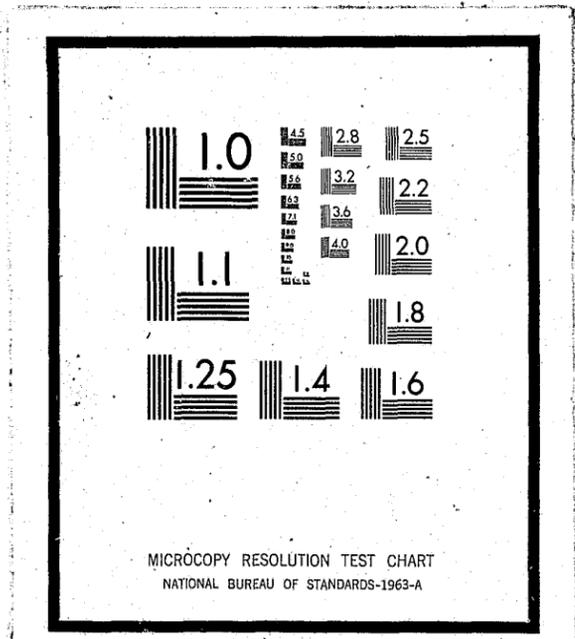


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DOMESTIC POLICE-CITIZEN ENCOUNTERS*

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Domestic Police-Citizen Encounters

Abstract

Police-citizen encounters involving husband-wife disputes or domestics are analyzed with respect to their origins, frequency, and nature of police-citizen interaction. Analysis reveals that these encounters can be understood to emerge as a consequence of perceived violations of relational rules of propriety; that they are less frequent than previously understood; and the interaction occurring in these encounters is primarily polite, non-violent, and delivered in the absence of displays of temper.

Recent analyses of the uniformed, motorized divisions of police organizations have revealed that the majority of police-citizen encounters are "non-criminal" in character.¹ For instance, Cumming, et al. (1965) found that fully half of citizen requests for police presence involved non-criminal or service matters. Similarly, Webster (1968) found that crimes against property and persons accounted for only sixteen percent of police-citizen contacts; "social service," administrative, and traffic problems accounted for the majority of police-citizen encounters. In even high crime areas Black (1968) found that less than one-third of police-citizen encounters revolved around criminal incidents; non-criminal disputes and juvenile problems together accounted for thirty percent of the encounters observed.

Within this general non-criminal population, previous studies have indicated that husband-wife disputes or domestics constitute a sizeable proportion. On the basis of their data, Ephross and French (1972) estimated that forty percent of all police-citizen encounters concerned domestic disputes. Similarly, Parnas (1967) estimated that one-quarter of citizen requests to Chicago police were for domestic disputes. The Task Force on the Police also noted that domestic disputes account for a "high percentage" of all police-citizen contacts (1967:14).

Despite the apparent frequency of domestics sociological analysis has primarily been directed towards other types of police-citizen encounters. In criminal cases attention has been given the factors which

appear to influence the exercise of police discretion (cf., Black and Reiss, 1970; Goldman, 1963; Piliavin and Briar, 1964). When attention has been given other types of police-citizen encounters such as those involving mental illness (Bittner, 1967a) or public drunkenness (Bittner, 1967b; Petersen, n.d.) analysis has been directed towards the factors which influence the dispositional decisions of the police officers involved.

Less is known relative to the social processes involved in domestic police-citizen encounters. With the exceptions of Parnas (1967) who outlined their broadest characteristics, Schulz (1969) who traced the roles of the police in low-income families, and Bard and Berkowitz (1969) who experimented effectively with the specialized training of police officers to deal with this type of problem, there have been few studies relevant to an understanding of domestic police-citizen encounters.

The purposes of this study are threefold: 1) to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of the origins of domestic police-citizen encounters; 2) to establish their frequency; and 3) to analyze the social interaction of the police officers and citizens involved in these encounters. The data to be analyzed are derived from a participant-as-observer study of 1,978 randomly selected police-citizen encounters occurring in a large midwestern city.²

1) The Origins of Domestic Police-Citizen Encounters

Although several studies have classified police-citizen encounters

as criminal or non-criminal (cf., Black, 1968; Reiss, 1971; Wilson, 1968), the bases for distinguishing encounters have remained unclear. The consequence has been the inability to distinguish domestic police-citizen encounters from criminal and other types of non-criminal encounters.

Recently, a number of proponents of the symbolic interactionist perspective in sociology (cf., Goffman, 1963; Cavan, 1966; Denzin, 1968, 1970) have articulated a conception of social order which permits us to distinguish domestic encounters from other types of police-citizen encounters. Primary attention in this framework is devoted to a conception of social order based upon three levels or types of rules: the civil-legal, situational, and relational.

Civil-legal rules of propriety are enacted and enforced by societal agencies such as state legislatures, courts, and the police (Goffman, 1963:8ff.). As such, they provide the most general guides to what may be expected in situations, set the outer limits of acceptable behavior, and constitute the broadest boundaries of social order. It is perceived violations of civil-legal rules which give rise to criminal police-citizen encounters.

Situational rules of propriety constitute less general systems of social order. While they frequently overlap with civil-legal rules, situational rules designate what is expected and accepted in concrete behavior settings or situations such as factories, classrooms, and elevators. Substantively, they are the "standing patterns of behavior, routinely expected within the setting, treated as fitting and proper

for the time and place, and persistently independent of the changing populace (Cavan, 1966:3)." Situational rules thus define the patterns of propriety or social order associated with specific types of behavior settings and their perceived violations give rise to non-criminal encounters revolving around drinking-drunkenness, juvenile trouble, disturbances, animal problems, loud parties, and a variety of dispute encounters involving landlords, tenants, neighbors, customers and proprietors.

Relational rules of propriety constitute the least general, most numerous, and least examined systems of social order. These rules are the emergent consequences of face-to-face interaction and like civil-legal and situational rules, designate what is expected and accepted within these interactive networks. Unlike the more general systems of social order, however, relationally based systems are associated only with their networks of origin (Denzin, 1968, 1970). That is, unlike civil-legal rules which are associated with the jurisdictions of governmental agencies and situational rules which are associated with concrete behavior settings, relational rules constitute the social orders of the specific face-to-face interactive networks in which they are generated and maintained.

Relational impropriety on the part of an actor evokes a wide variety of responses on the part of those aware of the violation. These responses range from irritation, anger, and exclusion, to communication of the violation to an outside agency such as the police (Denzin,

1970: 141ff.). When these violations are reported to the police, we have the type of non-criminal encounter which is of concern in this study.

Domestics account for the greatest proportion of perceived relational improprieties reported to the police. Most often, it is the wife who contacts the police about relationally improper behavior on the part of her husband. What is crucial insofar as understanding the empirical origins of these encounters is concerned, is that the rules perceived as violated are not generalizable and meaningful identification of the problem which gave rise to the encounter is not possible by reference to more general civil-legal or situational conceptions of social order. In the domestic involving drunkenness on the part of the husband, for example, it is generally not the drunkenness as such which is at issue. Drunkenness may well be routinely expected and accepted behavior within the marital network. Instead, it appears that it is the wife's perception of the drunkenness such that it is defined as deviating from "normal" drunkenness which precipitates contacting the police.

Domestic non-criminal police-citizen encounters, then, may be distinguished from criminal and other types of non-criminal encounters by reference to a rule based conception of social order. Thus, criminal encounters may be understood to emerge as a consequence of perceived violations of civil-legal rules while drinking-drunkenness and other types of non-criminal encounters emerge as a consequence of perceived

violations of situational rules. The domestic encounters of concern in this study may be understood to emerge as a consequence of perceived violations of relational rules of propriety.³

2) The Frequency of Domestic Encounters

As noted previously, domestic encounters are thought to occupy a large proportion of police activities. In this study, however, domestics accounted for only four percent of the police-citizen encounters observed (see Table 1). Traffic cases accounted for twenty-seven percent; perceived violations of situational rules accounted for twenty percent; criminal encounters for nineteen percent; service encounters for thirteen percent; and "other" types for seventeen percent of the encounters observed.

Table 1 about here

The significantly lower rate of domestic police-citizen encounters reported here is a function of the definition of the domestic employed in this study. As compared to Parnas (1967) who included assaults, stabbings, and shootings involving husbands and wives (i.e., violations of civil-legal rules) along with simple domestic disputes not involving weapons or violence, the definition of the domestic employed is restricted to only those encounters emerging as a consequence of perceived violations of relational rules of propriety.

Additionally, this definition follows directly from the ways in which the police handled these different types of calls. Radio dispatchers,

for example, clearly distinguished between "domestics" and assaults, with or without weapons. The latter were put out over the radio as "assaults," "shootings," and "stabbings" - never as domestics. The responses of the police officers receiving these radio calls followed directly from their descriptions. For assaults, shootings, and stabbings the police responded with emergency speed often employing lights and siren. For domestics, however, the police responded without emergency speed, lights, and siren, often proceeding to the encounter in a deliberate manner with the hope that the domestic would be settled prior to their arrival.

The higher proportions of domestics reported by others (cf., Ephross and French, 1972; Parnas, 1967; The Task Force on the Police, 1967) appear to be functions of definitional differences. Using our definition, domestic police-citizen encounters are less frequent than previously understood.

3) The Nature of Police-Citizen Interaction

The communicative acts of the police officers and citizens involved in these domestic encounters were primarily polite, non-violent, and delivered in the absence of displays of temper (see Table 2). First, displays of temper⁴ by either police officers or citizens were infrequently observed in these domestic police-citizen encounters. Officer to citizen displays of temper occurred at least once in twenty-one percent of these encounters and they accounted for less than two percent

Table 2 about here

of the total communicative acts. Similarly, displays of citizen to police officer temper occurred at least once in thirty percent of these domestic encounters and they accounted for two percent of the communicative acts occurring in these domestic encounters.

Communicative acts involving potential or actual physical violence were even less frequently observed in these domestic encounters. For both police officers and citizens, these acts accounted for less than one percent of the communicative acts observed. Thus, potential or actual acts of physical violence by police officers occurred at least once in twelve percent of these encounters while citizen acts of potential or actual violence did not occur in any of the encounters observed.

One observation to be drawn from Table 2, then, is that displays of temper and, especially, violence play a small role in terms of the total of the communicative acts occurring in these encounters. This is not to suggest that their occurrence is unimportant. Indeed, as has been made clear elsewhere (cf., Lundman, 1972; Piliavin and Briar, 1964) they exert a strong influence on the trajectory and outcome of these encounters. It is to suggest, however, that in terms of both the total of the communicative acts occurring within these encounters and the total number of encounters in which they occur, the majority of these domestic encounters were conducted in the absence of violence and temper.

A second observation is that polite⁶ statements by both police officers and citizens together constitute the largest proportion of the total of the communicative acts occurring in these domestic encounters. Polite police officer to citizen verbal statements occurred at least once in nearly all (99%) of these encounters and account for thirty-six percent of the total of the communicative acts observed in these encounters. Similarly, polite citizen to police officer verbal statements occurred at least once in nearly all (99%) of these encounters and account for thirty-six percent of the total of the communicative acts.

A final observation is with respect to the frequencies of impolite statements by both police officers and citizens. Impolite police officer to citizen statements accounted for seven percent of the total of the communicative acts occurring in these encounters. At least one impolite police officer to citizen verbal statement, however, was observed in thirty-nine percent of these domestic encounters. Similarly, impolite citizen to police officer verbal statements accounted for eight percent of the communicative acts occurring in these encounters. They occurred at least once in forty-four percent of the domestic encounters observed. In contrast to the frequencies of temper and violence, then, impoliteness in domestic police-citizen encounters is relatively common.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this study we have analyzed one type of police-citizen encounter-- the domestic. Our framework has been a rule based conception of social

order and it was found that domestic police-citizen encounters accounted for only four percent of the 1,978 encounters observed. Further, it was found that the communicative acts of the police officers and citizens involved in these encounters were primarily polite, non-violent, and delivered in the absence of displays of temper. The implications of these findings are at least twofold.

From the perspective of effective social policy, these data indicate that programs involving extensive training or re-training of police officers to deal more effectively with domestics (e.g., Bard and Berkowitz, 1969) should be carefully examined. If, as the data suggest, domestics are not as frequent as previously understood, then police officers might more efficiently be trained to deal with classes of police-citizen encounters. The rule-based framework presented in this study provides one such classification system.

From the perspective of social reality, these data suggest that understandings of the nature of police-citizen interaction based upon study of encounters emerging as a consequence of perceived violations of civil-legal rules of propriety need not be extended to more routine types of police-citizen encounters. As we have seen in even the potentially volatile domestic, police-citizen interaction is essentially polite and involves few displays of temper or violence.

Table 1: Frequency and Percent Distributions of Police-Citizen Encounters by General Definition of Encounter.

Definition of Encounter	Frequency	Percent
TRAFFIC ENCOUNTER		
Moving Violation	470	24
Parking Violation	52	3
NON-CRIMINAL ENCOUNTER		
Violation of Situational Propriety	386	20
Violation of Relational Propriety	77	4
CRIMINAL ENCOUNTER		
Crime Against Property	298	15
Crime Against Person	84	4
SERVICE	263	13
OTHER		
Take Report of Criminal Incident	229	11
Miscellaneous	122	6
TOTALS	1,978	100

Table 2: Police-Citizen Interaction in Domestic Encounters

Communicative Act	Initiator-Recipient	Percent of Encounters Where N Greater Than or Equal to One	As Mean Percentage of All Communicative Acts *
Display of Temper	Officer-Citizen	21	.011
	Citizen-Officer	30	.024
Display of Potential or Actual Violence	Officer-Citizen	12	.004
	Citizen-Officer	0	.000
Polite Statement	Officer-Citizen	99	.364
	Citizen-Officer	99	.358
Impolite Statement	Officer-Citizen	39	.066
	Citizen-Officer	44	.085

*The total of the communicative acts considered in this study sum to less than one since two additional channels of communication (i.e., officer to officer, citizen to citizen) were not considered. We are examining, then, slightly over ninety percent (.912) of the communicative acts occurring in the seventy-seven (77) domestic encounters.

FOOTNOTES

1. Black (1968) used the term non-criminal to refer to police-citizen encounters revolving around problems not in violation of the criminal law as well as to encounters revolving around problems on the fringes of the criminal law. The rule based framework employed in this study sharpens this distinction.
2. "During the fifteen months beginning in June 1970 a quantitative observational study of police in "Midwest City" was undertaken. Midwest City had a 1970 population of over one half million, more than five percent (5%) are either Afro-Americans or Indian Americans. A group of seven observers using portable electronic coding equipment (Sykes, 1971) and trained for over three months in the use of an interaction and behavioral code (Sykes, 1973), travelled with police on a random time sample basis. Without prior notice they appeared at a precinct station with directions to ride on a randomly selected patrol car for a full shift. Which car they were to ride on was not known to the police in advance. During the training and data collection period about 3,000 hours of police work were observed in Midwest City. The final data base consists of 2,835 police calls involving about 9,000 citizens. When such calls involved verbal or non-verbal interaction towards citizens the interaction of both police officers and citizens was coded (n = 1,978). Among the factors coded were: whether it was an on-scene or radio call; what the problem which gave

rise to the call was; the space in which the encounter took place; whether or not there was conflict between the citizens when the officers arrived; and a wide variety of action and interaction codes pertaining to politeness and impoliteness, the giving of and compliance with orders; displays of temper and violence; and the outcome of the encounter. Demographic data on the participants in the encounter were also coded. Included were sex, color, apparent socio-economic status, age, whether or not the citizens were under the influence of alcohol or drugs, whether armed, and style of dress. It should be noted that observations were of uniformed precinct patrol officers, not of tactical squads, morals squads, or other special function police groups, uniformed or not (Sykes and Clark, 1972:2ff)." For a more detailed description of the research see: Fox, *et al.* (1971); Lundman (1972); Sykes (1972); and Sykes and Clark (1972).

3. This framework may be compared to one suggested by Sykes and Clark (1972). They conclude that there are essentially three types of police-citizen encounters: 1) those revolving around offenses for which arrest is automatic; 2) encounters revolving around technical violations of the law wherein police arrest is discretionary; and 3) encounters revolving around problems which are not in violation of the law.

The fit between this framework and the one presented in this paper is quite straightforward. Thus, encounters emerging as a

consequence of perceived violations of civil-legal rules of propriety can be understood as those in which the police must arrest the alleged violator. Encounters emerging as a consequence of perceived violations of situational rules of propriety can be understood as those involving technical violations of the law wherein the police are in a position to exercise arrest discretion. (e.g., public drunkenness). Domestic encounters, from this perspective, would be those wherein the police have no discretion to arrest.

4. Temper was defined as displayed whenever a police officer or citizen raised their voice above normal, when hostility or anger was present in an actor's voice, and/or when a verbal statement involved a threat to normal freedom.
5. Potential or actual acts of violence included verbal threats of physical attack, efforts at territorial or physical restraint, fighting, making weapons ready for use, and/or the use of weapons.
6. A verbal statement was defined as polite if it was similar in content and form to polite, middle class interaction such as that displayed in routine interaction between, for example, customers and proprietors.
7. A verbal statement was defined as impolite if it deviated from polite, middle class interaction in the directions of non-aggressive non-compliance, embarrassment, heated argument, name calling, ridicule, and/or personal vituperation.

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