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Honouring the code? Exploring the ambiguities and antagonisms of ethical identities

Summary

This is a paper concerned with empirically exploring how employees make sense of their ethical and professional identities within a shifting order of discursive norms. We posit the code of ethics (CoE) as a valuable object of study that holds the potential to illuminate the relationship between employee identity, the ethical, the political and the organizational. We combine contemporary accounts of identity with a notion of an order-of-life in order to explore the ethical tensions and possibilities that occur when specific people are asked to travel between ethical worlds. We explore the relationship between CoEs and identity through an examination of how police officers and members of staff in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) construct the meaning of the organization's CoE against their own sense of ethical self, as well as against the background of political and organizational change and a history of contested professional and organizational legitimacy.

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Introduction

This is a paper concerned with empirically exploring how employees make sense of their ethical and professional identities within a shifting order of discursive norms. We posit the code of ethics (CoE) as a valuable object of study that holds the potential to illuminate the relationship between employee identity, the ethical, the political and the organizational. Adopting a poststructuralist interpretation of identity (Clarke et al, 2009; Ford et al, 2008), we position CoEs as occupying an ambiguous and contested status between organizational and political control, professional and social identity.

Specifically, we combine contemporary, poststructuralist accounts of identity with du Gay's (2000 and 2008) reading of the Weberian notion of an order-of-life (*Lebensführung*) in order to explore the ethical tensions and possibilities that occur when specific people are asked to travel between ethical worlds. We therefore argue for a deeper understanding of the role of CoEs within broader ethical orders. These are productive systems that represent and generate a particular 'compartment', directives for conduct, which in turn indicates ways of knowing, constructing and enrolling the ethical professional within a particular mode and conduct of ethical life.

Our paper offers two contributions to knowledge. The first lies in deepening knowledge of how the ethical identities of employees can be interpreted as intimately connected in an unfolding relationship with the political and organizational, with CoEs approached as important sites upon which employees make sense of their ethical and professional selves. In this regard we respond to the point made by Eubanks et al (2012: 1) that "there is a need for fine grained and nuanced studies of how ethical identities, individual and collective, are constructed within relations, and are effects of, power." In particular, we are interested in exploring the notion that an ethical identity, for the organization as much as the person, can be interpreted as comprised of a number of often contradictory discourses and subject positions, "stable without being coherent" (Clarke et al, 2009: 341).

Our second contribution lies in offering a conceptual means through which researchers may explore the interplay of context and person in the process of constructing an ethical identity. In doing so, we draw on du Gay's (2000 and 2008) interpretation of the Weberian order-of-life (*Lebensführung*), as part of an ethics of office. Adopting the notion of a *Lebensführung* offers a conceptually satisfactory means of incorporating the ethical and political alongside the personal and organizational in a reading of identity, one that avoids 'myopic' thinking (Coupland and Brown, 2012: 2) and deconstructs conceptual binaries (Knights, 2015). The consumption and construction of CoEs, in this sense, can be understood and interpreted, we argue, as a discursive interplay and interdependence of person and prescribed conduct of life (du Gay, 2000 and 2008), offering a rich reading of identity regulation and identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Our key point here is that one should think of the *Lebensführung* and the person as mutually constituted and known, as co-productive of both the ethical self and the ethical order.

We explore the relationship between CoEs and identity through the analysis of a collection of interviews with serving officers of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Policing in the UK is increasingly becoming a hotbed of ethical and political discourse, with high-profile scandals sitting alongside attempts from political and police leaders to offer visible reform packages to the public. Such efforts include the re-investigation of historical cases, the visible investigation and prosecution of sex offenders, a deliberate attempt to recruit a more diverse workforce and the introduction of a code of ethics for England and Wales in 2014. PSNI,

however, introduced a CoE in 2002 under even more politicized and extreme conditions, as part of the peace process. We examine how police officers and members of staff in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) construct the meaning of the organization's CoE against their own sense of ethical self, as well as against the background of political and organizational change and a history of contested professional and organizational legitimacy.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Existing research on codes of ethics

There is extensive existing research on CoEs within organizations, with our database search alone uncovering 916 papers. Two broad types of studies can be identified, which we describe as the practical and the critical. Underlying the practical studies seems to be a search for generalizable answers concerning what makes an effective code, in terms of linking codes to behaviour outcomes and positive perceptions of codes (e.g. Ruiz et al, 2015; Schwartz, 2001).

More critical accounts of codes tend to foreground the language of codes and explore how the discourses drawn upon in codes create power inequalities between organizational members (e.g. Winkler, 2011). Pullen and Rhodes (2014) argue that codes can generate "institutionalized expectations" that serve to legitimate disembodied, overly rational and masculine power structures; they prioritise "a priori judgment over contextualised experience" and the "mind over body", thus overlooking embodied relational dimensions of ethics in practice. Relatedly, and echoing Bauman's (1993) postmodern critique of rule-based ethics and Townley's (1994) critique of HRM techniques and technologies, Willmott (2011) argues that codes of ethics can have the effect of removing discretion and responsibility from the control of employees. Codes, he argues, can become co-opted as part of a broader fabric of organizational surveillance and control.

We aim to introduce a more context-specific reading of codes as interpreted and known through the identity constructions of employees. In this sense, we attempt to further and deepen existing research by Helin and Sandström (2008) who demonstrate empirically how codes co-exist with employee identity, particularly national identity. They state that "the receivers [in the Swedish subsidiary] of the code [imposed by an American parent] did not primarily react to what was actually written in the code, but to how it was written and to how it was implemented. The content, as most respondents claimed, was 'common sense' and not necessary to write down and sign." (p.289). Such a reading suggests that what surrounds a code, its social-political-organizational ambience, as well as the existing identifications of those subjected to a CoE, are as significant as the actual, often banal, contents of a code. Combining du Gay's reading of the *Lebensführung* with a poststructuralist account of identity, we argue, offers a subtle and substantial means of interpreting both codes of ethics and the ethical identities of people at work.

The value of a poststructuralist identity approach to studying codes of ethics

In keeping with our poststructuralist approach, codes are analysed as known and experienced within a particular socio-political context, as a disciplinary technology that can yet be (re)enacted and resisted in a variety of ways (Townley, 1994). We interpret a code of ethics, therefore, as a technology related to the regulation of employee identity (Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), of conveying and disciplining a desired

‘comportment’ via a range of ancillary discourses and practices (Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; du Gay, 2000 and 2008; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014; Townley, 1994). Such disciplinary mechanisms might come cloaked in ‘innocent’ (Vince and Mazon, 2014), or even ‘heroic’ (Ford et al, 2008) language but nevertheless equate to an imposition of norms. In the case of a CoE, such an imposition may come from democratically elected politicians, in the case of our study, or under other circumstances from a profit motive, linked to reputational damage (Helin and Sandström, 2008).

Du Gay’s case (2000 and 2008) is that distinctive ethical orders are established via norms of practice and processes of collective learning, which each serve a particular purpose in public life. Bureaucracy establishes impersonal and accountable rules and procedures; norms of political leadership are required to campaign for certain under-represented people and causes; enterprise is important for generating innovation. Such orders generate ethical expectations of the person inhabiting them via a range of practices, training and examination procedures. Such different realms or orders-of-life may antagonistically overlap, generating confusion, imprecision and conflict as to what kind of person one should be in a given area of life.

A poststructuralist account of identity seeks to explore such spaces of organizational dislocation (Howarth, 2013), allowing for a more agentic reading of the relationship between ethical regimes and codes of ethics and organizational subjects. Following Harding et al (2014), we approach people within organisations as subjected to discursive norms but also as resisting subjects, people who re-interpret ethical discourses and draw on alternative discourses in order to assemble an identity as an ethical professional (Fleming and Spicer, 2010). As such, we view subjects as capable of performing “assertion[s] of agency framed within relations of power” (Brown and Coupland, 2015: 1315-1336). Such a reading, however, also implies that both organizations and the people who work within them are not necessarily consistent or ‘coherent’ entities (Clarke et al, 2009: 341). They may be interpreted as far more “momentary achievement[s]” (Ybema et al, 2009: 301). The ethical organisational subject may occupy a more antagonistic and ambiguous relationship to both a CoE and its broader order-of-life.

Exploring the various meanings of the signifier ‘code’ can itself signal this ambiguous status. The Oxford English Dictionary defines codes in a formal sense as “a system or collection of rules or regulations on any subject. Codes are also bound with a more tacit sense of “honour”, a means of ordering a group through a “set of rules and customs which regulate the conduct of some particular class of person according to a conventional standard of honour”: they are thus related to and embedded within particular social and political contexts. Finally, codes are something one cracks, or fails to crack, a means of encrypting privileged information of great importance to a certain group or organization: codes protect important secrets, possession of which suggest a certain privileged ownership or knowledge. A code interpreted as a discursive resource for identity regulation and identity work amidst other resources, in other words, can be related to power, to the political and to the socio-cultural: its meaning is antagonistic and ambiguous.

Background: contested police legitimacy and police reform

The legitimacy of the police in Northern Ireland has been contested for a long time, calling into question all three forms of legitimacy identified by Suchman (1995): pragmatic, moral and cognitive. As Mulcahy (2013) argues, a lack of consensus over constitutional and

governmental arrangements in deeply divided societies poses a legitimacy problem for all state agencies but particularly for the police, who are charged with maintaining state authority and public order. The police and police reform thus become sites for the discursive power struggle over the political future of a society.

The legitimacy of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force of Northern Ireland from 1922, was questioned particularly by Nationalist and Republican communities. Republican communities considered the authority of the British state in Northern Ireland as illegitimate as such, and this lack of cognitive legitimacy extended to the RUC as the law and public order enforcement organ of the British state. The moral legitimacy of the RUC was also questioned, particularly in terms of allegations of unrepresentative composition of the force and partisan practices. Pragmatically, some Nationalist and Republican areas became virtual no-go areas for the RUC, being effectively policed by paramilitary organizations (particularly the Provisional IRA) rather than the police. In 1999 the Independent Commission on Policing, established as part of the Belfast (or Good Friday) agreement, published a report setting out recommendations for police reform in Northern Ireland (the so-called Patten report). This represented an attempt to disentangle policing from questions of the legitimacy of the state and was met with a modicum of success. The legitimacy of the PSNI (the successor organization to the RUC) appears less ferociously contested than that of the RUC, although it remains in question in some quarters (Mulcahy, 2013).

Calls for reform of the police in Northern Ireland encompassed three strands: cultural reform, including recruitment and religious composition, symbols, name and badge; organizational reform, including service size; and questions of governance, including mechanisms of accountability (Moran, 2008). As part of governance reforms, PSNI was made accountable to the Policing Board, newly established in 2001 and composed of elected members and independent members appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The PSNI CoE, introduced in 2003, remains intimately connected to broader political reforms. It “sets down standards and behaviours expected from police officers and provides guidance on how they should conduct themselves in this honourable profession”, while acknowledging that “police officers have to make [difficult judgments] on a daily basis” (Rea, 2008).

Methodology

We approached our methodology with the aim of developing a picture of how the ‘ethical police officer’ was constructed within PSNI. We approached this task through recording and interpreting the subjective ethical identifications of our participants, as well as their perceptions of organizational expectations. Bearing this in mind, we were interested in exploring why serving police officers chose their particular careers over other alternatives and what they saw as the most important ethical imperatives of policing, what made a good, ethical officer, in other words. We were also interested in capturing officers’ perceptions of organizational ethics and their views on how these were communicated to employees. We hoped that such an approach would establish a glimpse, no matter how transient and contested, of what it means to be an ethical police officer.

Data was collected through 37 individual, semi-structured interviews with police officers and members of staff of PSNI. The interviews were conducted at a single, heavily-fortified police premises in Belfast, in March 2015. A purposive sampling strategy was followed, with an attempt to maximise variety in terms of age, length of service, hierarchical position, their role in the organization, gender, and community membership. Interviews lasted between 45 and

60 minutes and were audio recorded (with two exceptions) and transcribed. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic it is even more necessary than normal to protect the anonymity of individual participants. We therefore consider it inappropriate to provide detailed descriptions of participants' demographics and roles here and will limit ourselves to very broad descriptors in attributing any quotes to particular participants in the findings section.

We were guided in our data analysis by the discourse analytic approach of Knights and Clarke (2014). Each author subjected the transcripts to multiple readings, meeting in between each reading to discuss, debate and reflect upon what we viewed as the emerging themes. We used NVivo to assist us in coding the data. Following the principles of template analysis (King, 2004), we drew our higher order codes from the interview schedule, with codes such as 'political environment', 'culture of rules and complaints', 'stories of personal danger', 'leadership of the organization', and 'code of ethics' adopted. Second-order codes focused in particular on deepening the codes of ethics code, exploring how it interconnected and overlapped with other codes generated. As a final step of analysis, we employed a close textual reading, analysing how participants assembled their identities discursively. This stage of analysis necessitated exploring how the textual adoption of pronouns, nouns, verbs and adjectives interleaved with organizational and social, 'small-d discourses' and larger socio-political, big-D discourses (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007).

Summary of findings

Situating the person and the code of ethics within their order-of-life

Our meta-finding is that it was impossible to separate employee identities and identifications with the CoE from the broader ethical ethos the organization was seeking to embed.

Particularly stark in our data is the sense that the code was viewed as one element amongst many that signalled to employees that they were now working not only under different organizational conditions but within a changed organization – and even society. Whereas the ethos of the RUC, according to our interviews, might be described in militarized, or even familial terms, with a sense of being comrades in arms in the face of hostile situations, the PSNI seems to carry much more of an ethos of bureau, with a greater emphasis on rule-bound behaviour.

Relating to the RUC, interviewees told stories of being informally inducted into police practice and proper conduct by more experienced members of the team, most notably the so-called 'senior man', the most experienced officer in a station, suggesting a relationship like that of a somewhat patriarchal figure introducing younger siblings or children to a desired identity. Recruits were inducted into the ethos of the organisation and accepted ways of doing police work, based on norms of service and solidarity.

Extract 1: The guys I worked with, everyone had [a] good solid background and with a wealth of experience. I remember one of the first experiences I went to was the murder of a fella just outside [...] Police Station, and I hadn't got a clue, and big fella [the most experienced member of the group] just turned around and said 'you just make sure that you stand right behind me and you stand back against the wall'. I'm standing and I asked 'why don't we move down a bit' and he said 'we are in the shadows and they don't even know that we are here' [...]. (Police Constable)

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We were told further stories of mutual support, standing by each one another in crowd control lines, keeping public order during the annual marches by the two communities, as well as watching over each other when entering perilous investigative situations.

Extract 2: The RUC had a certain camaraderie, in many ways life was [...] difficult out there on the street but you could cope with that because you felt you had a certain support from your supervisory and management staff. I don't think folks on the ground feel that any more. (Staff member)

This feeling of support and camaraderie was paired with a sense of pride in the RUC, its history and its symbols, as well as a feeling of nostalgia. The socio-political change after the Belfast agreement, which saw the abolishment of most RUC symbols and a more critical take on its history, was therefore greeted by some with a sense of loss and even betrayal and a feeling that the state of policing in Northern Ireland was deteriorating.

Extract 3: You didn't really get to build that sort of relationship it was more so whenever you went to your station and you were out with your tutor constables and then went to your section that you sort of saw more of your identity, which is well and truly lost from the Police now. (Police Constable)

Extract 4: I mean change is good and it's one of those things that I was brought up with you know change is good if it is done for the right reason and changes weren't done for the right reason changes were there to appease terrorists you know at what point does common sense come into this. (Police Constable)

The introduction of more external scrutiny through the Policing Board and the Police Ombudsman as well as the introduction of the CoE and the emphasis placed on this in induction and training can be read against this background of organizational reform towards a more rule-based and transparent organization modelled more on the notion of the bureau rather than of an ethos of family or command. Hence the code was spoken of in often impersonal terms, as one technology amongst many others that was parcelled within a bureaucratic ethical ethos.

Sense of self and resistance or acceptance of changing discourses

Interviewees seemed caught between identities and changing orders-of-life. Depending on their background and life situation they might use their own sense of self to either resist, accept or embrace changing organizational and societal discourses about the role of the police in Northern Ireland. A participant from the protestant community, which had been very dominant in the RUC, might resist external discourses that characterised the old RUC as biased against Catholics and might use their own self-identity as a moral person to justify that resistance.

Extract 5: Generally speaking the people I worked with, you know, there was strong sense of right and wrong morality. [...] I came from a very religious background [...] and I would have noticed if anyone had been a bigot but I never saw it and it wasn't through turning a blind eye to it, I just never saw it. And it galled me, the fact that these people were saying the RUC are this and the RUC are that. They were the ones causing trouble and myself and colleagues were out there trying to stop trouble and restore the peace as it were. (Police Constable)

In this extract the interviewee also aims to discredit those detractors as troublemakers and thus of lesser moral standing. In doing so he is drawing on one set of organization and/or societal discursive resources – the idea that those criticising the old RUC were mainly troublemakers and/or terrorists – in order to resist a different societal discourse – namely that of the RUC as a biased and bigoted organization that favoured one part of the community over another. It seems to us that he is invoking his moral and professional identity, i.e. his sense of self as moral person and his own experience of the colleagues he worked with, in order to do be able to accept one discourse and reject the other in a way that carries some authority, both to the interviewer and to himself.

Other interviewees linked their sense of self-identity with a more accepting or positive account of the changing ethos of the organization. These were typically – although by no means exclusively – participants with a background that had been unusual or underrepresented in the old RUC: Catholics, women or people from outside Northern Ireland. The next extract, from an interview with a member of staff who was in many ways an outsider not only in Northern Ireland but also within the PSNI, illustrates this quite well.

Extract 6: I'm from an area of the UK where, I won't say you rarely see police, but it's not as common as it was say here during the periods of the troubles. [...] My predecessor was a retired Chief Superintendent and they purposely wanted to civilianise the post [...] in Northern Ireland as an outsider it is a very confusing place and I've been here since 1989 and it is... I still haven't worked out how the place works to be honest, I find it very confusing, very frustrating. [...] It was a very strange environment, as I say, military type discipline and all these, when people say symbols of the British administration, it really was over the top, it was almost like a military establishment, which I found to be very, very strange. [...] everything else, in many cases had to change, it was inevitable that we change in terms of the ethos was something that you used to, I used to find overpowering. (Staff member)

In extract 5 the interviewee is drawing on a sense of self as an insider of the dominant community group in Northern Ireland and in the old RUC and weaves this into his rejection of a critical societal discourse. In contrast, in extract 6 the interviewee draws on a sense of self as an outsider to Northern Ireland and, due to his role, almost an outsider within the PSNI. He uses this outsider identity to point out how the culture and ethos of the RUC was *strange, confusing* and *frustrating* and how Northern Ireland is not like other parts of the UK. The change in culture and ethos that came along with the transition from RUC to PSNI and police reform is welcome, perhaps because it brings his sense of the organization closer to his own sense of self and what he considers to be normal.

A moral sense of self and duty

Before we bring together considerations of self-identity, organizational and political change and the Code of Ethics in the next sub-section, we will first look at interviewees' sense of moral identity as a professional police officer. This was often brought out in comments on why they decided to join the police.

Extract 7: I thought it would be good to help people and good to put people who did wrong behind bars. I saw it as an upright job and blessed of the peacekeepers. [That phrase] is in the Bible but 'blessed of the peacekeepers' is very much a thankless job for the vast majority of the time, [...] a policeman's lot is not a happy one and often you see that coming

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through, because certainly particularly in Northern Ireland you are nobody's friend so I know that was why I wanted to join. (Female Police Constable)

Extract 8: I think anybody who joins the Police joins because they have an interest in policing and they take pride in what they do. You may get one or two people who don't but the majority of the police officers do and I can't say that I have come across any problems and they will always put the public first. [...] Just keeping people safe incorporates a lot of things. Justice for people should it be that somebody has just lost a purse, you know, helping someone find a purse. Just simple things. It goes from saving a life to dealing with lost property. (Detective Constable)

A sense of having joined the police because they saw it as a morally good thing to do, as comes through in both the extracts above, was something portrayed by many of our interviewees. This is probably not uncommon among police officers generally but helps to set their responses to the politically motivated changing culture and ethos of the organization, discussed in the previous sub-section, and to the CoE, discussed in the next sub-section, into the context of a strong sense of moral identity. These police officers saw themselves as moral, in some cases strongly religious, people, who did their work in order to help *good* people and protect them against *bad* people. Given such a sense of moral self, it is unsurprising that external discourses of a biased or corrupt police force that only served one part of the community were resisted. It also helps to explain the representations of the CoE that are discussed below.

Three identifications: indifference, pride and injustice

We identify and unpack three broad types of responses to the CoE, within the shifting order-of-life of the Northern Irish police force. The first and by far the dominant type of response was of general acceptance that a CoE was necessary and probably good to have, that it contained nothing that a responsible, professional police officer or member of staff would not do anyway, but that one would not consult it in day-to-day work or even be particularly familiar with its details. This was a fairly neutral or indifferent identification, one rooted in and performed into being through a strong and stable sense of what it means to hold an identity of an honest and competent police officer, as discussed in the previous section. Imprecise notions, such as 'service' and the 'good, law-abiding people' were evoked in order to embolden the sense that the personal code of a police officer transcended any organizational or political pressures. Such an informal code of identity seemed to support, transcend *and* contradict the perceived ethos of the official CoE.

Extract 9: I don't think that everyone has [the CoE] at the forefront of what they're doing every day. I honestly believe that the majority of people who are police officers are virtually just decent people who do want to help, who will help people when they are in trouble and I think if you are just a decent person the code of ethics applies to you because they are normal things that you do. (Police Constable)

This kind of fairly neutral identification with the code as something that no decent, moral police officer would have a problem with, could become a more affirmative identification, if the code was seen as a means of preventing or weeding out some less than professional behaviour that also occurred.

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Extract 10: I think that the code of ethics is about trying to ensure what I've just explained to you [...] how you speak to [...] to the community, to external agencies, to colleagues in work and everybody you come into contact with, is professional and competent and I pride myself in my work and I hope that I do that each day. And really I think that the code of ethics is something that is there as a disciplinary type mechanism [...] I actually think it is necessary to have because unfortunately not everybody ... [...] it's a good reminder for yourself, we're in a disciplined organisation as well and with being a supervisor it's a useful tool [...] you could start a conversation about an issue that could easily be rectified. (Detective Sergeant)

Here, an affirmation that the CoE stipulated only those things that no professional police officer would have a problem with went hand in hand with an acceptance that wrongdoing or unprofessional behaviour did occasionally occur and perhaps the somewhat different viewpoint of an officer with line management responsibility, echoed by several other such officers.

The language of such responses was awash in notions of 'common sense' and 'normal' ethical and professional standards, implying a deep embeddedness of officers within the norms of what it means to be a police officer. Nevertheless, many of these officers offered passive resistance (Collinson, 2007) in relation to the code, expressing dissatisfaction with an organization they perceived as increasingly rule-bound and impersonal.

Extract 11: But to be honest with you, I have glanced at it and I never need to read it, because in my opinion it sort of states the obvious. And I'm not saying that it's not fit for purpose, but I feel at times it's like a rule book that someone can beat you with if they identify that you are doing something wrong. (Police Constable)

Extract 12: The code of ethics there is nothing there new in it as far as I'm concerned not to be used as a moral lifeline. If you are brought up right and you have decent morals and you know right from wrong if you treat people with common decency and courtesy you don't need them when the Police Service write things down it's for a reason and usually the reason is and I find out first hand it's for because they use it as a beating stick, because they will search through anything in that code of ethics and hit you with it. (Police Constable)

The second and least common identification was a more explicit welcoming of the CoE and the organizational and political changes that it represented, as well as of its use as a management and leadership technology. The CoE was experienced and consumed as offering more consistency with officers' existing, informal codes of ethics. This response was often, although not exclusively, articulated by police officers who identified themselves as Catholic or by those with a certain outsider status in Northern Ireland.

Extract 13: [...] that's a very emotional trigger for me to stand up to be, to hold up the code of ethics. [...] The public in [location] expect highest possible standards so... not the same everywhere else in Northern Ireland, so I think the code of ethics is really important. [...] So to me the code of ethics means different things to different people and my role as an Area Commander, holding people to account and being held to account, how do I

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get the best out of everybody wherever they are in their career path? The code of ethics is one way to do that. (Chief Inspector)

Interwoven with these positive accounts of the CoE were often narratives of ‘joy’ and contentment with the general political and organizational changes that made the PSNI a better place for women and Catholics to work, made it a more open, transparent police service and had removed some of the symbolism of the RUC which could feel oppressive to these previously under-represented groups.

In contrast, the third type of response constructed the code in more oppressive terms, a tool of political control and rigid rules that could hinder thoughtful and flexible policing practice. The code was one symbol amongst others of a sense of unease with the organizational changes. For these officers, the order-of-life within which PSNI sat was constructed in unethical terms – of ambitious bureaucrats serving career over profession or duty. In this critical account, the description of ‘normal’ police officers as decent people who knew right from wrong re-surfaced, questioning why a CoE was needed. For these officers, their sense of a personal code stood in unambiguous opposition to what was viewed as an external imposition of a CoE. Travelling with this critique was a sense of being isolated from senior officers and the larger political forces at play. Language here was dominated by evocations of isolation and the impersonal exercise of authority. There was a sense amongst these officers that they had been left behind and would be scapegoated by organizational leaders when necessary.

Extract 14: It's no longer a police force, it's a police service, which is fine in itself but we've given up everything that we've strived for, for the last 40 years to preserve, we've just given it up, we've now become this namby pamby, we're not policemen anymore, we're social workers, we can't do anything, everybody wants to complain, nobody is happy anymore, so you can't police. I hate it, I can't wait to get finished, I never thought I'd say that but it's coming to a point where in the next couple of years I'm seriously thinking of just leaving and giving it all up because it's just chronically bad. [...] But we've had 200 years of the evolution to become best practice then we get somebody who's got 10 years' service, who's never been on the front line and decides I know how we can save money we can do it this way and do it that way. Which is going against the whole evolution of policing. It doesn't work but this is how they get promoted because they are able to show how to save money and it's completely and utterly wrong. [...] Like for example the code of ethics, probably the only set of rules, but... Well the code of ethics, I never signed, I never signed up to it. I had a query about it and it was never satisfactorily explained. [...] It was all about discreditable conduct and discreditable conduct is totally subjective and depends on your audience and who is dealing with you and depends whether it is discreditable. I put a number of scenarios through and was basically told to... well wasn't told to shut up or put up, but basically you're an officer of 18 years' service, something like that and you should know what discreditable conduct is. Yes I do know in my eyes, but if you are going to put a rule on me and say you cannot be guilty of discreditable conduct on me well you are going to have to define what it is and they never have. So it's totally subjective. (Police Constable)

Extract 14 is from an interview with a police constable who was probably the most negative of our respondents in terms of his views on the organizational changes and the code of ethics. It brings together the various strands of our discussion above to show how a sense of self as a good, professional police officer, a deep dissatisfaction with the organizational changes and a perception of the Code of Ethics as a disciplinary tool that was also not well defined in places all constituted each other. His rejection of the CoE can only be understood against the background of his deep mistrust of the new political and organizational ethos pervading policing and his injured sense of an ethical and professional self.

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings demonstrate the importance of analysing ethical identity and codes within the rich, complex and contested ethical contexts of particular, overlapping realms of *Lebensführung*. The policing sector in the UK in general has experienced a profound shift in terms of visibility and scrutiny over the past several decades, a change that can perhaps be seen in even more pronounced terms in the context of Northern Ireland. The work performed by a code cannot be separated from this contested and complex shift in the broader ethical *Lebensführung*.

Codes can then also be interpreted as one performative technology amongst others that constitute accounts of what responsibility and irresponsibility mean within a certain *Lebensführung*. Hence we ought not to be surprised that codes hold varying degrees of prominence and commitment from employees.

The research implications are that more attention could be paid to more context-bound, ethnographic accounts of how codes are identified with by employees within their broader working lives, particularly in contexts of contested organizational legitimacy and attempted re-legitimation.

Our approach and findings also hold implications for practice. If codes occupy an ambiguous and liminal space within organizations, then perhaps the implementation and training associated with codes ought to better reflect this reality. In particular, we believe that there is significant space for approaching codes as technologies that enable critical and developmental reflection on what it means to be an ethical subject in a certain lifeworld.

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