitudes or behaviour across the police career.

Taken together, these results suggest that any efforts to improve police behaviour across the organisation should include measures to improve officers' perceptions of the organisation's ethical culture, with particular regard to the communication of expected ethical standards and the extent to which supervisors promote and act as models for ethical behaviour.

³ Note that the categories we used for work duties (uniform, plain clothes, OIC/manager, specialist) may be too broad to identify specific task environments that are a problem.

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