

Balancing Loyalty and Oppression: Ambivalence and Marginalization among Lesbian and Gay Law Enforcement Officers in Central Florida

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Abstract

Public attention to law enforcement officers' violent interactions with people who are minorized due to their racial, ethnic, and gender identities has grown in recent years, policing has come under increased scrutiny and critique in the United States. Existing scholarship on law enforcement underscores how policing is a key feature of governmentality and upholds power inequalities based on race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other social constructions of difference. Scant scholarship, however, examines experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identifying (LGBTQ+) law enforcement officers, who are simultaneously agents of the state and also subjected to governing regimes that perpetuate social exclusions based on their identities. While research on LGBTQ+ officers has examined community perceptions of officers, workplace inclusivity, and masculinized employment settings, it has largely ignored the complexities and ambivalent sentiments of LGBTQ+ officers who are complicit with governing objectives but also disenfranchised due to their identities. In this paper, we report findings from participant observation with an LGBTQ+ law enforcement organization and semi-structured interviews with Lesbian and Gay law enforcement officers (n=7) who were recruited as part of a larger study focused on activism following the 2016 Pulse Shooting in Orlando, Florida. Findings underscore Lesbian and Gay officers' tensions between embracing professional loyalty and experiences of trauma and exclusion due to their identities. Moreover, interviewees underscore the complex political and economic factors that reinforce their loyalty, including proximity to neoliberal economic ideals such as attractive wages and perceived prestige. Overall, we argue that Lesbian and Gay officers' loyalty to policing obfuscates larger neoliberal economic failings and reinforces social and political differences.

Introduction

During a monthly meeting of the Gay Officers Action League (GOAL) in Orlando, Florida, members began logging into Zoom and chatting. It was the summer of 2020, and COVID-19 precautions dictated the meeting occur online. As GOAL members joined the call, one member, Jeff, told another member that he would soon be reaching out for advice. Jeff is a law enforcement officer for a small municipality in Central Florida, and he described harassment he was experiencing at work. He had noticed his colleagues on the force treating him unlike anyone else, and he was unable to fully explain what was different, but he felt they were treating him differently because he is a gay man. “I just feel like they’re making me into the problem, you know?” he explained. He had talked to a supervisor about a general feeling of mistreatment and reported slurs that other officers used against him, but felt leadership had not acknowledged his concerns. He now feared he had a metaphorical target on his back as a troublemaking officer unable to adapt to the rest of the force. “It’s gotten pretty bad here, but I don’t want to make the entire meeting about me,” he continued. “I’ll just say this, he added, I just feel like now anytime I say anything they’re like, ‘oh great, here comes the whiny faggot again,’ and it’s not great. I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t want to leave, but they’re just making it really hard for me.”

As Jeff’s experience highlights, law enforcement officers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) may encounter workplace discrimination and harassment. Nevertheless, some officers, including Jeff, feel a deep sense of professional loyalty to law enforcement, in part due to how the profession aligns with their visions of serving their community, engaging in morally ideal work, and provides economic stability. This loyalty, however, obfuscates larger neoliberal economic failings, such as the erosion of economic security for most middle class jobs, and reinforces social differences.

In this paper, we draw from interviews with LGBTQ+ law enforcement officers that were part of a larger study examining LGBTQ+ activism in Central Florida following the 2016 Pulse shooting. We describe how LGBTQ+ law enforcement officers are paradoxically agents of state governmentality and also governed by ideologies of loyalty and the perception of middle class economic stability that law enforcement job can create.

Background

Policing overall as a social tool of power and governing difference

Throughout its history, law enforcement has played a critical role in maintaining power differentials through political and social influence. The first forms of law enforcement in the Southern United States originated from slave patrols, or organized groups to capture escaped enslaved people (Williams, 2004). These patrols effectively worked to reinforce the state’s efforts to govern race and economic hierarchy, and have laid the foundation for modern policing. Similarly, in the Northern United States, law enforcement was used to encourage or discourage individuals to vote for a particular political party, oftentimes through brutal measures (Williams, 2004). These forms of political and social influence have throughlines to modern policing and its role in maintaining racial inequity and upholding white supremacy. In essence, law enforcement have effectively functioned in the US as a biopolitical technology of control, or as Foucault explains, a way of applying power over the entire population (CITE discipline and Punish).

Moreover, law enforcement agencies are able to shield themselves from direct oversight largely through powerful law enforcement collective bargaining groups that have significant political sway (DiSalvo, 2022). Police are therefore not only the first point of contact with the criminal legal system and are used to enforce social order by means of mass incarceration and punishment, but are also able to escape a great deal of regulatory scrutiny.

Research on LGBTQ+ and other minoritized identities focused on workplace environment

While existing social science literature has robustly described the role of law enforcement in upholding power hierarchies, comparatively less literature has examined law enforcement personnel themselves, including sexual and gender minority personnel such as LGBTQ+ individuals. Overall, LGBTQ+ employees throughout the US face discrimination, harassment, and exclusion in the workplace. Consequences include lower job satisfaction, poorer mental health, and worsened job performance compared to heterosexual counterparts. Similarly, there are higher turnover rates and difficulty retaining LGBTQ+ talent across all sectors of the workforce. Organizational strategies for inclusivity include employee resource groups, diversity training, and benefits that include health insurance coverage for gender-affirming procedures. Other minoritized individuals face similar challenges, and repercussions are significantly more extensive when marginalized identities intersect (e.g., people of color, women, people with disabilities). Despite existing research on LGBTQ+ people in the US workforce generally, how LGBTQ+ individuals are received in law enforcement settings, and their reasons for joining law enforcement, remains an under examined topic.

Research on law enforcement and professional identity

Broadly, individuals who join law enforcement report doing so out of a desire to engage in a profession that provides a stable income, fulfills a sense of civic and community engagement, or relates to familial expectations (CITE). Policing may also attract people with specific personality traits, including a desire for power and control associated with narcissistic personality traits (CITE). These traits are reinforced and rewarded through institutional rites of passages, such as the academy and selection and promotion, while weeding out individuals who lack the desired traits. Once on the job, the professional culture of policing is more likely to shape individual than individuals are to shape the professional culture. Indeed, as Sklansky (2006), notes, “blue is blue:” emphasizing the unity of law enforcement officers and the primacy of law enforcement as a professional identity above other forms of identity. Police candidates undergo an intense socialization process as throughout their training in the academy and beyond that in many ways shapes police identity. This socialization process as described by Seaton (2017) introduces the officers in training to new value systems separate from those they hold outside policing. Under these value systems they tend to hold each other to a different standard than the average person, causing them to perceive questionable activity within the police differently, often ignoring it entirely. Further, law enforcement as a profession creates a deep sense of loyalty to other officers, and existing research has shown that officers report loyalty to other officers being a top priority for them (Cordner 2017).

Policing is also a profession in which traditional masculinity is valued (Mennicke 2016), and officers have reported seeing a lack of physical toughness as a weakness and that some people can only be dealt with “the hard way” (Cordner, 2017). Those who do not display traditional masculinity, and in particular heterosexual masculinity, may experience workplace harassment. Indeed, disclosing a gay identity can be more challenging for gay men working in masculinized industries (Collins and Rocco 2015) than other forms of work. Additionally,

existing research shows that work-related discrimination and harassment among lesbian and gay law enforcement officers is pervasive in the profession (Mallory et al. 2013). Among women who are law enforcement officers, masculinity is positively associated with career mentoring, while sexual orientation, such as identifying as a lesbian, is negatively associated with career mentoring (Barratt et al 2014).

Overall, the training rites of passage, emphasis on loyalty, and value placed on traditional masculinity, create pressures for individual officers to conform to the dominant group's (white, cis-men) personality traits if they want to survive in the work (Johnson, 2016). Over time, people whose identities are minoritized but are also law enforcement officers, including Black LEOs, may experience a form of "double consciousness" that leads to internal conflicts in personal belief systems (Dukes 2018). Despite the challenges of working in a highly masculinized industry, LGBTQ+ law enforcement officers are nevertheless drawn to law enforcement for many of the same reasons as other officers, including community and economic-related factors (Charles and Arndt 2013). Nevertheless, compared to other masculinized industries, there is comparatively little research on LGBTQ+ people working in law enforcement. Without such research, the nuances of professional ambivalence and challenges navigating a highly masculinized form of work among this group may remain poorly understood.

Methods

To examine the complexities of LGBTQ+ law enforcement officers' experiences, we completed in-depth individual interviews with lesbian and gay law enforcement officers (n=7) and participant observation with law enforcement officer organizations, such as GOAL. Interviews were conducted as part of a largely study focused on LGBTQ+ activism after the 2016 Pulse shooting, in Orlando, Florida. At the time, the shooting was the deadliest in US history, and occurred at a gay bar on Latin night, disproportionately affecting LGBTQ+ people of color. Our resulting research examined how intersectional social justice organizing following the Pulse shooting can create new forms of resistance to biopolitical control that can pervade multiple social spaces, including law enforcement agencies. Overall, law enforcement interviewees explained the tensions between their desire to be police officer and moments of professional inclusion coupled with experiences of harassment and exclusion.

Results

Desire to be a police officer

Interviewees described several economic motivations and benefits for joining law enforcement, including a pathway to finance higher education. For example, BR, a white gay man, explained: "I grew up in a lower socioeconomic area, and then that kind of had interactions with police just on its own...So I had a lot of interactions with the police at a young age" In middle school, Brandon joined a law enforcement exploring program, which he felt like showed him this could be his calling. He then went on to do a similar program with the Sheriff's office.

Then as a youth...I was probably like 14, 15, I started to explore programs with the Orange County Sheriff's Office, and then once I did that, I knew I was hooked and this is what I wanted to do for a career...Since then, I think it's changed, but it offered scholarships for college, you know, grants and things like that. So I utilized those resources to get education, to go to the academy, to

ultimately then get a job and get my foot in the door here [at the sheriff's office].

Similarly, GPH, a white lesbian woman, explained how law enforcement gave her benefits that increased her overall socioeconomic status by permitting her a way to finance her graduate education. As she explained: "I was born and raised in Cleveland, Tennessee...It's a small town..." GPH got a full scholarship for basketball in college, and completed a biology degree. "I got a bachelor's in biology with a minor in chemistry...But I was like, 'My god, what am I going to do with this degree?'" she explained. She got a position with Dr. Scholl's to work in a lab, but turned down the job. "I was like, 'Man, it has no windows.' It's like, 'Ugh, I don't want to do that.' So, I was like, 'What am I going to do with my life?' At that point, GPH decided to join the military. "So, I walked into their recruiting, and I actually went in the first door on the right, which was the Navy. That's why I joined the Navy.... I actually went in as enlisted. I didn't even try to go in as an officer, even though I had my degree. I was like, 'You know what? I'm just going to go in as enlisted, enjoy life.'" GPH completed bootcamp in Orlando, and was then stationed in San Diego. There, she was able to pursue an advanced degree. "I got my master's out there, at San Diego State. I got my Master of Management. The Navy paid for it. So, that was awesome." That degree then led her to law enforcement on offshore security. She eventually met someone at the Orlando Police Department, who then convinced her to join the department.

"Helping people" and being the "good guys"

In addition to economic motivations, participants described their desire to join law enforcement due to wanting to help people. One participant, JY, a gay man, described this desire as something common to officers and that being a sexual minority should not hinder that desire. As JY explained, "...Just because you identify as LGBTQ + ...if this is the job you want to do, it should never, it should never exclude you from doing this job. If this is the job you want to do. Because most of us go into this line of work to help people. I still believe that to this day I want to help people. I don't want to hurt people."

Tensions between embracing professional loyalty and experiences of trauma and exclusion

Despite economic motivations and desires to help people, participants described tensions in their workplace. For example, JY explained the precarious nature of his job due to his identity. He explained an incident regarding his department commander in the 1990s: "....So at the time I left, I had just been named officer of the year I was on the promotional list to be promoted to Sergeant. And something happened in the department where I had heard a person in higher command make a statement that they don't mind if there's lesbians in police, but if they found out they had a gay man, the worst term for gay man in the department, they would fire them immediately...." When JY left that agency for the Orlando Police Department, he felt a sense of belonging. He explained that when a department embraces diversity and inclusion, it allows for people to see themselves thrive in the organization. "...And here [at OPD] I never hid who I was. Like if someone asked or someone said something, I didn't mind, I told people directly who I worked with, you know, that I was gay. You know, and I never experienced any issues as far as here at the Orlando police department. So I immediately, I felt this is a place not only am I included, but I can excel here. Because I think, you know and I think in a place I can be dedicated to."

For some participants, tensions in the workplace manifest as overt and hidden forms of discrimination. One participant, CT, a black man, described navigating not belonging on a police force because he's a gay man, and how it potentially impacted his safety. As he explained:

Prior to joining law enforcement...I've done a research paper on, you know, how gays were treated in law enforcement. I knew it could potentially be bad, but I also knew that being closeted is potentially worse. At least for me. So I was like, I wasn't going to do that. So in the academy, I wasn't like screaming it in people's faces, but at the same time, I didn't hide away from it either...Some people would like, if we were changing in the locker room, they would go into the stall instead of changing out where everybody else was changing. You know, even though everybody was usually like changing out in the open, if I came in, things kind of changed for some people. Which, you know, that it was what it was that they, at least they weren't doing anything to me. You know, at that point.

Later once I started at the Sheriff's office, I had some really bad experiences. There was one guy who since resigned probably maybe a year or two after the incident, he went to a call with me and we were talking to a suspect and essentially what you do when we are talking to somebody, we try to kind of angle ourselves to where I can see my partner in case something happens to him or he's trying to give me some kind of signal, but I can also see the suspect. So we're keeping an eye on both people. So I'm kind of shifting my attention back and forth. And I guess at some point he thought that I was checking him out.. Yeah. so later on that night, he sends me a message asking him to meet behind some gas station, which isn't abnormal. Like we would normally meet in these kind of out of the way spots, if we were going to like, you know, talk about a call or things like that. So I didn't suspect anything.

But then I got there and I got out of my car and we're talking. And he's like, he just, I could tell he was angry about something. And he got maybe three inches from my face and started screaming at me. Told me if I ever looked at him like that again, that he'd beat my ass and you know, I need to stop checking him out and he's not interested in me. And I don't know what you're talking about. Like...I have no interest in you like this, just not. You know, it's I didn't understand what his issue was, but he, I guess wasn't buying it.

Between him and I know at least two or three other people on the squad, I guess they were going to the supervisor and complaining that I wasn't working, that I was unfriendly. And when the supervisor, the first time he confronted me, I showed him the stats because there's electronic stats were gathered. And he said, oh, well, you know, the other guys are saying you're dodging calls and you're lazy. And I said, but if you look at my stats for the last three months, I'm doing twice the work that anybody else is

doing, like I make twice the number of arrests or write twice the number of reports I go to twice the number of calls. So I'm not being lazy...there's no evidence that I'm being lazy. I'm working.

And he said, well, you know, they're also saying you're unfriendly. And I said, well, they're also not exactly being nice to me. And I wasn't trying to dime them out yet. And to that point, he basically said, well, you need to figure out how to get along with them. So one time I tried to go to dinner with a few of them and we had a new program that we were installing on our computer, kind of like you know, that dragon naturally speaking program where you can talk and it types for you. So the agency had installed that on our computers, but our speakers would randomly go off and on as would our microphone. Like sometimes it would just randomly start typing.

We all bring our computers with us to lunch or to dinner. So when I sat down, I had closed my computer, but I was in the middle of typing a report. Well, I went to the bathroom. And when I came back, you know, everybody was talking like normal, but when I opened up my computer, it had typed out unfortunately a good portion of what they had said...So somebody had some concern about having some faggot work with them. You know, he's like, oh, he's probably really soft. If he gets in a fight, you know, he's not going to be able to help us. I don't want him backing me on calls, like stupid things like that, which other people knew when I had, as I was working with them, them that if we needed to use force, if something had to be done, like if I needed to help someone, I was going to do it. It didn't matter if I was half the size of the person that we were fighting with. Like, I'll be right there with you. You know, competent people knew that, but there were just hateful people, I guess, for lack of a better term.

It finally reached a point where they I called for a backup one night, because I was dealing with two guys, one who literally was twice my size. And then another one his behavior was just suggesting something was wrong. Like it was very odd. I felt very uncomfortable. And the guy, the bigger guy was drunk and he kept on drunk people usually try to get really close to you I guess, because they feel like you can't hear them. So they want to get really close so that they can talk to you and have you understand. And because of the size, I wanted to keep him away. So I was just very uncomfortable in the situation overall. So I asked for backup over the radio the dispatcher repeated the request three times, nobody from my squad came and finally it took somebody coming from another sector. Like they left an off duty job where they were being paid like overtime by a separate employer. They left that job to come help me because nobody there would. So I knew at that point it was pretty bad.

I requested to talk to the supervisor because I was just going to lay all the cards on the table at that point. I'm like, look, I tried to fix it myself and it's not working. And essentially when I met with him, he had brought the Lieutenant there as well. And they kind of jumped on me before I could even say anything, oh, you know, we've talked to the other guys, you don't eat lunch with them and you know, you're rude to them. You don't hang out with them. I said, why would I hang out with people who treat me this way? ...So I said, you know, I really feel like they're treating me this way because I'm gay...And I really think you should do something about it.

And the response was that being gay or I forget exactly how I put it, but basically that being gay wasn't a protected class and that they didn't have to do anything about it. And at that point I was like, I've given up. I was getting ready to quit. Because I couldn't, it was too dangerous for me to go to calls and whatnot and have people not want to back me.

CT, did not quit, however, and instead joined another agency, where he felt more included.

Discussion

Taken together, participants' experiences highlight complex negotiations of being an LGBTQ+ law enforcement officer. Experiences like Jeff's, JY's, and CT's, show despite the mistreatment of being in law enforcement as a sexual minority, individuals persist in the profession even if they move agencies. Accordingly, findings suggest that law enforcement provides social mobility through a middle class wage and ability to pursue advanced education, as BR and GPH did, and the job fulfills goals of engaging in a "helping profession." These factors may reinforce law enforcements' professional loyalty that then allow for greater tolerance of workplace mistreatment.

Since 1970, the middle class accounts for a smaller percentage of the US population and has resulted in increases in lower-income and upper-middle income tiers. Accordingly, wages, adjusted for inflation, have remained relatively stagnant for the majority of the US and in comparison to previous generations, current generations are significantly less likely to make more than their parents did at the same point in their careers. This trend does not hold true for law enforcement. For example, law enforcement officer wages have seen year over year increases and significantly outpaced wage growth for most workers. For example, in 2020, the median income in the US was \$48,769 whereas the median income for a police officer was \$67,290 – nearly one-third greater than the average US income. For some, like BR, who described growing up in a poor neighborhood, police officer jobs may present as an opportunity to move between socioeconomic classes that many other professions do not afford. In addition, jobs as a police officer tend to require less education than some other professions, usually a high school degree or equivalent, while making more as a base salary than a profession that requires a higher level of education (college degree, graduate degree, etc.). Further, police officer jobs provide ample benefits including health insurance, dental insurance, paid sick leave, opportunities for growth/increased salary, and in some cases, free housing and transportation. Put together, law enforcement jobs are among the few that still provide the promise of a middle class US lifestyle. This attraction may reinforce professional loyalty.

Professional loyalty encompasses individuals' sense of duty, devotion, and allegiance to upholding the values and responsibilities associated with their role as officers. However, traumatic experiences and exclusionary practices related to one's identity can challenge and complicate loyalty. Narratives offered by JY and CT, however, show loyalty to the profession despite their experiences. Put simply, through JY's and CT's loyalty-informed lens, some agencies or departments may be problematic, but not all of policing. Loyalty to the profession because of its promise of a middle class lifestyle obscures the political and economic forces that have eroded access to middle class lifestyles. Policies that have perpetuated neoliberal, *laissez-faire* economic ideals have reduced opportunities of individuals like JY and CT to secure such a wage and also not be excluded because of their identities.

Additionally, the contrasting narratives of JY, who experienced both discriminatory attitudes and inclusive practices during his career, shows the significance of boundary-setting and organizational culture. JY and CT's personal accounts reveal the profound impacts of discriminatory attitudes, highlighting the difficulties faced by officers when their identities are not respected or accepted. The incidents they describe underscores the pervasive existence of deeply ingrained prejudices within police departments and highlight the potential trauma and exclusion experienced by individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation.

JY's contrasting narrative of inclusion, however, underscores the importance examining instances in which law enforcement agencies actively embrace inclusion, fostering an environment where individuals can thrive professionally. Exploring such counterexamples enables a comprehensive understanding of the pivotal role played by boundary setting and organizational culture in mitigating tensions and creating conducive opportunities for all members to excel within the profession.

Conclusion

Findings presented from our study underscore tensions between loyalty and exclusion among LGBTQ+ law enforcement officers. Caught between an ambivalent position of loyalty and oppression, additional research on LGBTQ+ law enforcement officers is needed in order to understand how they may be able to reform law enforcement overall. Some scholars (Smith, 2003, Decker & Smith as cited by Dukes 2018) have suggested that diversifying police departments would influence policing not only by improving public perception/increasing police legitimacy but also by increasing contact of white, cis-, straight officers with officers from minoritized identities. Doing so may reduce the solidarity of the police subculture, but as findings from this study show, such efforts may not be materializing as it was hypothesized. Accordingly, larger structural changes to law enforcement agencies may be needed. As public attention to police reform grows, our findings highlight that reforming police also necessitates challenging how agencies perpetuate marginalization while reinforcing an professional loyalty.

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