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# Monitoring the Ethical Climate of Organisations

## A Queensland case study

Andrew Ede and Andre Legosz

### Introduction

This paper describes a simple survey method developed by the CMC (formerly the CJC) to monitor the 'ethical climate' of the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and track changes over time in that climate.<sup>1</sup> The surveys, conducted regularly since 1995, are based on scenarios that describe various forms of improper conduct by police. For each scenario, respondents rate the seriousness of the behaviour described and indicate whether they would be willing to report a fellow officer for engaging in such conduct.

The surveys indicate that over the last several years there has been a measurable increase in awareness of ethical issues and stated willingness to report misconduct. Possible explanations for this shift, and their implications, are discussed in this paper.

We conclude by considering how applicable this method is to the monitoring of 'ethical climates' in other organisations, including non-policing bodies.

### Background

Measuring the 'ethical climate' of any large organisation is a challenging exercise. Large organisations, such as the QPS, are complex institutions that always incorporate a variety of sub-cultures. It cannot be assumed, for example, that the typical general duties officer has the same world view as an officer in Traffic Branch or a detective in State Crime Operations.

There is also the potential for significant regional differences to exist in the QPS because of the size and decentralised nature of Queensland and the degree of autonomy afforded to police regions.<sup>2</sup> Despite these differences, it is possible to use quite simple survey techniques to

gain an insight into the general organisational culture.

This paper presents a framework for gathering and interpreting attitudinal measures of an organisation's 'ethical climate'.

In 1995, the CJC began regularly surveying QPS Recruits, First Year Constables and groups of Experienced Officers training at the Academy on their views of the complaints and disciplinary process. The surveys sought the views of police officers on hypothetical scenarios of unethical conduct.<sup>3</sup> Respondents were presented with 10 scenarios describing various forms of unethical conduct, and asked to rate the seriousness of the conduct and indicate if they would be willing to report a fellow officer for engaging in that conduct.<sup>4</sup> (See next page for an explanation of the scenarios.)

- 1 In January 2002, the CJC (Criminal Justice Commission) and the QCC (Queensland Crime Commission) merged to form the CMC (Crime and Misconduct Commission).
- 2 As a way of dealing with these difficulties, the CJC used multiple discrete data sources, each of which provided a different 'window' into the organisational culture of the QPS, and, collectively, presented a more balanced picture of the 'ethical climate' of the QPS. In addition the CJC used insider assessments provided by officers with experience of the Service before and after the Fitzgerald Inquiry, outsider views based upon an analysis of complaints against police made by members of the public to the CJC, and behavioural indicators based on an analysis of police-initiated complaints made to the CJC.
- 3 Scenarios are modelled on a survey by the National Police Research Unit in 1992 (Huon, Hesketh, Frank, McConkey & McGrath 1995).
- 4 Similar types of surveys are conducted in other jurisdictions. For example, in May 2000 results of a similar survey conducted in 30 police agencies in the USA were reported by the National Institute of Justice (Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver & Haberfield 2000).

## Attitudes and actions

It is important to recognise that attitudes cannot be directly equated with behaviour. For example, the Theory of Reasoned Action developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975; Ajzen & Fishbein 1980) argues that behaviour can best be predicted by an individual's intentions, and intentions derive from two conceptually independent variables: the person's attitude concerning the behaviour, and the social influence or the pattern of norms and values to which the individual adheres.

Social scientists, however, have also sought to identify factors that affect behaviour that is not mediated by intentions. For example, Gorsuch and Ortberg (1983) argued for the importance of 'moral obligation', and Budd and Spencer (1985) for the importance of 'personal' norms (what people think they should do, as distinct from what they perceive others' opinions to be). Also, and not surprisingly, 'past behaviour' was found to be a strong predictor of future behaviour (see Ajzen & Madden 1986; Fredricks & Dossett 1983).

The Theory of Reasoned Action was later expanded to include 'perceived behavioural control' (Ajzen 1985; Ajzen & Madden 1986), and more recently expanded again to the 'Model of Goal-Directed Behaviour' with the inclusion of measures of positive and negative 'anticipated emotions', frequency and recency of 'past behaviour' and 'desires' (Perugini & Bagozzi 2001; Perugini & Conner 2000).

Nonetheless, whatever the merits of these theoretical orientations, attitudes and opinions on ethical issues provide important indicators of behavioural predisposition and willingness to tolerate behaviour by others that is consistent with these attitudes.

## Method

Respondents completed the survey during class time at the Police Academy. They were not required to put their name on the questionnaire and were told that all responses would be treated confidentially. They were asked for their cooperation in the study, but were told that participation was not compulsory.

Very few officers chose not to complete the questionnaire.<sup>5</sup>

## Samples

**The Recruit sample.** Two groups were surveyed at the start of their Academy training (59 surveyed on 27.3.95 and 121 surveyed on 23.1.97) and two groups were surveyed at the end of their Academy training (49 surveyed on 7.8.96 and 115 surveyed on 30.6.99). The total recruit sample size was 344.

**The First Year Constable (FYC) sample.** Eight groups with from three to eight months in the field as FYCs were surveyed while attending a training course at the Academy. The total FYC sample size was 692. Later in this paper, when changes over time in the 'ethical climate' are examined, this FYC sample will provide eight separate intake groups spanning the period from 1994 to 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Responses for males and females are not presented separately, given that gender proved not to be a significant determinant of how officers responded to the scenarios (CJC 1996).

## Scenarios of unethical conduct

### 1. Off duty officer tries to avoid RBT (Random Breath Test)

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 a bit 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 strikes youth in cells 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 decided to test how the rear of the police vehicle would slide on the deserted, wet car park. Their attempts resulted in a minor collision with a shopping trolley. Rather than go into full details about the scrape when reporting the damage, the driver stated the car was 'sideswiped' by an unidentified vehicle while they were attending to an inquiry.

### 5. Words added to suspected rapist's statement

An offender is picked up for a particularly nasty rape/assault 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 note book.

### 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 by officer to get details of attractive woman

The young lady in the Mazda sports car is very attractive and 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.

### 8. Officers accept cartons at Christmas party

The publican of a local tavern requests some extra police patrols as he is experiencing some problems with troublesome patrons. The officers at the station accept a couple of cartons of beer sent by the publican to the station's Christmas party in appreciation of the officers' service during the year.

### 9. Officer forcefully moves youth on

A youth on a deserted street is told to move on by the senior member of a car crew. At the youth's look of indifference, the officer jumps from the car and slams the youth against the wall (without injury), turns him round, and shoves him on his way.

### 10. Skimming from drug exhibits

An officer decides he/she can make a little extra cash by taking small proportions of confiscated drugs from the property room and selling it on the streets. Given the expense of a mortgage and a family, the officer feels justified in his/her actions; besides, the users would get the drugs from some other source anyway.

**The Experienced Officer sample.** Three groups of experienced officers attending training courses at the Academy were surveyed. Two groups attended detective training and investigative skills courses held in March and April 1995, and the third group were senior plain-clothes officers surveyed on 11.1.99. The total sample size was 81. These officers had between 3 and 31 years' policing experience, with an average of 8.6 years.

By surveying officers who attended these courses, we were able to obtain a quite large number of responses. The main disadvantage of this sampling strategy was that those who attended the courses were not necessarily representative of the QPS rank and file. For instance, there were relatively few females and a very large number of plain-clothes officers. However, our sampling technique does not appear to have greatly affected the results obtained, with little difference observed in the responses given by plain-clothes and uniformed officers, or between males and females.

### The survey instrument

The survey contained a series of scenarios based on situations that police might find themselves in. The scenarios describe conduct by police which, if proven, would generally result in some form of disciplinary action being taken against the officers. The text box on page 2 describes the 10 scenarios used in the survey (the format of the questionnaire is reproduced on page 5).

### Seriousness ratings

Respondents were requested to provide seriousness ratings of each of the scenarios on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being 'extremely serious'. Responses were sought on how seriously the officer:

- personally rated the conduct
- thought the typical working police officer would rate the conduct
- thought the QPS 'hierarchy' would regard the conduct
- thought the public would rate the conduct.

For reasons of space, this paper focuses upon the particular issue of how the police officers *themselves* rated the seriousness described in the scenarios. More detailed discussions relating to officers' beliefs about the attitudes of typical officers, the QPS hierarchy and the general public are reported in Waugh, Ede and Alley (1998), Brereton and Ede (1996) and CJC (1995, 1996, 1997, 2001).

### Action officers would take

Respondents were asked to say what action they might take if they became aware from a 'very reliable non-police source' that another officer had engaged in conduct described in the various scenarios. The options were:

- take no action
- report the matter to the QPS
- report the matter to the CJC
- informally raise with a senior officer
- raise directly with the officer.

For the analyses reported here, responses were collapsed into two categories:

- 'willingness to take official action' — respondents who indicated that they would formally report the officer to the QPS or the CJC, or would informally bring the incident to the attention of a senior officer
- 'unwillingness to act' — respondents who indicated that they would take no action, or would only raise the matter with the officer concerned.

## Results for different officer groups

The average seriousness rating and the proportion willing to take official action for each scenario for each sample group are illustrated in figure 1.

### Seriousness ratings

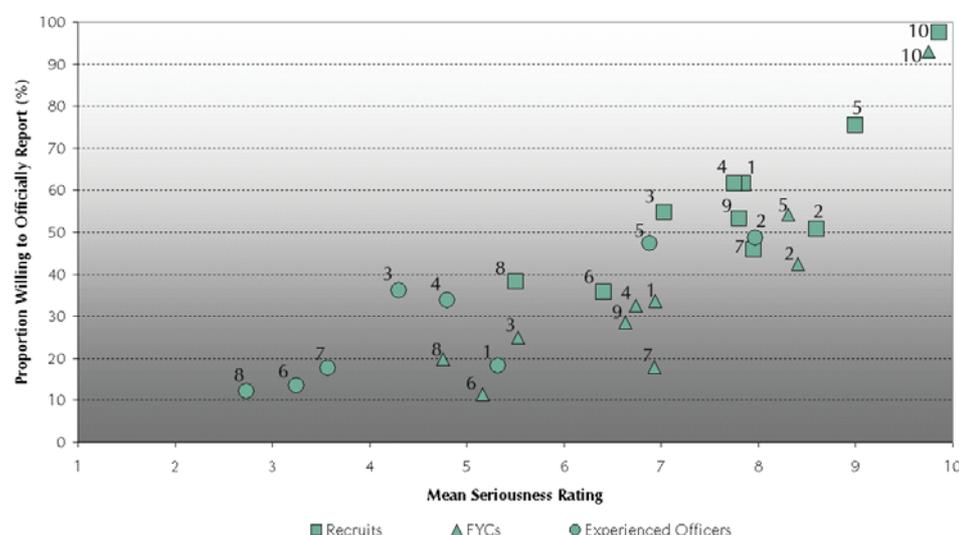
Typically, the Recruit sample rated the scenarios as more serious than the FYC sample, who, in turn, rated them more seriously than the Experienced Officer sample.<sup>6</sup> The only exceptions were:

- scenario 2, where the only group difference was between the Recruit sample and the Experienced Officer sample (FYC seriousness ratings were still between the other two samples, but not statistically significant from either sample), and
- scenario 10, where there were no statistical differences between the Recruit sample and the FYC sample (the Experienced Officer sample was not surveyed on this scenario).<sup>7</sup>

### Willingness to take action

Section 7.2 of the *Police Service Administration Act 1990* requires any member of the QPS who knows or reasonably suspects that misconduct has occurred to report it to the Commissioner of Police and the CJC. Eight of the scenarios describe behaviour clearly amounting to misconduct under the Act with possible exceptions being scenario 6 (pick-up outside patrol area) and scenario 8 (free beer at Christmas).

**Figure 1: Average seriousness rating versus proportion willing to take official action**



<sup>6</sup> ANOVAs were conducted with Bonferroni or Dunnett's T3 Post Hoc analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Scenarios 9 and 10 were added to the survey after the Experienced Officers were surveyed. Some of the earlier Recruit and FYC sub-samples did not receive these scenarios. However, the larger total sample sizes for Recruits and FYCs allows for scenarios 9 and 10 to be included for these groups.

## Format of the survey instrument

This section presents 10 brief scenarios that represent the sort of situations police may find themselves in. Please rate each scenario on a scale of 1–10, ranging from ‘not serious’ to ‘extremely serious’. To assist you, you might note the following categories.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all serious		Not really serious		Moderately serious		Very serious		Extremely serious	

**Firstly** We’d like you to rate these scenarios on how you think the typical working police officer would rate them.

**Secondly** We’d like you to rate these scenarios on how seriously you think the QPS would respond if the details of the matter came to official attention.

**Thirdly** We’d like you to rate these scenarios on how serious you think the public would rate them.

**Lastly** We’d like you to rate these scenarios on how serious you think they are.

If you are not sure about a response do the best you can but please try to answer each item.

1. 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 a bit under the weather. He identifies himself as a fellow police officer in an effort to avoid blowing in the bag.

<b>Typical officer</b>	Not serious	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Extremely serious
<b>QPS</b>	Not serious	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Extremely serious
<b>Public</b>	Not serious	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Extremely serious
<b>Personal view</b>	Not serious	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Extremely serious

[The format of the scenario presented in the box above is then repeated for scenarios 2 to 10.]

In the last section you told us your views about 10 situations. In this section we’d like you to give us some idea of what you might do if you, as a serving police officer, were to hear about the incident from a very reliable non-police source who had dates, names etc., but who did not want to initiate any action.

(You may wish to do a number of things in relation to a particular incident. Feel free to tick more than one column for any incident.)

	ACTION YOU WOULD TAKE					
	No action	Report matter to QPS	Report matter to the CJC	Informally raise with senior officer	Raise directly with officer	Other (please specify briefly)
1. Off duty officer tries to avoid RBT						
2. Officer at bottle shop pockets cigarettes						
3. Officer strikes youth in cells who assaulted female officer						
4. Accident by police misrepresented in report						
5. Words added to suspected rapist’s statement						
6. Pick up outside of patrol area						
7. Registration check by officer to get details of attractive woman						
8. Officers accept cartons at Christmas party						
9. Officer forcefully moves youth on						
10. Skimming from drug exhibits						

Figure 1 shows the pattern of results for willingness to take action was more variable than the seriousness rating pattern. In every scenario, the Recruit sample stated they were more willing to take official action than the FYC sample, and in only one scenario (scenario 1) were FYCs significantly more willing than the Experienced Officer sample to take official action. In the remaining scenarios there were no statistically significant differences between FYC and Experienced Officer responses (chi-square test of statistical significance).

### Discussion for different officer groups

Figure 1 shows a direct relationship between seriousness rating and proportion of respondents willing to take official action. That is, the more serious the matter was rated the more willing respondents were to officially report the conduct.<sup>7</sup> However, this does not explain why similar proportions of the FYC and Experienced Officer samples stated willingness to officially report even though the FYC sample consistently rated the scenarios as more serious than the Experienced Officer sample. Nor does it explain why the

Recruit sample consistently rated scenarios as more serious and were more willing to officially report compared to the other two sample groups.

The reality of policing means that recruits can be quickly socialised in the 'us versus them' mentality that is probably present in every police service, at least to some degree. The data presented here suggest that elements of a code of silence exist to at least some extent in the QPS and that new members of the Service may be quickly socialised into the informal code. Queensland would, of course, not be alone in this regard (see Wood 1997; Bouza 2001). Recent results from survey research conducted by the National Institute of Ethics (USA) on police officers and recruits in 42 states of the USA concluded that a 'code of silence' exists and that it breeds, supports and nourishes other forms of unethical actions (Trautman 2001). This research found that 46 per cent of respondents stated that they had witnessed misconduct by another employee but had taken no action. The author concluded that the code of silence was prompted by excessive use of force

incidents more than for any other specific circumstance and that it typically conceals serious law enforcement misconduct for years before the corruption is revealed.

## Changes over time: the different intake groups

### Seriousness ratings

As noted earlier, the FYC sample can be divided into eight separate intake groups over the years from 1994 to 2000. The average of the seriousness ratings generally show a positive change over time with the values in the graph displaying an upward trend for most scenarios (see figure 2).

### Willingness to take action

The data show an overall increase in the proportion of FYCs who would be willing to take action that would result in official attention (see figure 3).

### Discussion for different intake groups

For most scenarios, there was an increase over time in perceived seriousness and willingness to report. These trends may reflect:

- changes to the way ethics training was delivered, resulting in a greater emphasis being placed on ethical issues in Academy training
- improved rigor in recruitment and selection processes as a result of a review published by the Police Education Advisory Council (1998)
- more general cultural change in the QPS as a result of continual emphasis on ethical conduct by the Commissioner of Police.

The general rate of willingness to report misconduct, while increasing, remains at a level sufficiently low to indicate that considerable work still needs to be done in educating police on the importance of reporting misconduct.

Figure 2: Average seriousness rating (FYC samples)

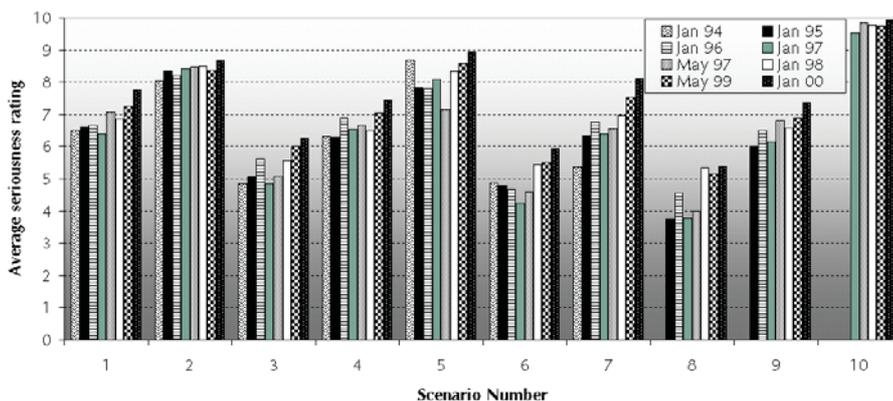
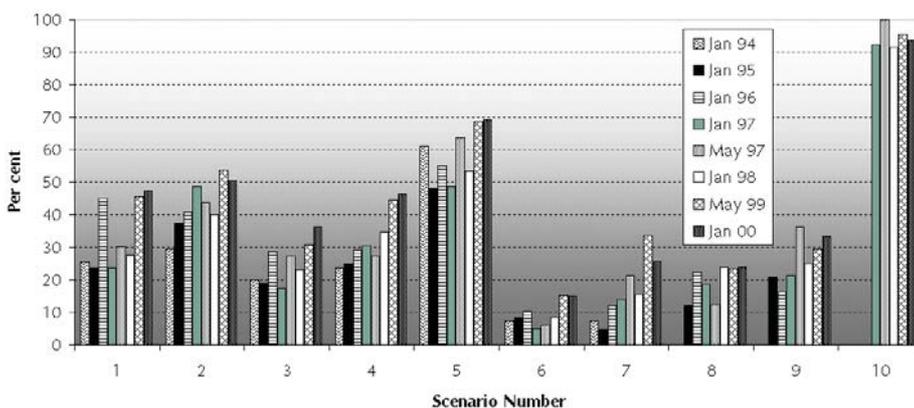


Figure 3: Proportion of respondents willing to take official action (FYC samples)



<sup>7</sup> ANOVAs showed that for all scenarios for each officer type (Recruits, FYCs and Experienced Officers) those indicating willingness to officially report rated the scenario as significantly more serious than those not reporting.

## Conclusion

The survey methodology described here is one useful way for the CMC to evaluate the general standard of integrity in the QPS and for the QPS itself to make a reasoned judgment from at least one perspective about its own standards. The general low likelihood of experienced officers taking official action for most of the scenarios supports a commonly held view by those who evaluate police ethical conduct: that of all the factors that might lead to a lack of integrity in the police service, an absence of good supervision, management and leadership is by far the most important (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary 1999).

## Applicability of methodology

Importantly, this methodology is readily applicable to gauging the 'ethical climates' in other organisations, including non-policing organisations. The first step is to devise a series of relevant scenarios. These scenarios should illustrate situations that employees may find themselves in, and should be written in language that will be seen as realistic by the target group. Some examples are presented below:

### A general scenario

Steve Smith is serving a female customer who has not completed the appropriate forms correctly. 'You stupid women are all the same. Can't you ever fill out the forms like the instructions say?', he snaps. 'Read the instructions this time,' he says as he hands her another set of forms.

### University or TAFE scenario

The test paper that the lecturer is marking belongs to the son of the Dean. He gets a couple of questions wrong, but the lecturer awards him full marks anyway. Well, you can't be the one to fail the Dean's son.

### Ambulance driver scenario

After an emergency run to the hospital, Terry is returning to base. He detours via the drycleaners to pick up his tuxedo. Tomorrow his cousin is getting married. Today's shift doesn't finish until 8 pm and the dry cleaner closes at 6 pm.

### Teaching scenario

Rumours are circulating that Bill Jones has become 'friendly' with one of his female students. The teacher in the next classroom observes Bill and the student talking and giggling in the hallway. Bill leans forward, whispers something in her ear, and kisses her on the cheek.

### Licensing scenario

Senior Drivers License Examiner Sally Jones conducts the driving test for her 17-year-old nephew. Sally then asks another driving examiner to sign the test sheet.

Care must be taken to ensure the scenarios are as unambiguous as possible or that instructions are given in the questionnaire to remove any ambiguity. For example, in the teaching scenario, it is possible that some respondents could focus on Bill's behaviour and others on the conduct of the other teacher. Thus, to eliminate ambiguity, the scenario should be rewritten as follows:

### Rewritten teaching scenario

Rumours are circulating that Bill Jones has become 'friendly' with one of his female students. Bill is often seen talking and giggling in the hallway with the student, whispering in her ear and sometimes kissing her on the cheek.

Similarly, in the licensing scenario some respondents may rate the conduct of Jones while others may rate the behaviour of the other driving examiner. The person whose behaviour is to be rated should be indicated by instructions in the questionnaire.

By selecting target groups based upon factors such as geographical location or task function, it is possible to measure the 'ethical climate' across different areas of the organisation. By using target groups based upon length of service, it is possible to check for socialisation effects. Finally, by surveying the same organisational groups over time, an indication can be obtained of the effectiveness of programs and strategies designed to improve organisational integrity.

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