

Criminal Justice and Behavior

<http://cjb.sagepub.com/>

The Life of a Police Officer : A Developmental Perspective

M. MICHAEL FAGAN and KENNETH AYERS, Jr.

Criminal Justice and Behavior 1982 9: 273

DOI: 10.1177/0093854882009003002

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cjb.sagepub.com/content/9/3/273>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[International Association for Correctional and Forensic Psychology](http://www.iacfp.org)

Additional services and information for *Criminal Justice and Behavior* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://cjb.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://cjb.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Downloaded from cjb.sagepub.com by guest on September 10, 2010

Citations: <http://cjb.sagepub.com/content/9/3/273.refs.html>

THE LIFE OF A POLICE OFFICER

A Developmental Perspective

M. MICHAEL FAGAN
KENNETH AYERS, Jr.

Kentucky Wesleyan College

Recent research in developmental psychology has shown that most middle class adults pass through a series of psychosocial stages as they mature. Since no one has studied the adult development of policemen, we wondered if their development would be exceptional because of the unusual amount of stress inherent in police work. The purpose of our study was to (1) describe the adult development of our subjects, and (2) discuss the practical implications of our findings.

Since Freud, psychologists have studied personality development; but, with few exceptions (Jung, 1933; Havighurst, 1948; Erikson, 1950) they have focused on childhood and adolescence, neglecting the adult years. However, in the past 15 years social scientists have begun to investigate this relatively unexplored area (Neugarten, 1968; Gould, 1972; Vaillant, 1977; Levinson, Darrow, Kleirn, Levinson, & McKee 1978). Their research indicates that most middle-class Americans pass through a series of psychosocial stages as they mature.

THEORY

LEVINSON'S STUDY

In one of the most thorough studies of adult development, Levinson and his colleagues interviewed and tested 40 men—10

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND BEHAVIOR, Vol. 9 No. 3, September 1982 273-285
© 1982 American Association of Correctional Psychologists

biologists, 10 writers, 10 factory workers, and 10 business executives. Levinson discovered that most of them went through five distinct stages between the ages of 17 and 45. Since these stages will be used as a springboard to analyze the lives of policemen, the stages are discussed in some detail below.

Early Adult Transition (17 to 22)

In this stage the young man bridges the gap between childhood and early adulthood. This is an introspective time when the young person establishes his identity by making commitments to those goals he decides are important (Erikson, 1968).

Entering the Adult World (18-22)

This is a nonreflective, busy time when the young adult works at the commitments (e.g., family, home, career) of the previous stage. Many men work at the fulfillment of a dream (their vision of the future). Young adults can be greatly aided by a mentor—an older, wiser person who takes the novice under his wing.

Age-30 Transition (22-28)

The stability of the 20s ends with a stressful, questioning period—a time when the adult reconsiders some of the commitments made in the early 20s. The person usually resolves this crisis with a change in lifestyle (e.g., divorce, career change) or with a recommitment to his initial life structure.

Settling Down (33-40)

After the Age-30 Transition, the adult settles down and works hard to accomplish his goals. Like the 20s this is a busy, nonreflective period. Toward the end of this stage the man in his late 30s works at becoming his own man, a desire to be an

independent, respected leader in his community. Some men begin a serious decline during this stage.

Midlife Transition (40-45)

According to Levinson this period separates early adulthood from middle age and is, therefore, a major transitional stage. Men in their early 40s ask themselves: "What do I really want in life? Who am I? Where am I going? What changes do I need to make?" This introspection is prompted by the decline of the body, an awareness of death, and other concerns of middle age.

Levinson relied heavily on Jung's (1933) theory of individuation to explain the midlife transition. At midlife the healthy person wants to be more of an individual, more authentic, and better balanced. Also, at midlife a man becomes concerned with his legacy—that which he chooses to leave to his survivors (e.g., property, his art work, etc.). In this article we will use these stages to examine the lives of police officers.

POLICE OFFICERS

Levinson's model is based on four diverse occupational groups, but his sample did not include police officers or others who face physical danger in their work. Perhaps the stress and danger of law enforcement results in a different developmental process.

Although many researchers have studied personality characteristics and stress of police officers, very few have taken a developmental perspective. Two classic studies investigated the cognitive and moral development of police officers (Muir, 1977) and researched their development of cynicism (Niederhoffer, 1967). In a theoretical article Bellman (1978) proposed a developmental model for training police officers. Using a developmental perspective, Cross (1977) utilized the concept of "turning points" to explain why people enter law enforcement; and Sparger and Giacomassi (1982) used the same concept to analyze terminations

from police work. However, to the best of our knowledge no one has studied the psychosocial or overall personality development of police officers.

PURPOSE

Knowledge of the development of policemen will expand or confirm existing theory in developmental psychology. In addition, this information should provide practical suggestions for improving the administration of a police department. Administrators who understand adult development will be better able to (1) understand their workers, (2) motivate them, (3) train them, (4) design programs for career development, and (5) counsel the individual who is in a developmental crisis. In fact, business management is already beginning to incorporate some of the findings of adult development research into personnel practice (Hanson, 1977; Roche, 1979).

Therefore, the goals of this study are to (1) describe the adult development of a group of police officers and (2) consider how these findings might be used to improve the morale and performance of a police department.

METHOD

PROCEDURE

We conducted the interviews of the police officers on an individual basis, one of us interviewing one subject at a time. Although there were differences in our style, we attempted to maintain continuity between the two interviewers by standardizing our questions and by working closely together. Typically, one of us interviewed a subject in the afternoon, and together we reviewed that interview the next morning. This procedure enabled us to maintain the same focus and direction.

The interview began with a series of factual questions about the subject's background. We asked about his family's ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic background. Next, the interviewer asked the subject to begin with his departure from high school and discuss the significant events of his life. If the subject did not

mention them spontaneously, we asked about his jobs, his social life, his ambitions, his disappointments, and the like. For example, if the interviewer did not discuss a mentor, we asked him, "When you were a young man, was there an older fellow who took you under his wing and helped you—sort of like a big brother?"

The subjects were interviewed privately in the training classroom at the police station. The typical interview lasted about 90 minutes, and they were tape recorded.

THE SUBJECTS

Our study had 23 subjects, all of whom belonged to the same police department of a medium-sized city in Kentucky. Our sample was selected by the training officer of the department as a representative sample of the entire 85-man department. The age range was from 27 to 55; 33.9 was the mean age. There was one black male; the rest were white males.

Most (19) of these men came from working-class families; 1 came from a poor family, 2 from comfortable middle-class families, and 1 from a wealthy family.

Average educational level of our sample was 13.0 years. Three of our subjects attended college before they became policemen, with 3 years being the highest level obtained. Only one had not graduated from high school; he became an officer before the high school degree or GED equivalent became mandatory.

We interviewed 11 patrolmen, 6 sergeants, 3 lieutenants, 2 captains, and 1 major. Their length of service ranged from 2 to 30 years with a mean of 14.7 years.

RESULTS

After analyzing the 23 interviews, we found that our subjects passed through a series of psychosocial stages and that stress and the management of stress was an important part of this process. Our data clearly supported Levinson's model of early adulthood, but was less supportive of middle adulthood. Specific observations are discussed below, using Levinson's stages as a framework.

THE EARLY ADULT TRANSITION (19-22)

Although our investigation of this period was rather superficial, we did find that most of our sample (18 of 23) entered the military after leaving high school. In retrospect, all but one agreed that the armed service was a valuable experience that helped them grow up.

Only two of our subjects experienced what Erikson would consider an acute identity crisis. Although a few of our subjects reported that they were wild during this period, the majority seemed stable and settled.

Seventeen of our subjects married during this period and took the first available job. We found little evidence of planning or introspection in these early adult decisions. Only three of our subjects became policemen during this time.

ENTERING THE ADULT WORLD (22-28)

Eleven of our subjects switched from blue-collar work to police work during this stage. Typically, the young man was laid off or became dissatisfied with his blue-collar job, began to search for another job, and stumbled into police work. Almost all of our subjects (91%) entered law enforcement, not because they had a life-long desire to be policemen, but because they were attracted to the job's security.

Most of the subjects settled down in their early 20s and seemed to live a rather stable life throughout their 20s. All those who became policemen at this time initially enjoyed the work; they liked the freedom, excitement, and power. However, some of them could not handle the freedom and the power. The temptation to drink excessively and to be promiscuous was great. As one police officer said:

At that time . . . there were women everywhere. Women would actually chase you. This was a new life. Getting off from work and hitting the bars, seeing how the other half lives, pulling pranks, drinking on duty. You know, it was actually a big party. Locking people up; that's a big thing, especially on midnights. You really got the power, whether you want it or not, and at that point, I really don't think any 23, 25, 27 year-old knows how to handle it. It's like you're a little God.

Many of the young officers believed this rowdy behavior helped them to be accepted by the veteran officers. As one officer said, "At that age I was channeled that way whether I wanted to go in that direction or not. I wasn't strong enough to set a course and follow it. I could be led fairly easily."

It appears as though this subject and several others experienced a delayed adolescence in that they were rather settled and stable in their late teens and early 20s, but in their mid-20s experienced a wild period where they were strongly influenced by their peers.

We asked each of our subjects about his ambitions and dreams as a young man, and only two of them described a dream in the sense that Levinson uses the term. Most of our subjects were concerned with making a decent living, doing their job well, and having a good time. They tended to live a day-by-day existence and did not do a great deal of soul searching and planning.

Only one of our subjects had the ideal mentor described by Levinson, and this happened before he became a policeman. Three subjects had mentors who were more like fathers than the "big brother" described by Levinson. We believe that this is one of our most significant findings. It appears as though these young policemen did not have the leadership that men in other occupations receive.

According to Erikson (1968) young adulthood is a period of intimacy versus isolation. It is a time when the young man must learn to love his wife and children. Many of our subjects had difficulty with this task (36% were divorced). Some buried themselves in their work and avoided their families, some cheated on their wives, and several drank excessively. All of our subjects experienced a great deal of stress in their 20s.

THE AGE-30 TRANSITION (28-33)

Our analysis of this age period clearly supported Levinson's model. Of the 23 subjects, 18 experienced a stressful transition between the ages of 26 and 34.

For example, one of the subjects married at age 20 and became a policeman at 22. His life with his family and his career seemed fairly satisfying and stable throughout his early and mid-20s. In his late 20s he became dissatisfied with police work and life in

general. He quit the department, but returned a year later. However, he still felt like a failure and continued to be depressed for another year or so. At the age of 31 he resolved his personal difficulty and began to feel much better about himself and his job. He is now in his late 30s and doing well in an important administrative position.

As in the above case, many of our subjects experienced a crisis at about age 30. The most common crisis involved a confrontation between the young officer and the police department administration; some of our subjects were denied a promotion they thought they deserved, and others were disciplined by their superiors. In each case the officer became bitter about his job and went through a period when he questioned his career choice. Apparently these young men entered the adult world with preconceived ideas about how police work, marriage, and life in general should be. After 5-10 years of experience they discovered that life was not as they thought it should be; and their Age-30 Transition was in part a resolution of the disparity between what they thought life should be and what it was.

SETTLING DOWN (33-40)

In our sample men advanced through a stable life structure during their mid- and late-30s. Many police officers experienced a professional rebirth; that is, they recovered some of their initial enthusiasm for the job but tempered it with experience. This positive change seemed to be triggered by promotion and the additional responsibility and education that advancement entails. Several officers remarked that they had no ambition as patrolmen; but once they made sergeant, they began to think seriously about further advancement. They also felt that when the department sent them away for additional training (e.g., the FBI Academy) it indicated that they were worthwhile, competent police officers.

However, some men experienced a serious decline during this period. Several watched their family life disintegrate and had to deal with the trauma of divorce. One of our subjects missed a promotion at age 33, became bitter, and increased his drinking.

His mother died a year later and his health declined (stomach problems). It took seven years of heavy drinking and a suspension from the police department for alleged gambling to change his attitude. After his 40th birthday he began to view police work and life in general in a more positive way.

We observed some signs of the "Becoming One's Own Man" stage in some of our subjects who were over 35. For example, the need to be "one of the boys" was less strong. Several officers took pride in the fact that the younger officers sought their advice on points of law and procedure.

THE MIDLIFE TRANSITION (40-45)

Only eight of our subjects were 43 years-old or older, so our observations about this period were tenuous.

Our middle-aged subjects seemed to be less introspective than those studied by Levinson (1976), Gould (1972), Sheehy (1976), and Neugarten (1968). In fact, this did not seem to be a transitional period for most of them. Only one of our subjects reported the death awareness that some believe is central to the Midlife Transition. According to this 45 year-old police officer:

When you get to be 40, you know that your average lifetime is about 72. You've reached at least your halfway point. And I feel like when you get there, you start figuring out things a little closer than when you were younger.

We were surprised to find so few reports like this one. We also found little evidence of individuation; our subjects showed no signs of broadening or changing their interests in their early 40s, nor did they exhibit the identity searching that they did at age 30.

A few of our subjects seemed to have a legacy. In the most obvious case, one officer seemed to derive a great deal of satisfaction in his plans to leave his farm to his children.

As our subjects passed 40, the ones who received promotions worked toward advancement, and the ones who did not looked forward to retirement. Many in the latter group developed a negative attitude about police work; they complained about the

politics of the department, disliked their work, and felt locked into the job because of their pensions.

SUMMARY: A MODEL

We believe the model presented in Figure 1 summarizes our study.

Our subjects typically entered the department during their early- or mid-20s and were, at first, enthused and pleased with their job. The young officers enjoyed the freedom, responsibility, power, and comradeship of police work. After several years of experience they encountered a setback or series of setbacks that caused them a great deal of pain and also caused them to evaluate their lifestyles. This stressful period usually lasted one or two years and occurred at about age 30. Most of the men emerged from the Age-30 Transition with a positive attitude about themselves and their work, but some experienced more setbacks in their 30s and developed a resigned attitude toward their job and life in general. However, the other group had successful experiences (usually promotions) in their 30s and seemed to grow in personal confidence and job satisfaction. As men entered their 40s, the gap between these two groups seemed to widen. We observed no transitional stages during the 40s.

DISCUSSION

In interpreting the results of our study, keep in mind that the sample was small and not randomly selected. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings is limited. With this in mind, we will discuss the significance of our research first, with respect to psychological theory, and second, with respect to the management of a police department.

THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Our study supports the growing body of evidence that adults experience a series of psychosocial stages as they mature. For

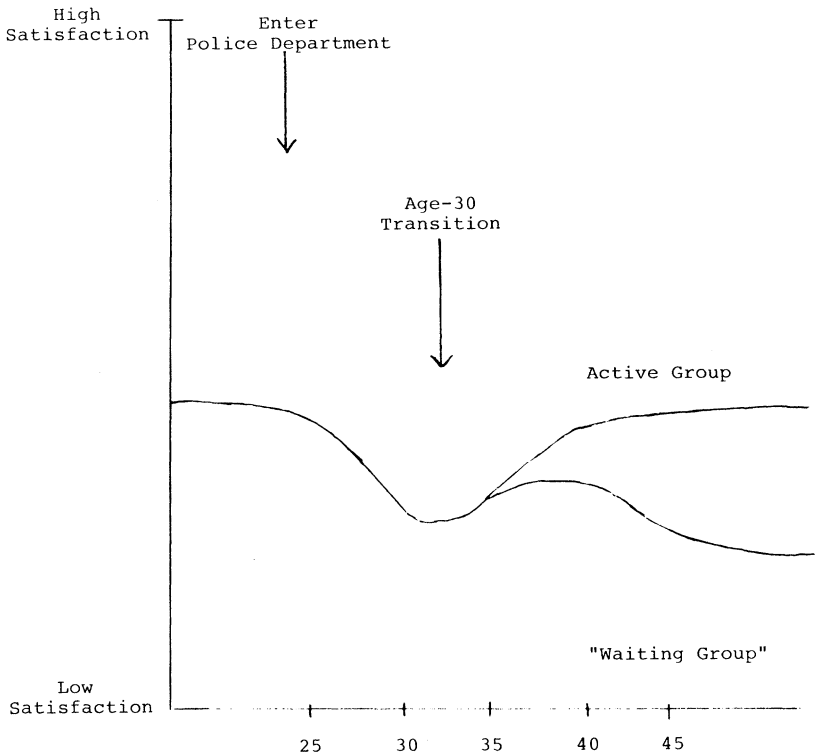


Figure 1: A Model of Police Development

example, our sample, like the subjects of the Levinson (1976), Gould (1972) and Sheehy (1976) studies, lived nonreflective lifestyles in their 20s and went through a transitional period at about age 30.

However, we found differences in the adult development of our group that pose some interesting questions. For example, why did many of our subjects experience an unusually stable adolescence and then a wild period or delayed adolescence in their mid-20s? Was this due to the nature of police work and those who are attracted to it?

Also, why did so few of our subjects have a mentor? Is it because the quasi-military hierarchy of the police department

inhibits older and younger officers from becoming friends? Secondly, what are the effects of the lack of mentoring?

We also wonder about the lack of a dream or a vision of the future. Does this retard the psychosocial development of policemen? Is the lack of a dream related to a police officer's cynicism?

Our study suggests another important question. What is the relationship between the awareness of death and adult development? Most adult development researchers agree that it is an important aspect of the midlife transition. Is the fact that we saw little evidence of a midlife crisis related to the fact that policemen face death sooner and more frequently than others?

These are just a few of the questions prompted by our research. Only a systematic replication of the study can shed light on these questions.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

If the results of our study are supported by future research, we believe the following suggestions will help improve police morale and efficiency:

- (1) Teach policemen about adult development through in-service workshops, recruit training, and college courses in Developmental Psychology. Learning about the developmental process will help the policeman to cope with his own problems and understand the people he serves (Bennett and Grosser, 1978).
- (2) Mentoring should be encouraged in the police department. The formal and informal environment should be structured so that it is conducive to young officers and older officers becoming friends.
- (3) The role of a policeman should be clarified. Young men are primarily recruited and trained to be crime fighters and later find out that this is only a small part of their job. Erikson's (1968) work with adolescents has shown that role ambiguity is a severe stumbling block in psychosocial development.
- (4) Individual and group counseling should be available to police officers and their families; developmental stress can be reduced through effective counseling.
- (5) Police departments should consider changing the nature of their retirement program. A more portable program would enable

dissatisfied officers to leave in their 30s or 40s before they get locked into the job.

- (6) Finally, we recommend that administrators become more sensitive to the process of adult development, so that they can distinguish the chronic problem officer from those who are experiencing the temporary difficulty of developmental crisis.

REFERENCES

- Bellman, G. Passages through training and development. *Training and Developmental Journal*, November 1978, 49-53.
- Bennett, B. & Grosser, G. External effects of a human development course on criminal justice personnel. *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 1978, 6, 424-428.
- Cross, S. Turning points: An alternative view of becoming a policeman. *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 1977, 5, 155-164.
- Erikson, E. H. *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton, 1950.
- Erikson, E. H. *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968.
- Gould, R. L. The phases of adult life: A study in development psychology. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1972, 129, 521-531.
- Hanson, M. C. Career development responsibility of managers. *Personnel Journal*, 1977, 56, 443-445.
- Havighurst, R. J. *Developmental tasks and education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- Jung, C. G. *Modern men in search of a soul*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1933.
- Levinson, D. H., Darrow, C. N., Kleirn, E. B., Levinson, M. H., & McKee, B. *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Ballantine, 1976.
- Muir, W. K. *Police: Streetcorner politicians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- Neugarten, B. (Ed.) *Middle age and aging*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- Niederhoffer, A. *Behind the shield: The police in urban society*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967.
- Sheehy, G. *Passages*. New York: Elsevier North-Holland, 1976.
- Sparger, J. R. & Giacompassi, D. J. Copping out: Why police leave the force. Paper presented to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Louisville, March 1982.
- Roche, G. R. Much ado about mentoring. *Harvard Business Review*, 1979, 57, 14-28.
- Vaillant, G. E. *Adaptations to life*. New York: Little, Brown, 1978.

M. Michael Fagan is Associate Professor of Psychology at Kentucky Wesleyan College. Professional interests include adult development, stress management, locus of control, and adolescent behavior.

Kenneth Ayers, Jr. is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Kentucky Wesleyan College. Professional interests include corrections, white collar crime, police behavior, and jails.