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PBJ 301: Organizational Structure and Communication

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Theory and Practice Paper

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MLA Citation
Please note: Professionals within the systems of public justice operate under strict rules of confidentiality. Our students must also maintain confidentiality when reporting on their observations and experiences, especially when such reports are to be shared with others in the public domain. All identifiers such as locations, names, and dates have been removed from the original paper with the permission of the author.

American author Mark Twain once said, “It is only through experience that a man who carries a cat by the tail, learns something he can learn in no other way.” On two different evenings in the fall of 2012, I accompanied the XXX Police Department on a student ride along and observation, so that I too may learn from my experiences, and better my understanding of the Public Justice System. Throughout the duration of each shift, I had the opportunity to accompany a sworn Police Officer on patrol, and observe how each officer handled and carried out his assigned duties. This firsthand experience not only offered me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the inner workings of a law enforcement agency, but it also educated me on proper departmental procedures and protocols. In preparation for my practicum next semester, I took this opportunity to question each officer so that I could grasp a better understanding of how law enforcement agencies operate. Throughout this experience I was educated on activities such as discretion and professional courtesy, as well as given the opportunity to observe several organizational theories that have been discussed this semester in Public Justice 301; including the Open Systems Theory and the Communication Theory.
My first shift began in the squad room of the Police Station at 7:00 p.m. where I met with Lt. XXX. Upon reviewing the proper protocols and guidelines for a student ride along, I was introduced to Officer YYY, a two year veteran of the department, and asked to sign a liability waiver. After completing a small pile of paperwork and gathering his equipment, Officer YYY ushered me to the patrol vehicle where we conducted an officer’s pre-shift checklist; this included a complete check of the patrol vehicle’s lights, sirens, radar, computer system and radio. After completing the checklist, we then proceeded to our first call of the night, a broken down vehicle in a parking lot. After several failed attempts to jump start the vehicle, we were unsuccessful, and Officer YYY advised the citizen to call a tow truck and have a mechanic examine the vehicle. We then left the parking lot, and spent the next two hours patrolling; stopping cars for faulty equipment (aka improper equipment) and minor driving infractions.

While on patrol with Officer YYY, one of the most discernible actions I noticed was an officer’s use of discretion. Stojkovic, Kalinich, and Klofas define discretion as “a situation in which an official has latitude to make authoritative choices not necessarily specified within the source of authority which governs his decision making” (363). Throughout the evening we conducted many traffic stops. One of those included a stop on Route ABC, around 7:45 p.m., in which we stopped a vehicle for improper equipment (the vehicle was a Honda and had a headlight out). Upon approaching the vehicle, Officer YYY began talking with driver and then returned to the patrol car. He informed me that he was not going to issue the driver a ticket because she was a corrections officer at a local correctional facility, and was on her way home from work. Instead, he issued her a warning and instructed her to repair the headlight the following day.
This I found to be interesting because earlier in the evening we had stopped another vehicle (driving a Chevy at approximately 7:22 p.m.) for the same violation, and issued the driver a ticket. Although I had heard of discretion and professional courtesy many times throughout my college career, I had never before seen a law enforcement official show professional courtesy while conducting a traffic stop. Officer YYY explained to me that the Police Department enjoys having a good working relationship with the community’s surrounding agencies, including other police agencies and District Attorney’s offices, and has a tendency to exercise professional courtesy when dealing with individuals associated with those organizations.

I found this idea to stem from the principles of the Open Systems Theory. According to Michael Bastedo, the Open Systems Theory simply refers to the “concept that organizations are strongly influenced by their environment,” which “consists of other organizations that exert various forces of an economic, political, or social nature” (1). Because the philosophy behind the Open Systems Theory is that an agency can benefit from the resources provided by its environment, I concluded that by issuing discretion (as well as professional courtesy) when dealing with individuals of a neighboring agency, law enforcement officials can reinforce their department’s relationship with those agencies so that they may benefit from their resources in the future.

My second ride along occurred on a different evening, several weeks later, (at 7:00 p.m.), this time with Officer DDD. The beginning of our shift began much the same way. When I arrived at the station, Officer DDD was just finishing up some paperwork and preparing for his twelve hour shift. He informed me that some personal problems had arisen with the second officer assigned for duty that evening, and that he would not be coming into work. Officer DDD
also informed me that the third officer on call that evening would not be in until 11:00 p.m. that night; that meant that for the next four hours, we were the only patrol vehicle on duty.

For the next several hours we remained rather busy. It was not long after beginning our patrol when Officer DDD received a call from dispatch, it was a fire call (a fire alarm in the kitchen had been set off by an oven that was being used by the residents to cook). After arriving at the scene, we entered the apartment complex and began checking the fire alarm system for any other tripped fire alarms. After clearing the building, we met with the Fire Department who had also responded to the call. Officer DDD informed the firemen of the alarm that had been set off and they too proceeded to the kitchen. After a brief inspection, they issued an “OK,” and the residents were permitted back into the building.

While responding to the call, one of the things I noticed was the manner in which Officer DDD both received information from, and informed dispatch of the details of the call. This process of communication involved the use of numeric codes and symbols known as encoding. Although there are several different forms of communication, such as verbal, non-verbal, and written, one form of communication that plays an extremely important role in the duties of law enforcement officials and the Basic Theory of Communication, is encoding. Encoding can be defined as the “first step in the communication process” in which “the sender feels the need to convey a message to another individual or individuals and encodes the meaning of the message into symbols” (Stojkovic, Kalinich, and Klofas, p. 95). For law enforcement officials, encoding plays an important role in something known as the Communication Theory.

The Communication Theory can be defined as the sequential process in which one person transmits a message to another individual through some form or medium (Stojkovic, Kalinich,
According to Robert Heath and Jennings Bryant, organizational communication is the way in which people “gain information, shape opinions, make decisions, coordinate efforts, voice expectations…and assimilate into an organization” (297). Communication is extremely crucial in law enforcement because whether it is a formal organizational structure of communication (such as the chain of command), or an informal structure of communication (such as a conversation between partners), it allows officers to gather information and coordinate their actions in order to achieve both individual and collective goals. Without communication, law enforcement officials would be unable to complete even the most mundane tasks.

After clearing the fire call, we continued our patrol. While making rounds in front of location XY, we noticed a vehicle going the wrong way in a one way zone. Officer DDD pulled up behind the vehicle and approached the driver’s side window. After he returned to the patrol vehicle he laughed and said, “Sorry bud, I was going to show you how to use the department’s ticketing software, but I’m going to have to let this driver go.” I asked Officer DDD why that was, and he informed me that the driver was the son of an Assistant District Attorney.

This I understood; much like Officer YYY, Officer DDD used his discretion and showed professional courtesy. According to Karim Jamal and Norman Bowie, professional courtesy is often times “interpreted as rules designed to manage and protect the interests of a profession or professional” (710). This again was no surprise. Throughout my college career I had heard about professional courtesy and the relationships that it helps build between departments and agencies. Much like the idea of the Exchange Theory, in which one worker (Worker A) assists another worker (Worker B) in completing a given task in hopes that he will be compensated for
his assistance in the future (Stojkovic, Stan, David Kalinich, and John Klofas, p 110), I saw this encounter as an exchange.

As my site observation came to a close, I realized just how educational my experience was. Not only was I given the opportunity to question each officer so that I could grasp a better understanding of law enforcement agencies and how they operate, but I was able to see how my knowledge from the classroom related to a real law enforcement agency. Although I only observed the department for a rather short period of time, it was much like I expected. Each officer knew his or her duties and completed them in accordance with departmental procedures. I even had the opportunity to observe how an officer conducts routine activities, such as issuing traffic tickets, conducting traffic stops, as well as interacting with the community they serve. As a result, I thought the experience was extremely educational, and it now has me looking forward to beginning my practicum.

Works Cited

