

Navigating underrepresented identities in public safety occupations

Norms and expectations

Norms and expectations within public safety occupations like policing, firefighting, and correctional services are largely rooted in Western paramilitary traditions that idealize masculinity, and associated traits such as toughness, physical dominance, stoicism, and fearlessness. These expectations create a **hypermasculine and heteronormative** 'default' by which all who do the job are measured. In this context, women and other underrepresented individuals are often seen as **'other'** and must very carefully manage the expression of their identities in order to fit in.

A female police officer, for instance, may feel pressured to set aside overt aspects of femininity in order to be 'taken seriously' in a male-dominated policing environment.

Impacts

While women, BIPOC, and 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals are joining public safety occupations like policing in greater numbers than in previous decades, fundamental expectations and organizational cultures around hierarchy, heteronormativity, and hypermasculinity remain largely unchanged within these organizations.

Having a non-normative identity within hypermasculine and heteronormative organizations can have a variety of negative consequences to one's mental health and wellbeing and professional standing. In policing, for instance, this might take the form of gendered or sexual harassment, being assigned to duties based on one's gender, and a pressure to continually 'prove oneself'. Other reported consequences include job dissatisfaction, distrust in one's organization and colleagues, and a lack of opportunities for promotion.

Even those who meet traditional hypermasculine norms can be limited, or negatively impacted by them. Public safety personnel (PSP) are routinely exposed to potentially psychologically traumatic events as a consequence of their job duties. **When hypermasculine norms and standards encourage withholding one's emotions, for instance, vulnerability becomes seen as 'weakness', and can act as a deterrent to seeking support.**

Diversity as strength

The world is increasingly complex, as are the communities served by public safety personnel. Successfully delivering public safety services will require understanding of these diverse and fluid social environments. Incorporating a diversity of perspectives, ways of being, and ways of problem-solving can make our public safety organizations stronger, more responsive, and more adaptable.

References

Angehrn, A., Fletcher, A.J., and Carleton, R.N. (2021) "Suck It Up, Buttercup": Understanding and Overcoming Gender Disparities in Policing. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18(14), 7627. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18147627>

Burdett, F., Gouliquer, L. and Poulin, C. (2018) Culture of Corrections: The Experiences of Women Correctional Officers. *Feminist Criminology* 13(3), 329-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085118767974>

CIPSRT (2024, December 5) Breaking the code: Navigating gender, sexuality, and ethnocultural identities in public safety occupations. Available at: <https://youtu.be/f7yOQ7fkwl>

Couto, Joe L. (2018) Gay. Female. Cop.: The Intersectionality of Gender and Sexual Orientation in Police Culture. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3200082>

Gouliquer, L., Poulin, C. and McWilliams, J. (2020) Othering of Full-Time and Volunteer Women Firefighters in the Canadian Fire Services. *Qualitative Sociology Review* 16(3), 48-69. <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.16.3.0>

Langan, D., Sanders, C.B. and Gouweloos, J. (2018) Policing Women's Bodies: Pregnancy, Embodiment, and Gender Relations in Canadian Police Work. *Feminist Criminology* 14(4), 466-487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085118763083>

CIPSRT gratefully acknowledges the contributions of: Dr. Andréanne Angehrn, Dr. José Luis Couto, Dr. Lynne Gouliquer, Dr. Carmen Poulin, and Dr. Leslie-Anne Keown. Infographic by Kara Vincent.

Watch the discussion

