The Metamorphosis*

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This paper sets forth a theoretical explanation of patterns of police aggression and hostility in minority areas. Such conduct is interpreted as the end result of a process of reaction formation, which afflicts police officers who find themselves functioning in high-stress environments for prolonged periods of time. The dynamics and consequences of this attitudinal/behavioral pattern are discussed on the basis of the author's experience as a ghetto patrolman during a five-month period of participant observation research in Jacksonville, Florida.

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It was a hot, sticky Saturday night in late August as the two officers riding Beat 305 made the familiar turn off Jefferson onto West Ashley. The cruiser began easing slowly down the long neon ribbon of bars, pool halls, and small shops that lined the ghetto's major arterial. "The Block," as Ashley Street is known to the policemen who work it, was predictably teeming with activity. Everywhere, black men and women either stood in small clusters on the sidewalks or drifted in and out of the bars--laughing, talking, arguing animatedly--their voices co-mingled with the distictive click of pool balls and the throb of soul music emanating from open doors and windows. "Christ, there must be a million of them down here tonight, Doc," the younger policeman remarked as his partner slowed the car to let a toothless old woman pushing a fruit cart pass in front of them.

"Welfare checks must be out," the older patrolman responded with a sarcastic grin. He slowed the cruiser again and suspiciously eyed two black teenagers who were leaning against the side of a cream-colored Cadillac with out of state plates. He continued driving as he quickly checked the plate number against their "hot sheet" of stolen vehicles.

Nights like tonight made the older officer especially apprehensive. There were so many of them. The high pitched emergency tone from the cruiser's radio suddenly interrupted his thoughts. "Unit 305...we have a man with a gun at Ashley and Lee," a female dispatcher's voice said.

The older policeman felt his insides tighten. He punched the accelerator to the floor as his partner turned on the emergency lights and siren. The service revolver at his side was already unsnapped when the call went out--it was a habit he had acquired during his first weeks in 305. Whenever they turned onto Ashley at night he now automatically and unthinkingly unsnapped the gun. Even though he had been riding the ghetto beat for barely four months, the older policeman had already followed the lead of many of the other men by buying and religiously wearing a light-weight bullet-proof vest beneath the dark blue uniform shirt.

After fighting its way through ten blocks of heavy traffic, Unit 305 braked to a stop at Ashley and Lee and both officers jumped out.

*Editors note: Potentially offensive expressions have been retained in this article in the interest of presenting an accurate report of actual police situations.

Nothing! Just a fake call. Somebody's idea of a joke. The older patrolman felt the tension beginning to drain from his body as they got back inside the car.

"Goddamn .....!" he muttered to himself through clenched teeth. His partner nodded assent and lit a cigarette.

It was just a minute or so later when the pair cruised past the Ebony Bar and Grill at Ashley and Washington.

"Pigs" someone suddenly shouted from a crowd of eight or ten young blacks gathered in front of the bar.

The older officer reflexively stopped the car and got out with his nightstick in one hand. His partner did likewise.

"Somebody got something to say to us?" the older officer demanded of the group. He could already feel the moisture in his palms and the droplets of perspiration beginning to roll down his armpits.

A tall black man in his mid-twenties stepped forward and smiled derisively. "Yeah, I said somethun, man...I said 'pig!' That's P-I-G! Can you dig it, huh?"

The black man stood facing the white policeman with a beer can in one hand and a cigarette dangling loosely from his lips as the crowd, which was now growing rapidly, laughed its approbation.

Without saying anything further, the older policeman stepped forward and knocked the beer can from the man's hand, grabbed him by a shirt sleeve and slammed him against the patrol car.

"Hey--"

"O.K., you're under arrest! Now get your ass in the car!" he snapped as he frisked the black man for weapons.

A murmur of protest immediately rose from the crowd, which was still growing in size. The younger patrolman slipped quickly back to the cruiser and emerged from it with a shotgun.

"Arrest? For what? I ain't done nothing!" the black man exclaimed as the older policeman snapped the patrol car's back door open.

"For drunk in public."

"Drunk? Hell, I ain't had but one drink all night--you can see that."

"Of course you're drunk. You'd have to be drunk to talk that kind of trash to the po-lice, man!" the policeman replied as he roughly pushed the man into the back seat.

"O.K., just everybody move on...C'mon, I said let's go! Now! goddamnit!" the younger officer commanded as he stepped forward with the shotgun cradled

in the crook of one arm. There were muffled curses from the crowd as the two policemen drove off with their prisoner.

Deplorable? The kind of police behavior that spawned riots in major American cities during the sixties, that is so closely linked to traditional patterns of enmity between minorities and the police? Indeed. The incident I have just described could be any one of many that occur across the United States each day. Yet this particular occurrence was unique, in a sense, for I was the older patrolman involved in it. This encounter and many others like it took place during a five month period of participant-observation research on police attitudes and behavior. During this time, I embarked upon an unusual research project for a social scientist: in order to develop greater insight into the police role in modern society, I decided to become a policeman myself. I accordingly left my university post, as an assistant professor of criminology, went through the same police academy training required of any other recruit, and began working as a regular, uniformed patrolman in a city of about one-half million people. Because I was interested in observing and personally experiencing the various social and psychological pressures to which policeman might be routinely subjected in a high-crime, inner city area, I requested and secured an assignment in Beat #305. The latter, I had discovered from an advance analysis of crime rates in the city, was consistently characterized by the highest incidence of violent crime and the predictable concomitants of poverty and deteriorated housing. Before going any further, I should perhaps emphasize that I undertook this project with precious few (if any) positive sentiments toward the police; to the contrary, I even harbored a conscious measure of resentment toward them--some of it a result of having personally witnessed violent police-student clashes as a graduate student at Berkeley, and doubtless some of it due to my educational and social class background (I believe that, if they are honest with themselves, most well educated, middle class individuals will own up to feeling a measure of antipathy for the authority policemen symbolize). Like so many others of my background, at the time I became a policeman I was shocked and appalled by what I viewed as a glaring nationwide failure to select and recruit the proper kind of individuals to be policemen--individuals who are, by virture of personality and education, equipped to resolve even the most pressing and serious of human problems without resort to violence and hostility. Looking back, I suppose that I thought of myself as just that kind of person when I first put on the badge and uniform of a patrolman in 305.

Just what happened to me during those five months? To be sure, that is a question I have struggled with many times since my return to academia this year.

How did a politically liberal, Berkeley educated, upper-middleclass university professor, move in such a short space of time from dispassionate interest in the dynamics of police-citizen interaction to a point where he became personally caught up in a tragic cycle of aggression and counter-aggression that he had longed condemned and recognized as irrational. Even now, as I recall incidents such as the one I described at the outset of this article, I am incredulous. I marvel that I could have been a part of them, that I could have so routinely come to feel such intense frustration, anger, and aggression toward other human beings.

The scientist within me still insists that my personal educational level and socialization should have adequately insulated me from whatever pressures life as a patrolman in 305 had to offer. But they did not.

As the weeks and months of my new career as a slum patrolman went by, I slowly but inexorably began to become indistiguishable in attitudes and behavior from the policemen with whom I worked 305. According to the accounts of my family, colleagues, and friends, I began to increasingly display attitudinal and behavioral elements which were entirely foreign to my previous personality--punitiveness, pervasive cynicism and mistrust of others, chronic irritability and free-floating hostility, racism, a diffuse personal anxiety over the menace of crime and criminals that seemed at times to border on the obsessive. A former opponent of capital punishment, I became its vociferous advocate in cases involving felony murder, kidnapping, and the homicide of police officers--even though as a criminologist I continued to recognize its ineffectiveness as a deterrent to crime.

For the first time in my life, a part of me began to demand retribution and vengeance in lieu of rehabilitation as just desserts for the perpetrators of crime. As the time in my new role as a policeman increased, I began to chafe and rail at what I now viewed as the soft, "coddling" orientation of the courts toward offenders, despite my personal knowledge that punishment has been throughout history a demonstrable failure in controlling criminal behavior. In a short while, the lens of objective scientific inquiry which I had at first carried so confidently onto the streets of 305 was utterly shattered by the stream of actors and events that began to impinge on me day after day. By the end of the experience, I found myself left with a conflicting duality of perspective that could scarcely avoid impressing those around me as hypocrisy: at times, I sounded once again like my former scientific self when discussing the subject of crime in society; at other times, however, vestiges of the police self that had emerged during those months in 305 would creep into my lectures and statements, with the result that I came off saying and feeling quite different things on the same issue.

Just what events accounted for the metamorphosis I have described? I suppose that the process of change began on my first night as a patrolman in 305. It was then that I lost for the first time in my life the precious luxury of prophylaxis, i.e., the insulation that most educated, middle-class people enjoy from the ugly realities of crime and poverty in the Great Society. As a former correctional counselor and mental health worker, I suppose that I had always thought of myself as quite capable of handling the full range of social and psychological problems that afflict human beings. But I quickly discovered that people in trouble pose very different--and infinitely more complex and anxiety provoking--problems for policemen that they do for such practitioners as social workers, psychiatrists, and correctional workers.

For someone in one of the latter occupations, a human problem--whether it be mental illness, child abuse, or marital discord--is almost invariably removed in time and space from the context in which the client or patient is encountered: Harry, a paranoid schizophrenic, was hallucinating last night; the child was beaten a few hours ago; the latest round in an ongoing marital dispute was fought the preceding weekend. The police officer, on the other hand, is constantly summoned to deal with these and other extremely delicate and complex problems as they are actually unfolding. How quickly I came to

to miss as a police officer being able to examine people and their problems in a calm, contemplative setting of an office or field interview, to approach them as components of a caseload--units of analysis to be carefully considered in light of previous knowledge and experience.

As a policeman, I found myself forced to deal with other people at their worst, day in and day out. To mediate interpersonal conflict in situations where the disputants were crying, kicking, screaming, threatening, bleeding, drunk, or enraged. Let me assure you that it is quite a different thing to discuss Jones' chronic temper outburst in a counseling setting, and to face the same man after he has just smashed his wife's face with a fist and is angrily proclaiming his readiness to do the same thing to you!

Such events, which I soon found become routine in the life of an urban policeman, introduce a new variable which makes difficult a successful therapeutic relationship with anyone: adrenaline. Few psychiatrists and counselors have to fear for their physical safety in the handling of interpersonal problems, but policemen must. Indeed, an astonishing number are killed or injured in just such situations each year. I assure to you on the basis of now limited personal experience that it is extremely difficult to function calmly and rationally in a climate of fear and tension. Time after time, as a policeman myself, I inadvertently precipitated an escalation in a problem as a result of having misread the characteristics of a particular individual or situation. I found that it was astonishingly easy to make such mistakes in the atmosphere of anxiety, confusion, and time pressure in which I found myself forced to operate as a policeman.

But to say that patrolmen make understandable mistakes in stressful situations still does not account for my own steadily increasing display of the same blantantly hostile, aggressive behavior as my peers in 305. How can my personal actions in incidents such as the street arrest I described earlier be accounted for?

Certainly, it might be argued by those with a psychological or psychoanalytic bent that the experience of working as an urban patrolman merely provide a catalyst which released long dormant and carefully repressed elements of hostility and authoritarianism in my personality. It might be thought by some that I merely simulated such traits in a Machiavellian attempt to win rapport with my new peer group for research or personal reasons, or that I naively slipped into identifying with police aggression and overreaction as a result of my prolonged and intimate exposure to it.

I am going to suggest another explanation of the personal metamorphosis which I experienced during those months in 305, one which I believes also sheds light on the behavior of other policemen who find themselves working under similar circumstances. It is not intended to condone overreaction of the sort that was apparent in the street incident, but merely to provide some insight into its psychological dynamics.

Like the policemen with whom I worked, I found myself both unprepared for and incapable of adaptively handling the enormous and almost continuous psychological pressures posed by a beat like 305. I realize in retrospect that the requirement to repeatedly confront situations which were both unpleasant and stressful in nature eventually began to produce in me an insidiously subtle, but very real and cumulative, emotional fatigue. As we rushed from one anxiety-

laden call to another, night after night, such things as my frustration tolerance and ability to manage stress steadily diminished.

When the mind's repertoire of normal defense mechanisms begins to collapse under the impact of prolonged stress or the introduction of events which it finds intolerable, it naturally casts about in search of new adaptations--things to restore its shattered state of equilibrium. During those first days and weeks as a patrolman, I found myself in something approaching cultural shock as I began to confront such trauma as violence, suffering, and death on a personal level for the first time in my life.

The desire to survive and remain uninjured is a remarkably basic and powerful motivation in all of us. Very soon after I began work in 305, I started to identify its inhabitants as a serious threat to my personal safety (three other policemen had been shot to death during the preceding three year period and our own patrol car received sniper fire on one occasion). My definition of 305 as a dangerous place quickly generated in me strong elements of fear and anxiety, something which I believe was also the case with other officers. I began to experience an omnipresent sense of personal physical insecurity as we moved about the Ashley Street Ghetto handling calls. This perception was of course greatly heightened by the fact that my new world did indeed contain so much violence, I believe now that it was also intensified to some extent by the mass media definition of a policeman's role as one filled with danger (television and motion picture definitions of the role as a basically dangerous one, I am convinced, account for at least some of the intense preoccupation with violence that characterizes police culture itself). The psychological impact of the physical symbols of the job--the revolver, nightstick, chemical mace and handcuffs--also had a profound impact on my mental set: they mutely proclaimed to me that the person carrying them was doing so because he might be called upon at any moment to either attack or restrain someone else, perhaps in order to save himself from death or injury.

It is immediately obvious that a strong sense of physical insecurity--and the emotions of fear and anxiety which accompany it--is untenable in the occupational world of a slum patrolman. Unless it is defensively neutralized in some way, it cripples and paralyzes the individual's ability to carry out the everyday tasks of his job. One cannot summon the courage to walk into a bar where several men are fighting with pool cues, order an unruly crowd to disperse, or walk into a darkened warehouse where a silent alarm has been activated, if he is chronically and severely frightened.

Policemen who regularly work under stressful circumstances therefore typically develop a defense mechanism which corresponds closely to what psychologists call reaction formation: i.e., the repression or driving into one's unconscious, thoughts which are unacceptable and the conscious assertion of their very opposite. Like the proverbial old maid who compensates for her unacceptable sexual impulses by expressing intense prudery, the slum patrolman comes to express a defensive facade of confidence and aggression as a means of coping with underlying sentiments of fear and anxiety--elements which would incapacitate and immobilize him were they to become conscious. He must convince himself as well as those with whom he deals that he is really not afraid, even in situations where everyone would reasonably be frightened. He must become absolutely certain that he is more than up to whatever interpersonal challenges the beat may provide.

Reaction formation usually involves just the kind of overcompensation and overreation that was so evident in my own behavior in the street incident. In order to bolster my sense of personal security and adequacy in the role, I began to become hyper-aggressive, even to the point of recklessness in my daily handling of calls on the beat. Danger was nothing to me, a thing to be scorned. The inhabitants of 305 became "just ....." or "jitterbugs"--interactional ciphers, non-persons who really didn't warrant things like fear, concern, or feeling. It is interesting to observe that like the policeman, other practitioners who must regularly confront such trauma as death and suffering often likewise adopt the defense mechanism of reaction formation, consciously asserting the very opposite of their true feelings. The callousness of doctors and nurses who work in emergency rooms forms a good case in point. The horror that wells in a person as he watches the life ebb from another human being--and the inevitable reminder of his own mortality which it generates--must be somehow kept from suffering. Like emergency medical personnel, policemen therefore come to treat even death lightly, to deny its significance just as they deny so many of the other harsh realities of their job. How many times during those months as a policeman, I wonder, did I joke about a particular shooting, stabbing, or killing, casually discuss over a cigarette or coffee a horrible automobile wreck I had just worked?

So, you see, things like fear and anxiety--and sadly, even compassion and feeling for the suffering of others--must be denied by a policeman on a beat like 305 if he is to psychologically survive and function as he must. That is why, I now realize, I couldn't ignore the shouted epithet 'pig' in the street incident, even though I'm certain that I wanted to. I had to save face, to prove to myself even more than to my partner or the street people, that I was every bit as strong as people who wear police uniform are expected by society to be. I dared not allow even a single crack to appear in the dike of reaction formation that I had erected. Nor could the men with whom I worked. Indeed, I realize now how carefully we policed one another in order to preserve this collective defense mechanism. Any show of fear or weakness on the part of another partrolman threatened all of us, and therefore was severely sanctioned. The following example drawn from my personal experience illustrates well the way in which the subculture of inner-city patrolmen effectively utilized ostracism as a means of limiting the display of attitudes and behavior which might undermine our sense of security and adequacy in a threatening environment.

We were just finishing dinner one night when my partner, Al, remarked, "Ya know, Doc. I don't like to ride with that goddamn Hensley. I was out working 305 with him last night while you were off. Well, anyway, I park down on Ashley near the end of the watch to catch up the log... you know, like we always do. Well, the moment I turn on the dome light, Hensley starts shouting, 'For Chrissakes, Al! Cut out that light before somebody takes a shot at us!" "Well," said Al, "I told him that if any ..... out there pops a cap at my car, I'll just blow his fucking head off...I also told him that if it's too rough out here for him, maybe he should stay home with the wife and kiddies!" Like Al, I suddenly found myself filling with a feeling of revulsion for Hensley and his ostensible cowardice.

I believe that what often appears to society as gratuitous cruelty by policemen and the intentional escalation of encounters with citizen to the

238-571 O - 77 - 14

point of violence actually is to be accounted for in terms of an understandable psychological adaptation to the occupational pressures I have described. While it is true that as policemen we often brutalized people physcially and psychologically in the course of our work, I could never escape the feeling that most of us never really wanted to do or say many of the things we did.

Whatever stereotypes educated, liberal Americans may hold of the typical urban cop as a club-wielding sadist, someone who delights in abusing other people and trampling their rights, I personally encountered few such policemen in 305. Rather, I saw and worked during those months with what I believe was a fairly ordinary group of human beings who were set apart from the rest of society by virture of the fact that they were repeatedly called upon to deal with extraordinarily difficult situations. That they--and I--failed so often and so miserably in these encounters is perhaps more a commentary on human frailty in the face of modern environmental pressures than it is an index of individual pathology. Indeed, the experience of working as a slum patrolman myself has left me with the very strong conviction that the countless "Beat 305's" which exist in modern urban society--the blighted lanscapes of poverty and suffering that stretches from coast to coast in the world's most affluent country--represents structures which brutalize and gradually dehumanise all who enter them, citizens and policeman alike.

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