Of ethos, family and bureau: accounts of a code of ethics as symbol of an organization's political re-legitimation

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Subtheme 10: Corporate Responsibility and Irresponsibility

Introduction

This paper proposes a neo-Weberian (du Gay, 2000) reading of codes of ethics (CoE) as a means through which 'responsible' people and organizations are discursively enacted and brought to life and differentiated from 'irresponsible' people and organizations. Such an analysis means adopting two main foci. First, an analysis of the rich and complex organizational, political and historical context in which a code of ethics sits. Such a reading enables an interpretation of the particular conduct of life ('*Lebensführung*') being enacted. Second, an analysis of a CoE as a particular disciplinary technology (Townley, 1994), ambiguously positioned within complementary and competing technologies and discourses. Such a reading enables a rich view of the work accomplished (and not) by a CoE, bringing to the fore the complex and contested nature of such codes and the work they do in re-legitimating an organization accused of irresponsibility.

We examine how police officers and members of staff in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) construct the meaning of the organization's CoE against the background of political and organizational change and a history of contested organizational legitimacy. The paper discusses how the police in Northern Ireland has been politically and historically constructed as an illegitimate and irresponsible organization by parts of the community and that the introduction of a CoE was part of a wider process of police reform in the wake of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Within this process a new policing organization was created, with the ethos of rule-bound public accountability at its core. Drawing on interviews with serving PSNI officers we posit identifications with the code as ambiguous and contested: experienced alternatively as joyful, oppressive and negligible. Such a reading, we argue, is made possible through exploring how specific people interpret and situate themselves within the perceived requirements of organizational and social change.

Background: contested police legitimacy and police reform

The legitimacy of the police in Northern Ireland has been contested for a long time, calling into question all three forms of legitimacy identified by Suchman (1995): pragmatic, moral and cognitive. As Mulcahy (2013) argues, a lack of consensus over constitutional and governmental arrangements in deeply divided societies poses a legitimacy problem for all state agencies but particularly for the police, who are charged with maintaining state authority and public order. The legitimacy of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force of Northern Ireland from 1922, was questioned particularly by Nationalist and Republican communities. Republican communities considered the authority of the British state in Northern Ireland as illegitimate as such, and this lack of cognitive legitimacy extended to the RUC as the law and public order enforcement organ of the British state.

The moral legitimacy of the RUC was also questioned, particularly in terms of allegations of unrepresentative composition of the force and partisan practices. Pragmatically, some Nationalist and Republican areas became virtual no-go areas for the RUC, being effectively policed by paramilitary organizations (particularly the Provisional IRA) rather than the police. In 1999 the Independent Commission on Policing, established as part of the Belfast (or Good Friday) agreement, published a report setting out recommendations for police reform in Northern Ireland (the so-called Patten report). This represented an attempt to disentangle policing from questions of the legitimacy of the state and was met with a modicum of success. The legitimacy of the PSNI (the successor organization to the RUC) appears less ferociously contested than that of the RUC, although it remains in question in some quarters (Mulcahy, 2013). Calls for reform of the police in Northern Ireland encompassed three strands: cultural reform, including recruitment and religious composition, symbols, name and badge; organizational reform, including service size; and questions of governance, including mechanisms of accountability (Moran, 2008). As part of governance reforms, PSNI was made accountable to the Policing Board, newly established in 2001 and composed of elected members and independent members appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The PSNI CoE, introduced in 2003, remains intimately connected to broader political reforms. It "sets down standards and behaviours expected from police officers and provides guidance on how they should conduct themselves in this honourable profession", while acknowledging that "police officers have to make [difficult judgments] on a daily basis" (Rea, 2008).

Literature review and theoretical framework

There is extensive existing research on CoEs within organizations, with our database search alone uncovering 916 papers. Two broad types of studies can be identified, which we describe as the practical and the critical. Underlying the practical studies seems to be a search for generalizable answers concerning what makes an effective code, in terms of linking codes to behaviour outcomes and positive perceptions of codes (e.g. Ruiz et al, 2015; Schwartz, 2001).

More critical accounts of codes tend to foreground the language of codes and explore how the discourses drawn upon in codes create power inequalities between organizational members (e.g. Winkler, 2011). Pullen and Rhodes (2014) argue that codes can generate "institutionalized expectations" that serve to legitimate disembodied, overly rational and masculine power structures; they prioritise "a priori judgment over contextualised experience" and the "mind over body", thus overlooking embodied relational dimensions of ethics in practice. Relatedly, and echoing Bauman's (1993) postmodern critique of rule based ethics and Townley's (1994) critique of HRM techniques and technologies, Willmott (2011) argues that codes of ethics can have the effect of removing discretion and responsibility for inhabiting a discursive position. Instead, he argues, codes can become co-opted as part of a broader fabric of organizational surveillance and control.

We aim to contribute to critical scholarship through introducing a greater emphasis on the socio-political context in exploring how codes are experienced and constructed by those subjected to them, particularly in the context of attempted re-legitimation of an organization accused of irresponsibility. Helin and Sandström (2008) demonstrate empirically how codes co-exist within and against existing employee identifications, such as national identity. They state that "the receivers [in the Swedish subsidiary] of the code [imposed by an American parent] did not primarily react to what was actually written in the code, but to how it was written and to how it was implemented. The content, as most respondents claimed, was 'common sense' and not necessary to write down and sign." (p.289).

Developing these insights, we propose a neo-Weberian approach that is sensitive to the discursive and disciplinary dimensions of organization. Codes are approached as known and experienced within a particular socio-political context, as a disciplinary technology that can yet be (re)enacted and resisted in a variety of ways.

Du Gay's neo-Weberian case (2000 and 2008) is that distinctive ethical lifeworlds are established via norms of practice and processes of collective learning, which each serve a particular purpose in public life. Bureaucracy establishes impersonal and accountable rules and procedures; norms of political leadership are required to campaign for certain under-represented people and causes; enterprise is important for generating innovation. Such lifeworlds generate ethical expectations of the person inhabiting them via a range of practices, training and examination procedures. Such different realms of *Lebensführung* may antagonistically overlap, generating confusion, imprecision and conflict as to what kind of person one should be in a given area of life.

Important in du Gay's reading are competing discourses of ethical life and their satellite practices and technologies. In this regard post-structuralist accounts of human resources technologies offer an account of how such technologies can act as a means of discipline (Townley, 1994). The active subject of overlapping *Lebensführung* may resist and re-interpret a CoE-as-technology in a range of unexpected ways (Fleming and Spicer, 2010; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014).

Methodology

We follow the examples of Helin and Sandström (2008) and Romani and Szkudlarek (2014) in adopting narrative analysis to explore how individual organizational members make sense of a code of ethics in their own practice and how they situate this CoE in its organizational and political context. Stories provide us with a way of accessing practical ethics (Coles, 1989, cited in Oliver, 1998) and thus narrative analysis appears particularly apt in the context of ethics research.

Data was collected through 37 individual, semi-structured interviews with police officers and members of staff of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The interviews were conducted at police premises in Belfast, in March 2015. A purposive sampling strategy was followed, with an attempt to maximise variety in terms of age, length of service, hierarchical position, role in the organization, gender, and community membership. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio recorded (with 2 exceptions) and transcribed. We used NVivo to aid our thematic and discourse analysis of the narratives provided by our interviewees. Mind-maps were used to construct more holistic narratives of the stories told by individual respondents and then to build up an overarching narrative of accounts of the code of ethics in the PSNI, as partially told in this paper.

Summary of findings

Situating a CoE within its *Lebensführung*

Our meta-finding is that it was impossible to separate employee identifications with the CoE from the broader ethical ethos the organization was seeking to embed. Particularly stark in our data is the sense that the code was viewed as one element amongst many that signalled to employees that they were now working not only under different organizational conditions but within a changed organization – and even society. Whereas the ethos of the RUC, according to our interviews, might be described alternatively as that of a military or a family type organization, with a sense of being brothers in arms in the face of hostile situations, the PSNI seems to carry much more of an ethos of

bureau, with a greater emphasis on rule bound behaviour.

Relating to the RUC, interviewees told stories of being informally inducted into police practice and proper conduct by more experienced members of the team, most notably the so-called 'senior man', the most experienced officer in a station, suggesting a relationship like that of a somewhat patriarchal figure instructing younger siblings or children. Recruits were inducted into informal codes of ethics based on norms of service and solidarity.

We were also told stores of mutual support, standing by each other in crowd control lines, keeping public order during the annual marches by the two communities, as well as watching over each other when entering perilous investigative situations.

> "The RUC had a certain camaraderie, in many ways life was […] difficult out there on the street but you could cope with that because you felt you had a certain support from your supervisory and management staff. I don't think folks on the ground feel that any more". (Staff member)

This feeling of support and camaraderie was paired with a sense of pride in the RUC, its history and its symbols and a feeling of nostalgia. The cultural change after the Belfast agreement, which saw the abolishment of most RUC symbols and a more critical take on its history, was therefore greeted by some with a sense of loss and even betrayal and a feeling that the state of policing in N.I. was deteriorating.

The introduction of more external scrutiny through the Policing Board and the Police Ombudsman as well as the introduction of the CoE and the emphasis placed on this in induction and training can be read against this background of organizational reform towards a more rule-based and transparent organization modelled more on the notion of the bureau rather than that of family or command. Hence the code was spoken of in often impersonal terms, as one technology amongst many others that was parcelled within a bureaucratic ethical ethos.

Three identifications: indifference, pride and injustice

We identify and unpack three broad types of responses to the CoE, within this shifting *Lebensführung*. The first type of response was of general acceptance that a CoE was necessary and probably good to have, that it contained nothing that a responsible, professional police officer or member of staff would not do anyway, but that one would not consult it in day-to-day work or even be particularly familiar with its details. This was an indifferent identification:

> "I don't think that everyone has it [the CoE] at the forefront of what they're doing every day. I honestly believe that the majority of people who are police officers are virtually just decent people who do want to help, who will help people when they are in trouble and I think if you are just a decent person the code of ethics applies to you because they are normal things that you do". (Police Constable)

The second identification was a more explicit welcoming of the CoE and the organizational and political changes that it represented, as well as of its use as a management and leadership tool. This response was often, although not exclusively, articulated by police officers who identified themselves as Catholic or by those with a certain outsider status in N.I.

> "[…] that's a very emotional trigger for me to stand up to be, to hold up the code of ethics. […]The public in [location] expect highest possible standards so… not the

same everywhere else in Northern Ireland, so I think the code of ethics is really important. […] So to me the code of ethics means different things to different people and my role as an Area Commander, holding people to account and being held to account, how do I get the best out of everybody wherever they are in their career path? The code of ethics is one way to do that". (Chief Inspector)

Interwoven with these positive accounts of the CoE were often narratives of 'joy' and contentment with the general political and organizational changes that made the PSNI a better place for women and Catholics to work, made it a more open, transparent police service and had removed some of the symbolism of the RUC which could feel oppressive to these previously under-represented groups.

In contrast, the third type of response constructed the code in more oppressive terms, a tool of political control and rigid rules that could hinder thoughtful and flexible policing practice. The code was one symbol amongst others of a sense of unease with the organizational changes. In this critical account, the narrative of police officers as decent people who knew right from wrong re-surfaced, questioning why a CoE was needed. Travelling with this critique was a sense of being isolated from senior officers and the larger political forces at play. There was a sense amongst these officers that they had been left behind and scapegoated when necessary. These narratives portrayed a sense of isolation, amplified by the depersonalised nature of a CoE.

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings demonstrate the importance of analysing codes within the rich, complex and contested ethical contexts of particular, overlapping realms of *Lebensführung*. The policing sector in the UK in general has experienced a profound shift in terms of visibility and scrutiny over the past several decades, a change that can perhaps be seen in even more pronounced terms in the context of NI. The work performed by a code cannot be separated from this contested and complex shift in the broader ethical ethos.

Codes can then also be interpreted as one performative technology amongst others that constitute accounts of what responsibility and irresponsibility mean within a certain *Lebensführung*. Hence we ought not to be surprised that codes hold varying degrees of prominence and commitment from employees. The research implications are that more attention could be paid to more context-bound, ethnographic accounts of how codes are identified with by employees within their broader working lives, particularly in contexts of contested organizational legitimacy and attempted re-legitimation.

Our approach and findings hold implications for practice. If codes occupy an ambiguous and liminal space within organizations, then perhaps the implementation and training associated with codes ought to better reflect this reality. In particular, we believe that there is significant space for approaching codes as technologies that enable critical and developmental reflection on what it means to be an ethical subject in a certain lifeworld.

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