Police Corruption

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In today’s society there is corruption, deceit, bribery, robbery, and murder. There are sworn members of an elite group that take an oath to serve and protect the men and women within their responsibility. Police corruption is a complex phenomenon, which does not readily submit to simple analysis. It is a problem that has and will continue to affect us all, whether we are civilians, military or law enforcement officers. Since its beginnings, many aspects of policing have changed; however, one aspect that has remained relatively unchanged is the existence of corruption. In this paper I will discuss what happens when officers do become corrupt. I will also explain why they possibly become corrupt, the on the job consequences, the public reactions and how the officers families are effected.

In the beginning, officers go through an Academy in order to become official and take the oath to become a police officer. The time in the Academy depends on the department they want to work for. Some academies are only 8-10 weeks, others are much longer. There are approximately 400 police academies in the United States. (LLC, 2017) For example, Pennsylvania State Troopers must go through a series of test and physicals prior to even entering cadet academy training. These tests are based off of knowledge in the field as well as allowing the academy to see where the cadet’s educations level is at. In order to even be considered for the academy, personnel must have at least an Associate’s degree, have a Pennsylvania driver’s license, must be at least 21 years of age when entering training and not over the age of 40, when entering training. (Pennsylvania State Police, n.d.) All of this is completed prior to an individual entering the academy. This is to ensure only the best and brightest go through the training. This process also helps weed out the unwanted, weak or corrupt from the start. But weeding out the corrupt, doesn’t always happen at this point, more than likely because the soon to be officer, isn’t corrupt just yet.

Once the newly appointed officer completes all required training and graduates, they are placed in a department in a certain region. This region can be assigned or requested. The new officer is then thrown to the wolves normally immediately and put out on the streets. Normally, there is a probation period where they are placed with a seasoned officer to be trained. On the job training is crucial in the police field. A person can’t learn everything only from what a textbook tells you to do. Officers must make split second decision based off of their training and knowledge. A book isn’t going to tell you how to react when a gun is pointed in your face and you are at a disadvantage. Police corruption can start as this very point in a new officer’s career. According to (Corisanos, 2012) corruption can be brought on by the way someone is raised and the values that are instilled in them.

All people struggle to understand the difference between right and wrong. The dilemma itself is not what the differences are between right and wrong, but rather what is perceived as the differences based upon ethical values. It is our own perceptions, moral and ethical values that encompass how we view the world. Consequentialism as defined in Williams and Arrigo, “perspective in which a person’s actions are right so far as they have beneficial consequences.” What this means is an act can therefore not be wrong if the decision to act was based on a right motive. The ethical egotism (what matters morally to a person is the consequences to themselves) of a person states that if they did something wrong but a good outcome came out of it, their actions were good. The premise of consequentialism is the good or desirable outcome benefits the person who conducted the action even if it was done with malice. This even goes for people who purposely put their lives in danger to make themselves appear to be a hero. The issue is not whether or not a person received the desired outcome if they did something intentionally wrong but rather that a wrong act whether known or unknown is still ethically and morally incorrect. If one is to believe that wring is always wring regardless of the outcome then they believe in a different theory which is known as the Deontology theory.

Deontology as described in (Williams and Arrigo, 2008) shifts the attention away from the person but to the actions. Deontologists who are also moral absolutists believe that some actions are wrong no matter what consequences follow them. This theory is based upon a religious basis which theorizes actions based upon good or bad intentions. This method is known as the Divine Command Theory, which is a form of deontology because according to the theory, the rightness of any action depends upon that action being performed, not because of any good consequences arising from that action. This theory would almost seem as if there are no reasons to do anything wrong, even if there is good reason in a person’s mind for doing it. Some people may believe to some extent in both theories depending on the situation, this would mean they have an ethical dilemma regarding Virtue of Ethics.

Virtue of Ethics, which can be defined as the combination of consequentialism and deontology, describes the character of a person’s moral agent and driving force behind their ethical behavior. Virtue ethics deal with the actions a person should take in a given scenario based upon the situation which they are dealing with. Virtue ethics is basically a median between consequentialism and deontology.

All of the theories mentioned share the commonality of a person’s ethical choice to make morally incorrect or illegal decisions to gain a desirable outcome, regardless of the fact that is may be beneficial to one’s self or another. Based upon these theories you can understand how a person may come to their decision based upon their own perception of morality and ethics. Ethics (Swanson, Territo and Taylor, 2008) are rules and standards governing a person’s conduct. Simply put, legal rules and laws set in place by the government, business or person. Morality defines as those values which are not physiologically determined and normally considered objective conduct that differentiates intentions, decisions and actions between those that are good or bad.

Police corruption can happen looking at the theories I previously mentioned. According to (Peak, Gaines and Glensor, 2010) police corruption, “is a specific form of police misconduct designed to obtain financial benefits, other personal gain and or career advancement for a police officer or officers in exchange for not pursuing, or selectively pursuing an investigation or arrest.” Police corruption carries high cost not only to the officer but the agency that they are responsible to and the people that are sworn to protect. Police corruption can incorporate things such as bribery, extortion and battery which are illegal. Police corruption can also detract from the integrity of the police and tarnishes the public image of law enforcement, this action then breaks apart the efforts of community policing that officers work so hard to gain. Corruption also protects other criminal activity such as drug dealing, rape, robbery, prostitution and murder. Although protected criminal activities are often lucrative sources of income for organized crime, the benefits to officers do not outweigh the costs of criminals getting away or the potential of that member going to jail. Many officers make excuses for their negative actions which are classified in the consequentialism theory. Due to long hours, stress, increased risk and low salary, this increases the possibility of an officer looking the other way to earn outside income. This belief causes officers to justify themselves, even though it’s illegal.

The department the officer is in, can also have weight on whether they are corrupt or not. One reason for corruption can have something to do with educational background. Many agencies have begun to notice that members in there chain of command that have gone further in their educational background have been less likely to be involved in aspects of police corruption both on and off duty. As stated in (Williams & Arrigo, 2008), the reason for this is the fact that college courses are making it more accessible for students to receive training on certain prerequisites that focus on ethics, morale values and principals of police. This is not to say that those members who have not gone are all corrupt but that the ratio is decreased through further career training. Another reasons which is occurring more often than none is a rationalization of police deviance known as “Condemnation of Condemners” which, is an officers way of dealing with justice in his or hers own hands. This is an approach that is felt even in the military; many people rationalize the taking of a specific ethnic group’s life because they feel that eventually that group will become a terrorist. This kind of prejudice is both an unethical and immoral way of thinking and could possibly lead to problems in the future.

If officers chose to steer near a path of corruption it does not only affect them but those around them as well. For example if certain police officers start taking bribes from stores or start doing shake downs on thugs and gang members without cause the department as a whole will lose credibility which will greatly impact the success of community policing and the reduction of crime. Not to mention there entire arrest rate will be in question if ever caught. Some members who were actually guilty may walk back on the streets because of the poor choices of an officer’s corruption. This affects the community in several ways first, the members will begin not to trust officers second, the members will end up back on the streets doing the same illegal activities, and third, the system as a whole will seem useless and people will be less likely to help authorities when needed. If that was not bad enough the people that suffer the most are the family members of corrupt officers. A bad cop’s action can lead to prison time which, may lead to no financial income for the families. If an officer dies in the line of duty but was found guilty of improprieties the family will not get survival benefits. Another more likely problem would be backlash from members in the community, things such as vandalism, threats and physical violence. The problems mentioned are very discouraging for any involved however, are able to be decreased if not prevented.

The police department and leadership styles can have a big impact on corruption as well. It can mold the department into a successful division or a toxic environment. Leadership Styles as discussed by (Swanson, 2008) consist of many different approaches. Much of today’s research of leadership can be attributed to the work of Lewin, Lippitt, and White; researchers known for a case study in 1939, that centered on boys’ clubs. Although, there is much literature regarding leadership styles and principles, law enforcement agencies tend to be reserved regarding their approach to new leadership concepts or styles. One of the most progressive approaches to leadership centers on the concept of emotional intelligence. Many executives in a host of varied disciplines have decided to transcend the traditional autocratic style of leadership and subscribe to the leadership concepts of Daniel Goleman.

In his book, *Emotional Intelligence* (1997, P.302), Goleman discusses some key aspects of emotional intelligence as it pertains to the thinking of an executive or manager. He addresses the need for executives to understand the perspectives and behavioral norms of others. Goleman infers that the executive must concurrently have an awareness of self in their efforts to develop realistic expectations of their capabilities and those of their peers and direct reports. An effective executive leader must be fully aware of their non-verbal and verbal skills as it relates to their ability to influence others. Goleman provides an instrument to assist executives in assessing their skill levels or abilities. This instrument addresses a concept known as Emotional Quotient (EQ). An individual who would attempt this would determine their queried in regard to five areas. These include the following:

1. Knowing your emotions
2. Managing your own emotions
3. Motivating yourself
4. Recognizing and understanding other people’s emotions
5. Managing relationships, i.e. managing the emotions of others.

The three more common at most police organizations are Authoritarian Leaders, Democratic Leaders, and Laissez-Faire Leaders. With the authoritarian leadership style the leader makes all the decisions without consulting subordinates and closely controls work performance. Authoritarian leaders make decisions independently with little or no input from the rest of the group; there is a very visible difference between the leader and the followers under him/her. The authoritarian leadership styles have been noted to be used mainly during times of extreme emergency or when there is no time for the brain-storming phase within a group. I would say times of panic and emergency calls for one leader to stand tall and to direct others to achieve a defined goal. In combat during an exchange of gun fire is no place for brain-storming or within groups or unguided discussion, someone has to lead others and direct them into or away from the fight. However, if used too much the authoritarian style can become useless, negative leaders act domineering and superior with people and feel that there is only one way to get the job done. This becomes demoralizing to the employee and eventually causes friction within the organization. This method is not often used in police agencies, in fact the democratic leadership style is a group dynamic which allows members at the lowest level to have a role in their jobs overall goal. It also gives them a since of accomplishment and increases productivity in some workers. Lewin’s study found that leaders who become more involved with group level thinking, generally allows for the most effective brain-storming environment.

Democratic leaders don’t just offer guidance to group members, but they also participate in the group and allow for guided input from other group members. In research study that Lewin’s conducted, children in this group were less productive than the members of the authoritarian group, but their contributions were of a much higher quality. Much like with most police organizations after time, most people would only do what they were told out of fear of losing their job or benefits. Although the case study proved that the authoritarian approach proved to be a bit more productive, doesn’t mean that you get the best quality. In fact by shutting down peoples thoughts often stop them from caring about their overall quality of work. Officers ask for the opportunity for on spot corrective action, each scenario is different in its complexity. Officers don’t always have the time or the luxury of going by the book. Failing to allow members to take initiative or make command decisions can get them killed on the streets. There are times when officers have to keep their mouths shut, to get the job done, but this should be done on rare occasions. This is not to say that you should not have any leadership style at all. This would cause utter chaos. There has to be a checks and balances response to leadership. Someone has to get the job done, if everyone is a leader than who will follow? Better yet what type of leadership is that?

The laissez-faire leadership style focuses on a more hands off approach; the subordinates get free rain at making decisions and creating new ideas for their organization. There are many different ways to go about being a leader most of which causes a person to be more involved. (Brunson, 2007), stated that “decision-making can be one of the toughest and most stressful tasks any of us can face. Yet, we face numerous decisions every day. Most of us take each one as it comes and form our conclusions as we see fit at that moment. Our decisions and subsequent actions from those decisions are based largely on whatever our emotions, feelings, and initial reactions happened to be at the time.” These types of leaders offer little or no guidance to group members and leave decision-making up to group members. While this style can be effective in situations where group members are highly qualified in an area of expertise, it often leads to poorly defined roles and a lack of motivation. Although it is good to have room to make your own decisions there has to be a balance in power. When people especially officers are able to have limitless control, supervisors have a lack of supervision and there is a strong chance of abuse of power. Emotional Intelligence embraces and draws from numerous branches of behavioral, emotional and communication theories (Goldman, 1997). As you can see, leadership can play a big role in how an officer carries themselves as well as how the community views the officers handling good order and discipline within their community. Stress is also a big factor when it comes to police corruption.

Officers have to make split second decisions of life and death all of the time. Hopefully their training will come into play, but their decisions are always questioned and scrutinized. Anytime an officer fires their weapon or uses a non-lethal tool, an investigation is conducted. This investigation is to find out the truth and hopefully find out if the officer shot an individual because of corruption or because the individual was going to cause serious bodily harm to someone else or the officer himself.

Officers must deal with many different aspects of the job and handle them with extreme caution and maturity. Although officers deal with murder, homicides and robbery on a constant basis depending on the region, those are not the only serious situations they must deal with. Officers often must focus on Digestive disputes and Major accidents. Domestic disputes put officers in dangerous situations and must be handled tactfully. Officers must worry about weapons within the house, additional suspects, the other person involved in the dispute and injured victims that maybe hidden. Traditional policing would cause for an officer to be notified of a dispute and go in to resolve the situation. Those methods are to deescalate the situation, arrest a suspect or temporarily separate members. This method which is still used today is only a band aid on an open wound, it offers no real solution but temporarily solves the problem.

Another very important and extremely stressful situation officers must deal with especially after 9/11, is major accidents. Not only do officers have to worry about vehicular accidents but also terrorist attacks and explosions. This puts officers at an extreme disadvantage considering they might be a target for revenge and retaliation or confrontations and standoffs. The traditional policing method incorporates the idea of overloading an area with officers and adhering to strict procedural rules. While the community policing method allows officers to make split second decisions based upon officer perception and objective reasonableness (what the average officer would have done if placed in the same circumstance). Today’s officer in dealing with major accidents are given room to use quick thinking and allows less restriction under guidance of supervisors and managers. This method however, causes a great deal of stress on law enforcement officials to get the job done efficiently and effectively.

Even with the most comprehensive training and self-awareness efforts, police officers at all levels of command encounter inordinate amounts of stress that is inherent in this demanding vocation. Police officers must learn to manage routine stress as skillfully as they manage the critical incidents encountered in the conduct of their duties. Managing stress should be as much a consideration as maintaining the fleet of emergency response vehicles.

Stress is a major factor in law enforcement due to the complex environment in which police officers perform their duties. This environment is riddled with overt and covert challenges. Some of these challenges are physical, while others are emotional. However, the routine duties of law enforcement officers are filled with both stressors. The best management for these stressors is knowing what causes them. As a law enforcement member it is extremely important for these members to know that they are important to the overall site picture. If they become over taken by stress of the job or resistance from the people the community as a whole will crumble. The best way for officers to stay alert and healthy is through effective communication.

There are many different types of police corruption. A study was completed in the Chicago Police Department for the different types of corruption. There were ten different types of corruption found. Mooching was the first type of corruption. This is when officers take free meals from any establishment that offers them free food. This can be looked at as favoritism and the establishment expecting something back from the officer. Chiseling is when officers demand free or discounted admission to sports events or entertainment not in the capacity of their official duties. Favoritism is when an officer grants immunity from police action to certain citizens, such as fixing a parking ticket. Prejudice is also considered corruption because the officer treats certain groups differently, specifically minority groups, because their influence in the political structure is not likely to cause trouble for the officer. Shopping is when an officer steals small things from a store that is closed but the door was left open. Extortion is when an officer demands cash and promises the person making the payment will be protected from being arrested. Accepting bribes is when an officer takes money from an establishment so the establishment can stay open and not be fined or shut down. A shakedown is when an officer steals expensive items for personal use from a crime scene or when searching a place. Perjury is when an officer lies to protect another officer or themselves in a court of law. Premeditated theft is when an officer carries out a planned burglary. (McCafferty & McCafferty, 1998)

Silence can also contribute to corruption. An officer who sees another officer doing something wrong, but says nothing is also illegal. An officer that turns their head to corruption can also be tried on court. The conspiracy of silence is based on a “code” that defines the acceptable standards of practice. An intense group loyalty develops among police officers and contributes to the conspiracy of silence. Group loyalty often overcomes an officer’s oath and duty. It makes loyalty to fellow officers, even corrupt ones, more important than the loyalty to the ideals of the law enforcement agency and the community. There are ways that have been established and practiced in order to keep police corruption out of the force.

Training leaders with integrity and maturity is one of the first steps to combatting police corruption. This leader needs to be under the protection from political leaders, and free from the ear of being fired for standing up for what’s right and what they believe in. It is sometimes frowned upon for the leader of the department to be an officer who has raised up through the ranks, due to possibility off corruption on the way up. The leader must be educated and poised. They should have a higher education and have professionalism instilled in them along with knowledge, awareness and the ability to combat corruption. This all starts with the hiring process.

Most police candidates go through psychological test data, full social service history, clinical review, personal history, polygraph, financial problems and a criminal background check. The testing should be completed by a fully qualified psychologist. The biggest checks that need to be done for a police candidate are a family history check and how they control their angry and aggression in a stressful situation. Pay is also something that is a huge factor in police business and corruption.

If you don’t pay them a decent salary, an officer may take money off the side to make ends meet for their families. The demands of the job mandate that the law enforcement officer should be intelligent, mature and ethical. Officers should be paid by how much danger they are put in or by the risks they take daily. Probation could also assist with combating corruption. Instead of a probation period be six months for an officer, make it two years. This time frame could possibly weed out the bad eggs. Supervision is a key to battling corruption as well.

Supervisors should be taught the indicators for corruption so if they see something, they can report it. Leaders need to ensure senior officers aren’t looking the other way because they have promoted and about to retire or just don’t care. This can cause a lot of corruption to happen in departments just because someone looks the other way. This also goes into play with evaluations.

Officers should be evaluated on a regular basis. Evaluations should not go past a year. Corruption only has to happen one time for someone to get addicted and continue to partake in illegal acts. Discipline also goes into play when you deal with evaluations and investigations.

Supervisors need to have the courage and integrity to discipline officers when needed. The discipline should be impartial, consistent, immediate and definitive. Leaders and supervisors of law enforcement departments should find ways to defeat the obstacles to discipline and dismissal, including the conspiracy of silence, peer pressure and civil service rules.

The officers and criminals of the future will not be the same as today. Everything in the world is evolving into something greater. Which means, police corruption may not stem from the things listed in this paper. There may be different psychological and ethical demands on officers. The new generations think differently which means new and evolving crimes will be coming to the surface. Officers will have to pay close attention to how cultures change in their communities and how they will combat the threats. An officer being corrupt due to these things can easily happen. This is why education is key in the officer’s understand what they are up against and not fall into criminal activity. Police corruption will never disappear, but armed with the right tools, leaders can weed them out and allow the departments to do their jobs correctly and ethically sound.

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