

# Crossing Cultural Boundaries: Reconsidering the Cultural Characteristics of Police Officers and Ambulance Staff

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## Keywords

Police culture, paramedic culture, organisational culture, boundary crossing, situated learning

## Introduction

The subject of this paper is the organisational cultures of two different parts of the emergency services, the police and the ambulance service. The former has been the subject of much criticism over the years (Loftus, 2009) and has faced repeated calls for its culture to be changed. The focus of this paper however is on the potential for co-operation and collectivism underpinned by the shared cultural characteristics across both organisations as a result of their very close physical working relationship when dealing with the public. The purpose therefore of this paper is to analyse those shared occupational and cultural characteristics and in doing so, provide the potential for identifying the critical success factors of a strengthened working relationship and the subsequent capacity for enhanced multi agency working.

The study of culture has traditionally been the bed-rock of anthropologists and has been of intermittent and periodic interest to other parts of the social sciences. However culture is staging something of a comeback and is being considered not only as an academic tool of discovery but also as an organisational tool of reform. But, what is the culture of an organisation? And is it worth discovering? Or is culture, in the words of Hofstede and colleagues, "a fad ... Fads pass, and this one is no exception" (Hofstede, Neuijen, Daval, Ohayv and Sanders, 1990:286)?

The study of co-operation and collectivism however has a long history. Tonnies wrote of the differentiation between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (1957) in the late 1800s for example; along with Durkheim's *mechanical* and *organic* solidarity (1933, translated W. Halls, 1984) and Weber's social relationships (1978). The more recent phenomena of the study of culture within the organisational and management disciplines emerged firstly in the 1950s and then moved on apace during the 1960s and 1970s. The publication of *Corporate Cultures* (Deal and Kennedy, 1982) followed by *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) firmly cemented the concept into management discourse. What appealed to the corporate world about the concept of culture was that there was a sense in which culture could not only be created within an organisation but could then be moulded and strengthened in order to boost productivity, alleviate workplace tension and assist with strategic change. This approach towards organisational culture as something malleable and manipulable sits firmly within the notion that culture is something which an organisation has (Smircich, 1983). Residing within academia alone is the notion that culture is what an organisation is and with it, the belief therefore that culture is not so easily changed (Lynn-Meek, 1994:274).

Unsurprisingly, there is little agreement from the disparate disciplines which embrace analyses of culture, about its form and function. Yet despite this, there is broad agreement that its centrality within organisations renders its concept worthy of deeper analysis. Understanding the culture of an

organisation is a way of making sense of an organisation (Peck, Towell and Gulliver, 2001). It is argued that human programming takes on three levels, the *universal* (or biological) level, shared by all; the *collective* level, shared by some but not all; and the *unique* characteristics, exclusive to each person (Hofstede, 2001). Culture embraces that second, collective level of mental programming. Societies, organisations and most relevant to this particular article, occupational groups, have ways of successfully reproducing these cultural schemas over time. Culture embraces all that is generally known but mostly unseen within an organisation. This includes the shared values and assumptions of the organisation plus the more symbolic aspects such as its myths, its stories and its rituals. These values and beliefs (which are deemed to remain constant over time) manifest themselves to an extent in the behaviours of the group.

### Organisational Culture

Organisational culture tends to be portrayed pictorially as an onion of varying layers (see Hofstede, Neuijen, Daval, Ohayv and Sanders, 1990; Johnson, Scholes and Whittington, 2008 or Spencer-Oatey, 2000 for examples). Although not universally consistent in their choice of layers, what are most often described are those unseen characteristics of an organisation which, as you journey through the layers, become increasingly less conscious, tangible and observable but are nonetheless key characteristics of the culture. These include rituals, stories, routines, behaviours, symbols, values, beliefs and paradigms. Whilst different theorists place different elements at the core of the model of organisational culture (for Hofstede *et al* (1990) it is 'values', for Johnson *et al* (2008) it is 'paradigms' and for Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) it is 'basic assumptions'), there is general agreement that organisational culture is both learned and shared. According to Schein therefore culture is:

*"A pattern of shared basic assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, is to be taught to new members of the group as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (1984:3).*

Organisational culture is therefore learned by its members through a process of socialisation (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). This learning works to both integrate and assimilate the newcomer into their role but also functions as a positive reinforcement of effective working practices and a method of avoiding less effective measures. Groups will adopt behaviours which preserve or enhance a positive group identity (Tajfel, 1982). In adapting to a role, the values of an organisational member become validated and as such, form into assumptions (Schein, 1991). Shared understandings and shared meanings (how something is interpreted) are what makes occupational cultures both interesting and important. These are not necessarily apparent to members themselves but are tacit, generally unspoken, taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Alvesson, 2002). The capacity of occupational cultures to have a "cultural memory" (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995:126), to reproduce themselves over time, is almost a test of their strength and their validity.

Culture can act as the *glue* which holds an organisation together (Alvesson, 2002:7). What this paper seeks to do is to address an extension of this belief in the adhesive nature of organisational

culture. Through an analysis of qualitative interviews with police officers and ambulance staff in the south of England, it attempts to analyse whether there is the potential for shared occupational cultures *across* organisations. If we are moving further into the territory of multi-agency working as it appears that we are (Home Office, 2014) then an understanding of the cultural characteristics of individual agencies and the potential for shared characteristics across agency boundaries would appear to be essential. After a brief consideration of the police culture literature and the very sparse literature on paramedic and ambulance staff culture, this paper goes on to identify the potential shared cultural characteristics and artefacts which have been learned, validated and reproduced by the two occupational groups. Can the glue bonding one organisation, or part of an organisation, extend to cement two different organisational groups? If the occupational identity is strong, can we refer to police officers and ambulance staff as an "occupational community" (Hofstede, 2001:414), where:

"A group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; who identify (more or less positively) with their work; ... share with one another a set of values, norms, and perspectives that apply to, but extend beyond, work related matters; and whose social relationships merge the realms of work and leisure" (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984:295; cited in Hofstede, 2001:414)?

### Police Culture

Police culture remains an enduring area of enquiry, a situation which has remained unaltered since Skolnick, Westley, Cain and Banton were writing in the 1960s and 1970s (Skolnick, 1966; Westley, 1970; Cain, 1973; Banton, 1973). What also, in many cases, remains unaltered, is the almost universal condemnation of the culture of the police as a site of masculine hegemony, racism, prejudice, discrimination and sexism. Research suggested that police officers exhibited the characteristics of secrecy (Goldsmith, 1990; Punch, 1983), cynicism (De Lint, 1998; Scripture, 1997), authoritarianism (Waddington, 1999), aggression (Reiner, 1992; Fielding, 1994; Christensen and Crank, 2001), hostility (Reiner, 1992; Scripture, 1997), suspicion (Skolnick, 1966) and prejudice (Drummond, 1976). More recent research has maintained the enduring continuity of some of these characteristics, (Loftus, 2009) despite considerable change both externally in the social, political and cultural climate in which police officers work and also internally, with demographic and organisational change. A handful of authors have pointed to the necessity of a re-evaluation of this conception (Chan, 1996, 1997; Waddington, 1999; Sklansky, 2006, 2007), yet the original narrative persists. Police culture is repeatedly referred to as being rigid, immutable and "deeply entrenched and pervasive" (Davies and Thomas, 2003:682). These entrenched and indelible attitudes were seen to extend to the concept of partnership working when introduced during the 1990s (Bullock, Erol and Tilley, 2006).

Yet, is there any sense in attempting to explore and perhaps even attempting to appreciate the role of police culture and how it is and could potentially be utilised? Firstly, police culture can be seen as a *tool of coping* with what, at times, can be a stressful and dangerous occupation. The collectivistic nature of police culture ensures co-operation, teamwork and loyalty amongst colleagues (Filstad and Gottschalk, 2010). Waddington has argued that the police canteen is the "repair shop" of policing and jokes, banter and anecdotes the tools" (1999a:295). Secondly, police culture can be considered

as a *tool of learning*, from the passing on of knowledge and experience from sworn officers to new recruits. Shearing & Ericson (1991) argue that although police research has dismissed the police service for using experience to teach the young recruit, it is in fact a successful method of using metaphors to create “sensibilities” within which officers can create their own understanding. Using Sackmann’s (1991) terminology, this would constitute the acquisition of ‘recipe knowledge’, or more simply, a survival guide. Lastly, police culture can be considered as a tool of *rule adaptation*. The role of the police officer provides much room for discretion, particular at the lower ranks. There is undoubtedly a gap between 'law in books' and 'law in action' (McBarnet, 1981). Police officers need their own set of internalised rules to cope with situations where there are “policy vacuums” (Goldsmith, 1990). What police culture achieves is a patterned response, a ‘working rule book’, a set of values and beliefs that are shared by the organisation and which can be utilised by officers during their working practice.

The literature on police culture remained fairly uncontentious for many years. Ethnographic studies had, through careful observation, highlighted some of the features and characteristics of police officers and police work. The results however were rarely challenged and it is only in recent years that we have begun to see a body of work that is questioning these “core assumptions” (Chan, 1997) about policing that have emanated from a cultural analysis. There are challenges to the notion that what is said by police officers is indicative of how they will behave, ie. the distinction between 'talk' and 'action' (Waddington, 1999). There are challenges to the notion that there is one singular and monolithic police culture which is pervasive and unavoidable throughout all ranks, roles and personnel (Reuss Ianni, 1993, Christensen and Crank, 2001, Chan, 1996). More recently, this has been addressed with a much greater awareness and appreciation of the many different types of police culture (Fielding, 1989, 1994; Cain, 1973; Waddington, 1999, Reiner, 1992; Chan, 1997; Young, 1991; Glomseth and Gottschalk, 2009). These authors have differentiated between different policing tasks, between rural and urban police, between special forces, between gender, between race and between non-uniform and uniform officers. And finally, there are challenges to the notion that police culture cannot change. Our understanding of police culture is described by Sklansky (2007) as being “a story of cognitive burn-in” (p.20). Much like old television screens can leave image burn-in if a static image is shown for too long, Sklansky argues that the same can be true of ideas and particularly those concerning police culture.

### Ambulance Culture

Whilst the literature on police culture remains contentious, the literature on the culture of ambulance staff and paramedics is very sparse, despite the growing emergence of academic interest in the work of the emergency services (Wankhade and Murphy, 2012). Whilst some of the literature on the performance, competencies and role of ambulance staff touch upon some of their cultural characteristics (Filstad, 2010; Eddie Palmer, 1989, 1993; Steen, Naess & Steen, 1997), what is found is that in much the same way as the sociological accounts of police work in the 1970s, culture is not the primary focus. The research also tends to be restricted to the US and northern Europe. However, it is also evident that many similar cultural characteristics emerge from a profession which is also involved within the boundaries of emergency, public facing, potentially dangerous work. The importance of trust between partners (Eddie Palmer, 1989; Filstad, 2010), teamwork (Eddie Palmer, 1993), a strong occupational bond (Filstad, 2010), strong people management (Eddie Palmer, 1989),

compassion (Steen, Naess & Steen, 1997) and a desire for action (Eddie Palmer, 1993) all feature regularly. However, in a not dissimilar fashion to the policing literature, the role of 'storylines', storytelling, humour and jokes have also entered the discourse about the characteristics of ambulance staff (Tangherlini, 2000).

Researching culture is a complicated process. Rubin and Rubin (1995:20) argued that it posed particular problems, "In asking about culture, interviewers are often asking fish to describe the water in which they swim". Those involved in the research themselves refer to the concept of culture as "a fuzzy field" (Hofstede et al, 1990: 313) and "fuzzy .. phenomena" (Alvesson, 2002:14). Attitude is not a concrete entity but an abstract construct from which we can only infer meanings. These inferred meanings however should not be any less valued within social science research. Although attempts have been made to measure and quantify culture through a survey approach (see for example Hofstede, 1980), generally speaking descriptive and/or ethnographic approaches are more commonplace (Schein, 1991). However, analysing culture should not constrain itself through a search for "the truth", it is rather an adventure to discover perceptions, beliefs and ideologies. By attempting to appreciate the culture of an organisation, one can attempt a fuller and more holistic understanding of that group.

### Methods

The data for this paper was the result of a cultural analysis of a group of police officers and ambulance staff in England. The primary concern of the research was an investigation into the interoperability of two distinct professions during the course of their involvement in serious incidents. For the purposes of this research, the decision was made to concentrate on interviews (or as some have classed them, "conversations with a purpose" (Kahn and Cannell, 1957:149)). The decision was reached for many reasons. Interviewing as a research tool has many advantages. Response rates are usually higher than other forms of qualitative research and it allows prompting and clarification of questions. A wide variety of information can be gathered and a large amount of data can be collected (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). This brings with it the problems of often an unwieldy amount of data which must be carefully managed. Knowledge evolves through the dialogue between interviewee and interviewer. Cultural research does not require the strict 'facts' of an event but rather the meanings attached to them by the participants. Thus culture can be communicated through the stories and examples that are provided by the interviewee and reveal how their world is understood (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Arksey and Knight, 1999).

"The cultural report is credible because the story is told by the experts, the members of the culture, in their own words" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995:30).

Cultural research resides, sometimes uncomfortably, between the ideographic (one example) and nomothetic (seeks generalizability) research traditions (Martin, 2002). Whilst this research cannot claim to produce a universal analysis of cultural interoperability between police officers and ambulance staff, it can through an analysis of not just values but meanings, produce a deeper level of understanding than that associated with one sample (Schein, 1992).

A total of 45 semi-structured interviews took place with 22 ambulance staff and 23 police officers, with a gender ratio not dissimilar to that in their respective professions. Ambulance staff included paramedics and technicians. Police officers were all serving at or below the rank of Inspector. Discussion with more senior ranks within the police service would not have benefitted the research as the focus was on the combined working relationship of the two professions, in their prime working location, which is on the streets. More senior ranks, especially within the police, tend to reside more within stations and opportunities for working together are more limited. More details of the interviewees can be found in Appendix 1. Interviews took place mostly in police canteens or ambulance rest rooms. As such the author was already privy to the "backstage" (Goffman, 1959) or "home territory" (Lyman and Scott, 1967: 270) environment where cultural behaviours, attitudes and values are more likely to flourish. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed systematically and thematically by hand. Thematic analysis is the process of categorising qualitative data via the application of codes or themes. Transcripts from ambulance staff are all given the prefix 'P' whilst all other prefixes refer to the words of police officers.

A small number of observations at joint training exercises also took place. Whilst not claiming to have undergone the rigorous number of observational hours to qualify as a "peopled ethnography" (Fine, 2003), the principles of building upon other ethnographic research and relevant theoretical considerations, the observation of interacting groups and the general premise of conversation plus observation plus theory has been present. In line with many cultural analyses, this account does not purport to be a behavioural, measurable truth. As Van Maanen has noted "A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker" (1988:3). However, the interview data that forms this part of the research does not "simply illuminate" (Fine, 2003: 45) the theories. Rather, the data built the case upon which the following results will be examined.

### Findings

The most notable finding of this research was the universally high regard directed towards each other from both police officers and ambulance staff. Without exception, all of those interviewed commented on the positive working relationships between the staff on the ground across both organisations. It is a relationship that is built upon trust, professional respect, good rapport and a mutual understanding of the roles that each perform. Ambulance staff were described by police officers as being "*in tune*" (R1) with police, "*good as gold*" (B3), "*like-minded people*" (B4) and "*it sounds corny . . . they're great*" (E4). Ambulance staff described a relationship that was "*incredibly collaborative*" (P3), had a "*natural affinity*" (P19), "*a huge amount of reciprocal respect*" (P3) and was "*friendly and fun*" (P20).

Of central importance to this paper is an analysis of what contributes to this harmonious relationship, to this bond which is felt by (what might appear from the outside to be) two fairly distinct and diverse organisations. The results of this research appear to demonstrate that police officers and ambulance staff share a number of key working attributes or *core cultural characteristics* which provide opportunities for a strong, cohesive and enhanced working relationship. This is not universal to the emergency services as a whole, as shall be seen later, but a unique relationship between police officers and ambulance staff. The following presentation of the

results of this research will broadly and fairly roughly categorise these attributes into *explicit cultural characteristics* and *tacit cultural characteristics*. The former are evident through the spoken word of the respondents, either during the research interview itself or reported upon during the research interview as a feature of their daily practice. The latter, harder to define *tacit cultural characteristics*, are the shared, implicit, yet unspoken characteristics that also define this working relationship.

#### Explicit cultural characteristics

According to the vast majority of the participants in this research, communication lay at the heart of their positive working relationship. Not only is this of considerable importance to their individual jobs (Westera, Kebbell, Milne and Green, 2014), it also appears to be a key feature of their combined working relationship. Given that this attribute is valued so highly in their individual professions, it should then perhaps come as no surprise that it is so fundamental to their shared working relationship:

*“the communication is always good” (P11)*

*“the job that we have is about 95% communication and 5% application, skills ... I think that’s the very strong commonality, it’s about communication. If you’re communicative and you’re in a communication role then you’re going to have that thing in common, which kind of then doesn’t fit with the fire ... service which is 5% communication and 95% how well do I look in black” (P3)*

*“there’s sometimes a breakdown in communications with the two relevant control rooms but once on the ground, there doesn’t appear to be any breakdown in communication at all” (B6)*

As is highlighted in one of the quotes above, humour plays a significant role within both organisations and is widely regarded to be associated with the ‘dark humour’ or ‘black humour’ of cynicism, scepticism, sarcasm and irony, particularly relating to events or situations of a more serious nature (Charman, 2013). This appears to be in direct contrast to the ‘hero-status’ afforded to the emergency services, most especially the ambulance service. However, some respondents were keen to stress that both police officers and ambulance staff are “like actors” (P17) with different personas for the myriad of different incidents that they encounter on a daily basis.

Whilst some participants spoke of the 'joking relationship' being directed at each other, the object of much of the shared humour between ambulance staff and police officers emerged from two distinct groups. First, it came from the members of the public that the two services were attending to, often difficult members of the public whose behaviour may well be strongly influenced by the use of alcohol and drugs. Second, it came from the remaining emergency service: fire officers. This bond was created, maintained and enhanced through the use of humorous quips, tales and jokes about their fire officer colleagues.

The areas of dissatisfaction that provide the ammunition for the humour directed against fire officers revolve around two areas, their perceived work ethic and poor work practices (Charman,

2013). The ability to sleep whilst on duty, their lack of awareness of evidential issues and an over-enthusiasm for unnecessary action were all highlighted. Police officers were not alone in humorously expressing their perception that fire officers "stamp their big size nines all over everything" (P18), "cut stuff up then spray water on it" (B3), "sweep up all the evidence" (B1) yet "they've gone before you've had a chance to thank them" (E4). Frequent mention was made of the enthusiasm of fire officers to cut car roofs off, cut battery wires and crow bar car bonnets open despite it being perceived to be unnecessary:

*"I was on standby once and we used to share a fire station ... and we had the TV on and [laughs] a crew commander came out and knocked into us and said "we're all trying to sleep down the corridor", "oh, sorry about that", it's that sort of thing you know" (P19)*

*"Us and the police kind of, you know, 'wipe the sleep out of your eyes boys' ... it makes the day go by, again it's sort of humour to lighten the mood a lot of the time" (P21)*

*"We always say to them we've come in to check you're awake [laughter]" (E2)*

*"a lot of their duties are sleeping duties" (T2)*

Despite its occasional causticity, the word that was used most regularly to describe this humorous interaction between ambulance staff and police officers about their fire colleagues was "banter" and it was used as evidence of their good and positive working relationship.

Linking with the issue of humour as a potentially enhancing bond between the two organisations, is the related concept of 'storytelling'. The study of storytelling within occupational cultures has a long history and has been identified as an important feature individually within both police culture and ambulance culture (Shearing and Ericson, 1981; Tangherlini, 2000; van Hulst, 2013). Storytelling functions in a number of inter-related ways. At a basic level it provides information, performs a social function and allows members to 'let off steam' but in a more complex way, it has the potential to shape and reinforce the values and beliefs of its members. Results from this research suggest that police officers and ambulance staff are not only using the cultural art of storytelling within their own professions but are also sharing that feature with each other's professions. Like humour, storytelling has the potential to be risqué, and therefore carries with it potential risks. To 'share' that cultural attribute with another profession then exhibits fairly high levels of trust. The following quotes from a member of ambulance staff followed by a police officer provide some flavour to this widely held practice of sharing humour, banter and storytelling:

*"if you're saying something in front of your ambulance crew you could easily say the same thing in front of police and they wouldn't get, nobody would get the slightest bit concerned over it ... everybody would join in" (P18)*

*"I can't imagine a time where I've ever been to a fire station for a cup of tea or a bit of downtime. You go to an ambulance crew, 'come in', make a cup of tea, you sit and chat and share stories. I think it's because ... there's that shared experience that you have with them,*

*your understanding of people you deal with and how the workings of the public are similar so you tend to get on” (B2)*

#### Tacit cultural characteristics

Respondents often found the description and analysis of the positive working relationship that they felt towards each other’s service, difficult to verbalise. On numerous occasions comments such as *“it muddles along but it does work” (P2), “it seems to work well” (P15), “I’ve not really thought about it before ... but [ambulance staff] are I suppose the same as police officers” (P19), “it just works well” (P20), “we just slot into our roles” (E1), “it just slots into place” (E2), “there’s an understanding” (E3) and “all seems to work quite well” (R1) were used and are just some examples. These tacit and implicit features of their relationship which shape the combined cultural characteristics of the two organisations should, although often poorly verbalised, nonetheless be carefully scrutinised.*

The over-riding sense from the respondents in this research is that they felt an affinity with each other’s professions. It should be noted that the police officers and the ambulance staff worked in different areas of England and would therefore not have experience of working directly with research respondents from the other profession. This affinity, or rapport as some respondents described it, came from a mutual and tacit understanding of the nature of the working environment that each group were faced with. The quotes below are examples of what was almost universally acknowledged by the respondents:

*“we have a lot of sympathy for each other’s role and they understand what we have to do and we understand what they have to do” (P20)*

*“We seem to be very like-minded people and there seems to be that awareness of whose role is what ... if you work closely with people ... you get a better understanding of what they do and they get a better understanding of what we do” (B4)*

As has been argued elsewhere, police officers and ambulance staff belong to a number of interconnected and overlapping ‘communities of practice’ (Charman, 2014) and therefore expose themselves to the combined experiences of this mutual engagement. It was argued by respondents that the *empathy* required by them to fulfil the requirements of their daily job could therefore extend itself to a better understanding and appreciation of the work that the other service is engaged with. In addition, the mutual understanding that each profession had about the other, extended to a mutual understanding of the ‘customers’ that were part of that service delivery. This longer quote from a member of ambulance staff explains this:

*“there is definitely a commonality in the way that people deal with their jobs, although their jobs are predominantly different in their remit and reference, and yet what comes through I suppose is people’s empathy for each other. You know, I’ve seen police officers saying to me, “Come on, you just can’t carry on like that,” and you would think that they just need to go, “Right, well, I’m going to arrest,” you sort of thing, but they don’t, can almost sometimes be a last resort. They’ll try to negotiate with somebody and that’s the humanity isn’t it. And as much as we might harden to the experience, you don’t...perhaps you don’t ever consider*

*doing that job without having some level of humanity, I'm sure there are exceptions, no doubt about that, but generally we want to be doing something that we feel is worthwhile that perhaps on occasion really helps other people and I think that's true of the police and we're in more of a caring profession perhaps just because of its nature, but I think that's true of them as well. You know, they care about victims of crime, as much as they might have somebody who they think has done something criminal, but they look at them and go, "Well I can see perhaps what's caused you to be like that, I don't like it, I don't think you've made the right decisions but I can perhaps see why," ... and, you know, we'll often share that sort of empathy with each other and what we do." (P19)*

This is a good example of the 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which takes place outside of the classroom and the training school but emerges through the realities of dealing with the job. As one of the respondents said:

*"For somebody who's new to policing, ambulance and that, they'll get to the scene and they are a bit headless chicken. But it comes with experience that we know what we need to do and vice versa for the other two services as well" (T3).*

Culture here can be seen as a tool of rule adaptation.

This empathy and mutual understanding was not however purely concerned with admiration. There was also a much more pragmatic reasoning behind this appreciation of each other's role. Many respondents spoke of the relief at the presence of the other service, in order that their skills could be used to either diffuse a potentially difficult and violent confrontation, or to attend to a medical incident that required far more than a police officer's first aid skills:

*"we obviously understand that they can do a lot more than we can in the law side of things and we can do a lot more than they can in the medical side of things" (P12)*

*"it is more of a sense of relief when they turn up ... so for me certainly, there is nothing better than seeing an ambulance when you are at the scene of a nasty incident. I think I can talk for all police officers" (B8)*

*"I think there's this mutual understanding and I think there's this mutual relief. I think there are situations where if it comes up and it says 'police officers at scene' I just feel so much happier about going to a job. I know they're only human beings like I am, but I just know that they're going to look after me, they're not going to let anything happen to me" (P7)*

*"we have deference to each other ... a huge amount of reciprocal respect ... when [the fire service] went on dispute we actually found that we coped quite well without them ... we didn't notice that much difference" (P3)*

All of these examples of mutual understanding, mutual appreciation, affinity, rapport and even deference reflect an underlying cultural bond between the two services which is characterised by a

harmonious and seemingly generally effective working relationship. This was not reflected across all of the emergency services.

There has been much academic debate about whether the police service in particular attracts people of a certain personality type (associated with psychological theories of personality - (Reiner, 1982)) or whether indeed the process of police socialisation creates officers of a certain disposition (associated more with sociological theories of socialisation and Skolnick's "working personality" (Skolnick, 1966)). Whichever stance is taken, the respondents within this research were very much of the view that the police service and the ambulance service contained within them persons with a similar outlook towards their job and a similar approach towards their work which included what were perceived to be the fairly unique characteristics of common sense, negotiation, and teamwork:

*"the style is incredibly collaborative ... it works well because of common sense mostly" (P3)*

*"I think it's communication and common sense" (P6)*

*"the same characters, the same personalities" (P8)*

*"I think you've got a general personality for people that are in the emergency services ... They're quite laughy and jokey, they've their own sense of humour which we can relate to as well and so they're very different from normal public people" (P17)*

*"those negotiation skills are definitely similar ... we're all very good at negotiating" (P19)*

*"I think we have a very, very good working relationship. We seem to be very like-minded types of people and there seems to be that awareness of whose role is what" (B4)*

*"at a job everyone works together, we've never had a problem. A clash of personality, as such, that's never happened, it's always one team as soon as you're there and everyone gets on with their particular role" (G2)*

The argument that the two services contained employees of a similar nature was reinforced by those in both professions in relation to the new educational requirements of both organisations. Both the police service and more strikingly the ambulance service are increasingly looking to recruit graduates to its workforce, resulting in what is referred to by many as a 'new breed' in both services. Indeed, some respondents referred to there being more similarities across the professions with more recently recruited members of staff than there were between long service and recently recruited workers within the same profession.

### Cultural Differences

It is certainly not the case however that police officers and ambulance staff have converged into one indistinguishable emergency service provider, differentiated only by their uniform. Although the vast majority of interviewee comments about the cultural characteristics of police officers and ambulance staff did refer to attributes which were shared and mutually understood, some

respondents also noted the different characteristics of the two organisations which continued to delineate them from each other. The first of these related to the manner in which the public were dealt with and the tone which was used to address them. Whilst the majority of ambulance staff praised police officers for their calm and patient approach to the public, particularly the more difficult and challenging members of the public, they did also comment that the tone used to speak with these people could be seen as more direct and abrupt than that used by ambulance staff. These comments were mostly made in an appreciative manner and for some, a longing for the less “fluffy” (P2) manner used by their own colleagues:

*“we’re much more, you know, much more fluffy because you have to be nice to everybody and I’m not saying the police aren’t nice but they can be much more assertive than we can... And in some ways the public expect the police to be really assertive and, you know, kind of, very take no nonsense, kind of thing whereas they expect paramedics to be really nice and fluffy and, okay there, there” (P2)*

*“I think we’re just too soft with them” (P16)*

*“the police seem to be a lot harsher with people than I used to think was necessary but I sort of over the time realised that it’s because, particularly at things like domestic violence, or something like that, if the police are all friendly friendly with everybody and then they suddenly have to nick them, then it changes their dynamics completely, whereas as far as we’re concerned we’re just friends with everyone ... whereas the police obviously have a role to do so they are much more efficient and not military about it but just tougher basically. They are just tougher about the whole thing but then that’s kind of their role I would think” (P5)*

The different tone used by police officers which was raised by some ambulance staff respondents appeared to them to relate to the different legal positions that they found themselves in. Some ambulance staff commented that they had to approach the public in a different way due to the different legal powers available to them:

*“the police have powers that they can put in place, if someone doesn’t want to come with them, they can arrest them. They’ve got a whole toolbox of powers and tools that they can employ, when they need to, to get things to go their way whereas the ambulance service doesn’t have that. We can’t do any of that. So really I think our negotiation skills have got to be a little bit better, because usually we get what we want .....You’ll have the same characters, you’ll have the same similar personalities, but the police officer will have, as I say, that toolbox to utilise whereas we can’t. So a police officer might not have to be so understanding and careful about what they say, because they know they’ll get their way in the end anyway”. (P8)*

However, this was also seen to have its advantages in an ability to “turn little blind eyes on things of the law” (P16):

*"I've seen a policeman confiscate five bottles of cider from a guy because he was drunk in a public place. He was drunk on his way home from the shop that he just bought the five bottles of cider from. And despatch, we took him home in the end, but he went home without his cider. And that's probably on his benefit payday, he's managed to buy his cider, and, of course, they've taken it away from him. But we would never do that. We would take him and his cider home" (P16).*

The divergent tone which some ambulance staff and police officers referred to in dealing with members of the public appears to be reinforced by the second and third difference highlighted by respondents which were the public perception of the different professions and the contrasting uniforms worn by them. Police officers in the UK wear a black uniform, ambulance staff wear green. In a slightly mocking but nonetheless benevolent manner, police officers referred to the 'hero status' accorded to the ambulance service and used this as contrast to the often less than welcoming attitude greeting the arrival of the police:

*"They're heroes, 'cause they save people" (G4)*

*"they do seem to call them a lot more 'mate' and the friendly side of it" (R2)*

*"I think the public will always view paramedics and firemen as helpers and savers and people who do really good work and they're constantly you know, really good people whereas police because we deal with enforcement and people who break the law, we're all like the bogey men" (B2)*

*"I think they're being seen more in the, "we're here to help you" bracket than perhaps the police are, who are sometimes seen as the 'baddies'" (G1)*

This difference in uniform worn by the two emergency services is a more physical manifestation of difference yet one which also represents some more symbolic differences between them in terms of their role, their perception from the public and fundamentally, their 'mission':

*"police are despised and abused by a large part of their public but we are almost universally liked and helped" (P20)*

*"Generally the public support for paramedics and this again, with many, many years of history, is they are loved by the public generally. Because what we're there to do, we're there to save them, aren't we?" (P4)*

*"I think it's something as simple as we don't wear a hat, maybe something like that, we're in green...not wearing a hat, there's no real authority there, whereas the policeman, he's got a hat on, dressed all in dark, it's maybe a little bit intimidating, I don't know, but certainly people resist that authority that we don't really have". (P8)*

*"I would say broadly we get a much better response. I mean you will get comments like, "Well I'll talk to you, but I don't want them here," you know, in reference to the police. And*

*generally the police are quite ... you know, they sort of roll their eyes and they understand, they know that they are ... their uniform represents something different and they will just stand back and facilitate us looking at somebody” (P19)*

*“I think we’re quite highly valued by the general public and also we tend to get away with more in that we can walk into a scene where if the Police walk into a scene immediately someone’s on the defensive, if we walk in we wear green, we’re not a threat to anyone, in fact we’re there to help” (P1)*

## Discussion

This research, which was conducted with a sample of police officers and ambulance staff in the south of England, has suggested that the two professions have a strong and positive working relationship which is characterised by trust, empathy and respect. In addition to this, there are strong indications that police officers and ambulance staff display many similarities in their working styles and share many professional attributes. They have crossed the cultural boundaries that mark out many organisational cultures and have succeeded in absorbing and subsequently participating in each other’s cultures in the pursuit of shared goals. This notion of boundaries has an established literature base which focuses not only on the organisational difficulties that they can cause via social exclusion and inter-group conflict (Petronio et al. 1998) but also on its potential for innovation, via ‘boundary-crossing’ (Kerosou and Engestrom 2003, Tsui and Law 2007). Boundary-crossing as a concept provides the potential to understand the working relationships across occupational divides. Organisational culture often refers to characteristics which are learned and shared. The potential to learn and share both within and across occupational divides also needs to be considered.

This ‘boundary crossing’ can be witnessed in the shared characteristics of black humour, storytelling, empathy, cynicism, common sense, exclusion and communication which operate at both an explicit and tacit level. These characteristics are clearly not exclusive to police officers and ambulance staff but they are shared within the context of other collective aspects of their work which include being public servants and being members of blue-light professions. Consequently, the shared *cultural characteristics* in combination with the shared *organisational characteristics* of their work contributes to a fairly unique working relationship. This willingness to work together and an appreciation of its benefits would appear to contradict the long held assumptions about the immutability, rigidity and closed attitudes of police officers within the police culture literature (Loftus, 2009). It would appear instead to add weight to more recent research highlighting the much more positive attitude of the police towards partnership working (O’Neill and McCarthey, 2014).

This reciprocity of features emerges from the nature of the work that both professions are involved with and the nature of the public that they are dealing with. They have a “camaraderie of exposure” (P19) to all aspects of social life and in keeping with much of the work of the emergency services, repeat this on a fairly mundane, routine basis. In dealing with, or coping with, this mostly mundane, but occasionally traumatic and dangerous job, these two emergency services have developed a mutual understanding and an outlook which is recognisable and acceptable to many within their professions. Culture here can be seen to be a tool of coping. Bayley (1994) estimated that only 7-

10% of a patrol officer's time is spent dealing with crime. A paramedic from this research argued that

*"the job that we have is about 95% communication and 5% application, skills ... With policing, it's 5% law, you know, and hands on and running and jumping and beating and stuff but, you know, 95% is about engaging"* (P2)

This famous quote from Bayley about police officers is as much true of ambulance staff as well:

*"They hear about the petty, mundane, tedious, hapless, sordid details of individual lives. Patient listening and gentle counseling are undoubtedly what patrol officers do most of the time"* (1994:31-2).

What this has created are two professions with a clear affinity towards one other. Situated learning and the impact of social interaction on learning considers the learning which takes place every day in all walks of life and most especially in the workplace (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Workplace functioning is thus influenced not only by the culture and norms of the organisation, but also crucially by learning from and with others. Culture here can be seen to be a tool of learning. There is therefore the potential for positive influences (and clearly negative influences too) to be transmitted between organisations working in close proximity with each other. In terms of this research, it may be possible to detect this in the areas of communication and empathy.

These shared cultural characteristics are not replicated with the remaining emergency service - the fire service. Although most often described as 'banter', it was clear from these interviews that the fire service were not held in the same regard by police officers and ambulance staff as they are held by the public. In addition, this shared belief in the 'difference' of fire officers to themselves was utilised as a tool through which to bond with each other through humour and storytelling. The humour of exclusion and the humour of superiority are used to good effect to create shared cultural understandings, reinforce group values and strengthen the bonds between the two organisations. Police officers and ambulance staff may well stress these shared cultural characteristics and even exaggerate them in order to enhance an already positive identity (Tajfel, 1982). Although difficult to analyse and evidence, it is likely that these strengthened bonds have the potential for more effective levels of interoperability.

There are clearly vast differences in the training and skills required to be a police officer and to be a member of the ambulance service and there are fundamentally different expectations of the role of these two professions. These differences have also been reinforced by the participants of this research in terms of the differing public perceptions of the two organisations and a different manner with the public. These differences are symbolised in a physical sense with the contrast in their uniforms. However, much of the work that they actually engage with on a daily basis has many commonalities. This research has indicated that these two professions also share a number of cultural characteristics which appear to have provided a strong and cohesive collective bond between them. These cultural characteristics, identified as both explicit and tacit in nature provide the 'glue' which not only binds each organization together but which appears to cement a longer term, tangible link between the police and ambulance services. These shared *cultural characteristics*

operate in tandem with the shared *organisational characteristics* of their work. These cultural characteristics emerge through time, through experience and through shared practices. As stated earlier, very little is known about the cultural characteristics of the ambulance service, even less so on the shared cultural characteristics of these two essential components of the emergency services. This paper has sought to change that and to analyse the potential for enhanced multi-agency working arrangements. When seeking strategies for enhanced interoperability between organisations, due consideration should be given to the advantages and benefits of human interoperability which are sometimes neglected at the expense of hardware solutions.

This paper has therefore highlighted the importance of culture for an enhanced understanding of an organisation and in this case to the combined working practices of two organisations. Culture, most especially within the policing literature, is almost universally condemned but within this paper's analysis can be seen as a more positive instrument which can be utilised as a tool for coping, as a tool for learning and as a tool of rule adaptation.

Hofstede's (2001) earlier cited definition of an 'occupational community' which shares values, norms and perspectives but extends beyond the realms of the workplace appears to be a valid description of these two organisations. What this potentially achieves is a subtle, tacit, yet undeniably harmonious relationship between two essential components of our emergency service provision in what is a difficult and challenging aspect of public service work.

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Appendix 1 Role of interviewee and interview length

CODE	ROLE	GENDER	INTERVIEW LENGTH		CODE	ROLE	GENDER	INTERVIEW LENGTH
E1	Inspector	F	30		P1	Paramedic	M	57
E2	Constable	M	25		P2	Paramedic	F	42
E3	Constable	M	15		P3	Paramedic	M	38
E4	Sergeant	M	34		P4	Paramedic	M	42
B1	Sergeant	M	42		P5	Paramedic	M	32
B2	Constable	M	29		P6	Paramedic	F	18
B3	Constable	M	34		P7	Paramedic	M	48
B4	Sergeant	M	31		P8	Ambulance Technician	M	36
B5	Constable	M	15		P9	Paramedic	M	41
B6	Constable	M	24		P10	Paramedic	M	29
B7	Constable	M	11		P11	Ambulance Technician	M	14
B8	Constable	F	14		P12	Ambulance Technician	F	22
T1	Sergeant	M	31		P13	Ambulance Technician	F	19
T2	Constable	M	23		P14	Ambulance Technician	M	20
T3	Constable	F	39		P15	Ambulance Technician	M	19
T4	Constable	M	14		P16	Ambulance Technician	F	32
R1	Sergeant	M	30		P17	Ambulance Technician	M	29
R2	Constable	F	8		P18	Ambulance Technician	F	30
R3	Constable	M	7		P19	Ambulance Technician	M	58
G1	Inspector	F	31		P20	Paramedic	M	40
G2	Sergeant	M	17		P21	Paramedic	F	27
G3	Sergeant	M	24		P22	Paramedic	M	31
G4	Sergeant	F	26					