THE PRESENT OF THINGS PAST: AN EXPLORATIVE CASE STUDY OF STORYTELLING AND SENSEMAKING IN POLICING

A thesis presented
by
James M. Gallagher
to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2019
ProQuest page
Abstract
This case study explored how the stories told in a large, urban police department influenced the process of sensemaking among its members. It began with the premise that police officers are storytellers by nature, that theirs is a socially discursive profession, and that occupationally they engage in work that is characterized by sudden changes in their environment. These environmental changes challenge a police officer’s sense of personal stability and safety and require mitigative action to process through the change event towards a successful conclusion. To facilitate this process, this research showed how police officers relied upon the stories of the organization, either an individual or organizational narrative that best fits their current situation and took from them the most meaningful lessons to assist in their sensemaking process. Further, this research identified a unique typology of organizationally specific police stories and the manner by which they are developed and shared organizationally. This findings of this research revealed tangible organizational themes that identified a process of organizational narrative exchange upon which answers to this studies research questions were built, describing the sensemaking process in policing as fluid and adaptable, reliant upon the creation and sharing of stories to provide a bank of organizational experience from which to draw during times of flux. This process was closely aligned with the seven elements of Weickian sensemaking and offers new insight for police leaders into a previously thought abstract process making it more accessible to leaders and suggesting organizational leadership and capacity can be improved through an enhanced understanding of story and the process of organizational narrative exchange.

Keywords: Sensemaking, Storytelling, Organizational Narrative Exchange, Police Leadership
Dedication

For my parents, Jim and Kathy Gallagher, who set me on the path to learning and to service.

For my wife, Esther, who has taken this journey with me, walking alongside down this long and winding road and across some rocky terrain. I love you.

For my children—Ella, Mia, Ava and Jimmy—for whom I do all things and for whom I take this journey. I love you the most of the most, forever and ever.

For all the cops out there that I have ever known and/or worked with - those in my family, those in my Department and those across the country. Thank you for what you do, we are all the better for your service.

For those we have lost – among them friends, partners, colleagues and brothers and sisters on the job – your stories will never go untold. No day shall erase you from the memory of time.

And for Snoopy Smith, Gerd Kurtenbach, Bill Reutter and all the other storytellers in policing – thank you for your service, thank you for your support and, most of all, thank you for your stories.
Acknowledgements

This has been an incredible experience, difficult at times but among the most rewarding things I have ever done personally, professionally and academically. I began this program with a single, guiding principle—to help make cops better through the use of evidence-based research that had immediate utility on the frontlines of policing and police leadership. I make no bones about the fact that I am a police apologist, always willing to see the best in our profession and in our members. But this makes me blind neither to our flaws nor to our responsibility to look critically inward.

I have been fortunate to be involved in some high-level conversations about the state of policing—within my Department, within the Arizona law enforcement community, in grad school and at the FBI National Academy with the brightest minds and best leaders in our profession. I realized from these conversations policing remains the bedrock of our free society but that it, like other sections of society, could be better; it had to be better. With that in mind, I’d like to acknowledge those who have made me better.

I begin my thanks with my father, Police Officer (retired) and Investigator (retired) James M. Gallagher, Sr. of the New York City Police Department and Drug Enforcement Administration, respectively. No words can ever adequately express the profound influence you have been in my life as a father, as a cop and as a role model. Policing the toughest city during its toughest times (1967 to 1989) he taught me what service was, that everyone is entitled to their own dignity, that there is no “us” and “them” there is just “us” and that the job is about doing good “with a capital G.” Nearly forty-six years of law enforcement service to his community is a testament to his character and just one of many reasons why he is my hero.
I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge the strong influence of my uncle, Detective Sergeant Joseph Gallagher (retired) NYPD, my aunt Officer Mary Ann Gallagher New York State Court Officers and my cousin Detective Jaak Erik Leino NYPD. Being part of a police family, particularly a New York City Irish police family, is a gift greater than any I could have imagined. Going to the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, Emerald Society rackets, trips to 1PP, graduation ceremonies at Madison Square Garden and graduation parties at Ballybunion are experiences I treasure and strong threads in the man and police officer I am today. Thank you for your mentorship and advice and for teaching me what it truly means to “be on the Job.”

I am indebted to and deeply appreciative of Dr. Colleen Byron, Ph.D. of Northern Arizona University. When starting grad school, I sought a rigorous program outside the spectrum of criminology or criminal justice with the strong belief I did not want to become one dimensional and that exposure to other ways of thought would be beneficial to me as a leader and as a person. I got all that and more from Dr. Byron who challenged my thinking, encouraged my disagreement and supported my research interests. She exposed me to leadership thought and theory and directed me towards doctoral work with care and encouragement.

Words cannot accurately express how grateful I am for my friend, Dr. Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, Ph.D. of Arizona State University. She alone is the person responsible for whatever academic growth I have had and is someone who has given me a great gift – the opportunity to engage in meaningful applied research that could help an exceedingly vulnerable and often neglected population. As members of the same community invested in addressing human and sex trafficking we found in each other kindred spirits, two back east people who didn’t take ourselves (or each other) too seriously with a passion for making things better and a willingness
to look in different places for answers. As good as she is as an academic mentor, she is even better as a friend. Words cannot properly express her importance to me.

I am exceedingly fortunate to have Dr. Tova Sanders, Ed.D. as my thesis chair. Her unwavering support, thoughtful feedback, research insight and unrelenting enthusiasm for my study has sustained me through this process even when the time between submitted written products grew long due to life getting in the way. When we first met in Boston, I told Dr. Sanders my goal with this study was to contribute something meaningful that is both rigorous in method and findings and accessible to practitioners. Because of her guidance, I am more hopeful that I may achieve that lofty goal. My thanks as well to Dr. Margaret Kirchoff, Ed.D. who willingly stepped in to become my second reader and offered excellent feedback and to my friend and colleague, Dr. Paula Veach, Ed.D., who provided me with support and insight throughout this process and who provided practical insight as a fellow police leader that helped to shape the study and added tremendously to its value. Dr. Al McCready, Ed.D. challenged me over lunch one day in Boston, to widen my gaze and to do better; this gentle prompt refocused my research direction and made me a better doctoral student. Finally, I must thank Northeastern University for the opportunities afforded me through this wonderful program. When searching for a rigorous doctoral degree from a top school, this program jumped to the top and has never once disappointed.

Lastly, I must acknowledge and thank my wife, Esther, and my children Ella, Mia, Ava and Jimmy for their unwavering love and support. Being a cops wife and cops kids is difficult enough with crazy schedules, dangerous work, and the occasional teasing from other kids. But add to the mix the time associated with completing a doctorate and a thesis and there were nights and weekends where they saw little of their husband and father. But it was they who encouraged
me, who told me they were proud of me for what I was doing and that motivated me to push forward and towards completion and to produce a final product they could be proud of. Their support was everything for me.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study ........................................................................................................... 13

Statement of the Problem .............................................................................................................................. 15
  Scholar–Practitioner Tradition .................................................................................................................... 15
  Problem of Practice .................................................................................................................................. 15

Research Questions ....................................................................................................................................... 16

Significance of the Problem ............................................................................................................................ 17

Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................................................ 25
  Sensemaking Theory Development .......................................................................................................... 25
  Theoretical Application ............................................................................................................................. 29
  Theoretical & Methodological Alignment .................................................................................................. 30
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 30

Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................................................... 31

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 31

Sensemaking .................................................................................................................................................. 33
  Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 33
  Sensemaking Theory Development .......................................................................................................... 36
  Sensemaking & Policing ............................................................................................................................. 44
  Counterarguments to Sensemaking ......................................................................................................... 47

Storytelling .................................................................................................................................................... 49
  Foundations ............................................................................................................................................. 49
  Storytelling in Policing .............................................................................................................................. 52
  Police Culture & Storytelling ...................................................................................................................... 53

 Sensemaking, Storytelling, and Policing ..................................................................................................... 57
  Storytelling, Sensemaking and Police Culture ............................................................................................ 59
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 62

Chapter 3: Methodology ................................................................................................................................. 64

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 64

Qualitative Research Method and Rationale ................................................................................................. 65
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Considerations</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivist Research Paradigm</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Approach</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study Defined</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminal Scholar &amp; Application</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Site &amp; Participants</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Site &amp; Organizational Description</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Site &amp; Participants Access</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Size &amp; Recruitment of Participants</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Treatment &amp; Protection of Research Participants</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection, Condensation, Coding, and Analysis</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Storage &amp; Management</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness and Verification</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Validity and Generalizability</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of Findings</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmations and Threats</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Research Findings</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Landscape</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Storytelling and Sensemaking</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOT #1: Affiliation</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOT #2: Educational</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOT #3: Occupational</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOT #4: Coping</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

Walt Whitman

Leaves of Grass (1892)

I am a part of all that I have met;

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough

Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades

For ever and forever when I move.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Ulysses (1842)
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Much has been made of recent high-profile police/community interactions as an indication of the negative aspects of contemporary American policing and its effect on the public perception of police legitimacy and procedural justice (Corsaro et al., 2015; Merkey, 2015). While most police/community interactions continue to receive necessary critical attention, several high-profile incidents involving the death of unarmed persons of color during police contacts, either through uses of force or while in police custody, highlight a growing divide between the police and the community that appears to worsen with each successive incident (Scott, Crawford, & LeDuc, 2016; Weitzer, 2015). Given recent events, both the internal and external narrative regarding policing today remains highly charged with much of the discussion centered on who the police really are and why they do what they do. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore the role storytelling plays in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment.

Among the issues most often referred to by nonpolice as problematic is a perceived culture within policing that acts as a contributing factor to this divide and manifests itself through over-policing disadvantaged communities (Fagan et al., 2010; Weitzer, 2002; Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Implications of tacit or overt institutional and individual officer racism have framed much of the dialog via print, digital, and social media and have led to calls for a fundamental re-engineering of police departments and police practices (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Less voice, however, has been heard from the police themselves in response to questions of practice and intent, leaving them largely silent in this discussion and in some cases disconnected from the communities they serve.
The “voice” of a police department can be found in its stories or the organizational narrative that captures its history and traditions and reflects the unique nature of the department and its members. The stories told in policing constitute the specific organizational and social realities of the department (van Hulst, 2013). Fletcher (1999) says police departments are comprised of natural storytellers, both to meet professional obligations (i.e., police reports and courtroom testimony) and to capture and share organizational history and values. As history, stories capture the past for present understanding and help to create a community of officers within the organization (Burnett, Pedersen, & Smith, 2011; Gabriel, 2000; Smith, Pedersen, & Burnett, 2014; van Hulst, 2013). Fisher (1987) said, “We tell stories to give order to human experiences and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common” (p. 63) and Gabriel (2000) says, “stories transform into experience...and experience turns into stories” (p. 18). This experiential cycle of narrative exchange provides the foundation of many police departments’ organizational identity and reflects their unique culture and history.

As an important thread in the web of culture, storytelling is a powerful way organizational narrative is developed, perpetuated, and shared among members (Geertz, 1973) and has been described as a key knowledge management and dissemination tool, particularly in policing (Burnett et al., 2011). In policing, stories are often used as a lens through which to view the world and to help make sense of situations for which there is little context or are novel, dangerous, traumatic, or politically charged (Fletcher, 1999; McNulty, 1994; Shearing & Ericson, 1991; van Hulst, 2013). Stories capture the history of a police department, describe the realities of the job, are shared among members to provide a sense of organizational identity, and are the foundation upon which present actions are built (Moskos, 2008; Smith et al., 2014; van Hulst, 2013). This research explored how the stories shared among the members of a large,
southwestern police department helped police officers make sense of their environments, particularly during times of flux, and how these stories inform their professional practice.

Statement of the Problem

Scholar–Practitioner Tradition

This research follows the scholar–practitioner tradition that encourages the practitioner to engage in deeply reflective intellectual work with the specific intent of improving an aspect of their praxis through the application of theory (Graham & Kormanik, 2004; Jenlink, 2005; Lynham, 2002; Nganga, 2011; Ruona, 1999). Tenkasi and Hay (2008) say that scholar–practitioners are “actors who have one foot each in the worlds of academia and practice and are pointedly interested in advancing the causes of both theory and practice” (p. 49). Assuming the role of scholar–practitioner is intentional, as one occupies a fluid place along the “continuum of roles” where scholarship is on one end and practice is on the other (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). The midpoint on this continuum defines the scholar–practitioner as being possessed of a reflective competence that enables them to be driven to improve their practice through the considerate application of theory in a continuously reinforcing cycle of applied scholarship (Ruona & Gilley, 2009).

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice that guided this research was an exploration of the role storytelling plays in a large, southwestern police department as its officers strive to make sense of the discontinuity that tends to define their professional environments. Policing is often marked by occupational discontinuity and environmental disorder (Braga & Bond, 2008; Flynn & Herrington, 2015; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Decisions that can have significant impact on the officer, the involved citizen, and the community at large must be made in an instant and many
times with limited information (Alpert, Macdonald, & Dunham, 2005; Harris, 1999; Mastrofski et al., 2000). These decisions, including the decision to initiate a stop, to utilize discretion, or to employ force, many times culminate with a mechanism of the criminal justice system being triggered resulting in a profound impact on the police/citizen dynamic and the individuals involved (Alpert et al., 2005).

The purpose of this research was to explore the role storytelling plays in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strived to make sense of their environment. A fundamental premise of this research was that what a cop does can be taught in the police academy or through training, including the following: how to interpret and enforce the law, how to make a traffic stop, or how to write a report. However, what it means to be a cop, particularly how one assumes the collective identity as a member of a specific police department, must be shared through the past experiences of other officers captured in the stories of the organization. This study built off the assumption that it is at the intersection of doing and learning that police officers use stories to make sense of the situations they face thereby reducing equivocality with the subsequent actions adding to the organizational narratives of their police department (Weick, 1969, 1988, 1995a). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the role storytelling played in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strived to make sense of their environment.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question for this thesis was, “What role does storytelling play in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment?” The following sub-questions will be considered to frame the direction of the research:
● What are the different types of stories that develop in the police department being studied?

● How are the stories that act as sensemaking tools shared within the police department being studied?

**Significance of the Problem**

The current and historical literature focusing on sensemaking and storytelling tends to run along parallel tracks with each implicitly explicating the other. For example, Weick (1969, 1979), in his foundational work on sensemaking, focused on the collective cognitive process necessary to consume stimuli that challenges one's perceptions of their norms depending, in part, on past experiences. Similarly, Bruner (1986) and Habermas (1972) discussed the value that could be found in organizational (collective) storytelling to leverage the connection between people and narratives in organizational settings. It is this connection between people and their shared experiences that provides organizations and their members with a frame of reference through which to view and make sense of their environments and to mitigate equivocality by relying upon a common historical narrative.

Minimal attention has been paid, however, to the positive implications of socialization into the police organization through storytelling and the role it can play to enact individual and organizational sensemaking capacity. As part of their occupational initiation into the profession, new police officers attend a police academy where they are taught how to do the job of police officer. The real learning, however, occurs after this training in the field when they are paired with a senior officer or Field Training Officer (FTO) who teaches them *how to be a cop*. What cops do can be taught; who they are must be shared. Storytelling, or the manner with which police share their common history to make sense of their environment, is only recently receiving
attention in policing research (Smith et al., 2014; van Hulst, 2013). The social nature of police culture or its role in a learning organization is also less well understood, particularly in terms of introducing new members into the profession and binding tenured members to the organization and its objectives through cultural artifacts such as storytelling (Filstad & Gottschalk, 2011; van Hulst, 2013).

As evidenced by Paoline (2004), the further study of the police and their organizational culture will lead to increased understanding of the profession and of the members who comprise it. The study of the stories commonly shared in policing and how they may inform the process of sensemaking in a police department is a distinct research path that can be illuminated with the proposed study. This research explored these two distinct fields—storytelling and sensemaking—to identify at what point they intersect and at a time when greater understanding of our police is critically necessary to evaluate their legitimacy (Matusiak et al., 2016; Tyler, 2006; van Hulst, 2013).

While stories as an artifact of policing have been explored as unique organizational elements in areas as diverse as the social importance of the police station (Holdaway, 1980; van Hulst, 2013), police humor (Holdaway, 1988), policing as a lived experience (Sutton, 2004), and police leadership (Rowe, 2006), there is still much yet to learn about how these story types affect an officer’s ability to recall their lessons and utilize them during times of flux. Smith et al. (2014) summarized the extant literature to create a framework of story types in policing to illustrate some of the ways stories are categorized in police departments (Figure 1). While thorough in its summary, it remains as only the first part of an operational equation that adds story to organizational culture to create a library from which to draw upon when framing a situational response.
In the scholar–practitioner tradition, the application of this research is intended to improve the practice of policing and police leadership, enhance understanding of police officers, and further the discussion on the state of police/community relationships (DeVries & Van Der Hooft-Van Der Zijl, 2003; Hinds, 2009; Merkey, 2015). Further, the synthesis of these ideas lays open the possibility of the application of its findings to similar, and similarly underexplored, public safety fields such as the fire service, emergency medical service, and federal law enforcement. To highlight the significance of this research the police narrative will be explored in depth, the results of which are expected to add immeasurably to the understanding of the police and the complexities of their relationship with the public.

**The police narrative.** Fletcher (1999), in her in-depth analysis of the police narrative as told by line level officers and detectives, said that it serves several important purposes in the police organization including acting as a “sanity-preserver, social glue, or a type of survival handbook” (p. 47). Previous studies on the police narrative have included the exploration of the ethnography of the profession (Van Maanen, 1973, 1974), the use of narrative as a common-sense tool for job survival (Fletcher, 1996, 1999; McNulty, 1994), storytelling in the police
station (Holdaway, 1980; van Hulst, 2013), as oral history (Cockcroft, 2005), and policing as a lived experience (Sutton, 2004). Despite the relative breadth of the study of the police narrative, Smith et al. (2014) found only a small number of studies into the police narrative focus on its impact on police leadership (p. 221).

Recognizing the content of the narrative as an influential element of organizational culture (Geertz, 1973; Mumby, 2013; Schein, 2010), is critical for police leaders to understand as the stories of an organization influence the performance of its duties (Gino, 2015; Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992; Lesser & Storck, 2001). While leaders cannot necessarily control the creation of the stories, their content, or their interpretation, they are nonetheless a prominent way in which organizational history becomes embodied and shared among organizational members (Schein, 2010). Stories serve many purposes in organizations, not the least of which is to present examples of the challenges experienced by the organization in the past and how its members worked through them (Gino, 2015). In this vein, retrospection, or an appreciation for the narrative history of the organization, is an important a leadership trait equal in importance to contemporary and future focus.

Shaping, delivering, and defending the organizational narrative is often the province of police leadership (Murphy & Drodge, 2004; Rowe, 2006; Shim et al., 2015; Wilson, 2000). So too is the ability of police leadership to recognize gaps in the organizational narrative as read against the backdrop of current events and to enact leadership strategies to address them (PERF, 2014). Understanding their department’s stories will enable police leaders to look more deeply into the emotional, political, and symbolic life of their organization and guide them towards a better understanding of the people who comprise their department, their needs, and their actions (Gabriel, 2000). Burnett (2010) describes storytelling as a useful way to of capturing and
sharing knowledge in an organization. Fletcher (1996, 1999) describes stories in police
departments as divided into two categories that prove can useful to organizational leaders—the
personal and the organizational. Understanding the dual typology of the police narrative and its
effect upon police actions and public perception is a critical component to effective police
leadership.

By the very nature of the job, policing is narrative-bounded with police officers using
stories to capture past experiences and using these stories to guide future actions as part of a
cyclical process of narrative informed action (Gabriel, 2000; Smith et al., 2014). Fletcher (1999)
describes the stories told in policing as the “connective tissue” of the organization. As
practitioners and leaders, today’s police chiefs would benefit from knowing more about what it is
that binds the organization together into a corporeal whole; specifically, how these narratives are
constructed, by whom, and for what reasons. Particularly during times of flux, knowing how
members of the police department develop, assess, embed, recall, and enact these narratives to
make sense of their environment will allow police leaders to better understand their
organizations’ oral history and be prepared to articulate this history in response to community
questions or concerns or to frame future policy and practices.

The police narrative and its application as historical knowledge has yet to be fully
explored in the literature and will provide insight into both the iterative process of sensemaking
and the necessary actions it compels. Fletcher (1999) describes police officers as storytellers,
saying they share their stories about their job to entertain, to cope with the harsher realities of
policing, as prohibitive or permissive tales intended to educate about the practice of policing and,
perhaps most importantly, to make sense of their experiences. As a key plank in the culture of
the police organization, an enhanced understanding of the police narrative and how it is shared
both internally and manifest externally will provide police leaders and community leaders with a better understanding of the culture of the police organization, how it is reflected to the community, and how it informs police decision making and actions.

**Connecting narrative with action.** Next, this research dug more deeply into the literature on sensemaking and storytelling to tie in the foundational work of Weick (1979; 1988; 1995) on sensemaking with the work van Hulst (2013) and others on police storytelling. Police culture is often viewed in the literature in a narrow sense, proceeding from the understanding its roots lie among certain, immutable truths about the profession related to violence, authority, bureaucracy, tension between task environments and organizational environments, or the universality of the job across the profession (Niederhoffer, 1967; Van Maanen, 1974, 1978). It has been viewed as a barrier to change (Skogan, 2008), an inhibitor of accountability (National Research Council, 2004), and as an underlying cause of police abuse of power (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). As such, a frequently occurring theme found in research surrounding police culture identifies an adaptive capacity to hostile or unfavorable environments that occurs through an insular socialization process that tends to define “us and them” (Crank, 1998; Skolnick, 1994). While this research will not explore police culture as coequal to sensemaking and policing, its influence will nonetheless be prominent in the background of this study informing participant’s responses and perceptions of their subjective reality.

While macro situations challenging organizational equilibrium have been covered at length in the literature, the micro processes of sharing the lessons of these situations have not been similarly addressed. Colville, Brown, and Pye (2012) state these unprecedented events both challenge sensemaking capacity and compel a search for meaning or a story that can be ingrained into the organization to mitigate the complexity of future unprecedented events. The
significance of this research lies in its ability to explore the connection between certain stories that originate at the macro-level with certain actions that occur at the micro-level to ascertain how storytelling within a police department influences the process of sensemaking among its officers.

Culture and community. Perhaps the greatest benefit to an increased understanding of how the police process the realities of their profession is found in the police/community relationship. Several scholars have explored the benefits of improved police/community relationships (De Vries & Van Der Hooft-Van Der Zijl, 2003; Hinds, 2009; Merkey, 2015; Nalla et al., 2016) describing the mutual benefits realized by positive and collaborative relations. Recent discussions of police legitimacy, however, have highlighted the community's growing dissatisfaction with aspects of American policing and elements of those who provide police service (Armaline et al., 2014; Gau & Brunson, 2010; Taylor et al., 2015).

As a way to share organizational context and introduce new members into the police department and its various roles (Smith et al., 2014), organizationally specific stories are artifacts of the distinct departmental culture that may serve as foundational to officer development and perceptions of role and identity. This is particularly relevant as a means for new police officers to make sense of the new experiences associated with being a police officer (Weick, 1995), especially in contemporary times where there is a growing uncertainty about the public perception of policing and a growing perception among police officers of the increasing dangers inherent in the profession (Nix et al., 2016).

As the findings of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) indicated, there are significant policy issues at stake in reviewing the influences of police culture. Among the six key recommendations is the imperative to build trust and enhance legitimacy through a
reimagining of traditional community policing models connecting cops with community. This is followed very closely by the related need to reevaluate the use of force policies governing many police departments and to consider additional oversight measures including external monitors and review boards that, historically, have been rebuffed by police. And yet, both are closely correlated to the storied nature of policing. Commonly held “war stories” in policing often focus on significant events in the community and high risk/low frequency events such as officer involved shootings or uses of force (Fletcher, 1991; van Hulst, 2013). These stories are shared generationally in policing as mythopoeic devices to capture and extol the heroic virtues of police officers in the most dangerous of situations (Wansink et al., 2008) or as cautionary tales providing the listener with an organizational specific recollection of a significant event and how to navigate a similar one in the present or future (Fletcher, 1991; Orr, 1996; van Hulst, 2013).

Policy and practical change cannot precede this new understanding; therefore, this study aimed to provide a solid foundation upon which improvements can be made to the profession through an enhanced understanding of storytelling as an element of sensemaking in policing. For today’s police leaders, members of government, the communities served by police, policing scholars, and policy makers, an enhanced understanding of the nuances of policing narratives developed and shared through storytelling may yield insight into the process of making sense of contemporary environments that are characterized by instability. The foundational understanding that can be developed through this research implies important future research paths on another as yet unexplored aspect of police culture, sensemaking processes in a policing context, there public implementation, and their influence on public perceptions of police legitimacy.
Theoretical Framework

Sensemaking Theory Development

Sensemaking is a cognitive process through which information is acquired, analyzed, and operationalized to guide a subsequent action intended to enact order to a given situation (Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993; Weick, 1995) as part of an iterative process in which people generate meaning from what they see and how they interpret (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is not simply interpretation; it is the assignment of meaning to events co-created by individuals, organizations, contexts, and environments through mutually and culturally developed frameworks for understanding (Fig. 2) (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

Rooted in a social constructivist perspective, sensemaking recognizes people play a prominent role in creating and assigning meaning to the very situations they seek to understand (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Despite the importance associated with studying something as foundational to organizational behavior as sensemaking, the study of the social processes that informs it is a relatively new domain and remains open to further research and expansion of thought (Eden, 1992).

Sensemaking is comprised of seven elements that define its theoretical underpinnings (Weick, 1995a). First, sensemaking is grounded in the notion individual identity is central to one’s sense of self and, therefore, how one views their sense of equilibrium when it is disrupted. Second, sensemaking itself is an act of retrospection as one reconciles present circumstances with past experiences. Third, sensemaking occurs as people enact or articulate their environments through narrative accounts that frame actions and reduce equivocality during times of change. Fourth, sensemaking is, at its most basic level, a social activity where experiences are shared among group members to enable both retrospective and collective sensemaking. Fifth, sensemaking is an ongoing process continuously undergoing review and change as one adapts to changing conditions. Sixth, sensemaking requires people to extract cues from social or situational context to determine what stimulus or information is necessary to retain to complete sensemaking activities. And finally, sensemaking values plausibility over accuracy when rationalizing past events and current actions to complete the iterative process of sensemaking while preparing for the next challenge to balance or equilibrium.

Sensemaking has its roots in humanity's earliest attempts to understand their place in the world. There is a thought reminiscent of sensemaking attributed to Socrates which says, “The only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing” (Fine, 2008, p. 50). The truth of this statement resonates as part of the historical lineage of sensemaking illustrating that life is a constant pursuit of knowledge, meaning, and understanding. In Theaetus, Socrates stated, “Wisdom begins in wonder” (Jowett, 2006, p.110), an ontological truism that speaks to man’s pursuit of their truth in their world by asking the rhetorical question “what’s the story” (Weick, 1995a).

As the concept of sensemaking evolved towards theory, similar discussions were being held by scholars studying the social construction of reality and the lived experience (Berger &
Luckmann, 1967; Cicourel, 1974), organizational culture and learning (Schein, 1985), crisis identification and response (Weick, 1988), post-incident assessment and understanding (Gephart, 1993; Gephart, Steier & Lawrence, 1990), anticipatory sensemaking (Mitroff, 2003), and how language captures and constitutes change within organizations (Boyce, 1995). The common theme throughout these seemingly distinct research orientations is the idea that pursuit of a subjective reality framed through a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm is key to understanding situations and their meanings as opposed to pursuits of a more objective truth.

This continuously evolving line of research offers scholars the opportunity to explore meaning making and its impact across the spectrum of organizational life. Weick (1995) says much of what passes for theory is merely approximations of theory either due to weak research or, in the case of sensemaking, scholars inching ever closer to a more grounded theory. Weick et al. (2005) also correctly point out there is a relative dearth of empirical evidence regarding sensemaking despite the attention it has had and continues to receive. The value of this statement lies in its inherent truth as Weick et al. (2005) continue that any addition to the body of knowledge on sensemaking is likely to enhance our understanding of the process and its importance to organizational life.

Though not as well known or as empirically defensible as some “hard science” theories, sensemaking, particularly Weickian sensemaking, is just as viable as theory in that it seeks to explore the general and theoretical laws that govern an important element of organizational leadership (Walker, 2006). Leadership theory suggests Wren (2006),

...should have internal consistency; that is, its propositions should be free from contradiction. Second, a theory should have external consistency; that is, it should be consistent with observations. Third, it must be ...stated so that its predictions can be
verified. Finally, a practical theory should have the attribute of scientific parsimony (p. 6).

Each of these criteria is the aim of social science inquiry and not to be taken as epistemological absolutes. Theory making, Weick (1995b) states, is a process of speculation, best guesses, and movement towards a greater certainty, though perhaps never actually getting there. The key, he says, is to view offers of theory in terms of what preceded it and what follows it (Weick, 1995b). Runkel and Runkel (1984) in describing the iterative process that is theory-making state:

Theory belongs to the family of words that includes guess, speculation, supposition, conjecture, proposition, hypothesis, conception, explanation, model.... Social scientists will naturally want to use terms with more care than they are used by the general populace. They will naturally want to underpin their theories with more empirical data than they need for speculation. They will naturally want theory to incorporate more than one hypothesis. We plead only that they do not save theory to label their ultimate triumph but use it to label their interim struggles (pp. 129-130).

Following both Weick (1995b) and Runkel and Runkel (1984), sensemaking can be classified as a theoretical construct. Building upon an ontological and epistemological foundation of Socrates, James, Dewey, Festinger, and others, Weick, Garfinkel and their contemporaries recognized a need to better predict how people will react in an organizational setting when confronted with flux. From this platform, a number of divergent research paths arose that illustrates sensemaking as theory is both informative and incomplete and worthy of further inquiry and expansion.
**Theoretical Application**

The relationship between sensemaking and storytelling has received extensive attention in management research (Collins, 2013; Gabriel, 2000; James and Minnis, 2004). Storytelling as an element of sensemaking in a policing context, however, has received little attention in the literature. Separately, storytelling and sensemaking have received extensive attention in policing research in ways that hints at the potential of a combined applied review of their import to policing, police culture, and police/community relationships. Sensemaking literature related to policing tends to focus on crisis management and mitigation (Bergstrand, 2011; McMaster, Baber and Duffy, 2012) while storytelling literature tends to focus on police culture, police practice, and police process (Fletcher, 1996; Holdaway, 1980; van Hulst, 2013; Van Maanen, 1973; Wilson, 2000). Taken together, the research possibilities imply an enhanced understanding of how the stories shared by police allow them to make sense of the unique responsibilities and experiences they will have as police officers.

Sensemaking as a theoretical construct is neatly broken down into seven applicable elements that articulate their supportive role in the larger theory (Weick, 1995a). As it applies to policing, these elements of sensemaking address the similar elements that storytelling provides police organizations as an artifact of culture. For example, police officers are bound together by a unique social identity that links them to the profession and to each other (Bradford, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This identity can be a byproduct of the stories shared between junior and senior officers that act as both permissive and prohibitive lessons on how to succeed in the profession (Fletcher, 1996, 1999; Smith et al., 2014; van Hulst, 2013). Police officers also routinely engage in a culturally specific form of retrospection known as debriefing. Success in policing can be attributed to ongoing learning. In policing, debriefings occur after each
significant incident to assess the incident, its response, and to build an experiential library from which information can be withdrawn later.

**Theoretical & Methodological Alignment**

As a student/researcher most interested in the subtler aspects of organizational behavior occurring at the cultural level, the purpose of this research was to explore the role storytelling plays in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment. The research direction requires unpacking the narrative expression of culture in a way that qualitative research can to elicit the meanings respondents ascribe to the stories and experiences they have as police officers and how shared narratives allow them to function within a complex organization like a major city police department.

The value in this methodology is the opportunity to capture first person accounts regarding storytelling and sensemaking in a policing context, as witnessed by the informed lens of the scholar–practitioner who has a native understanding of the profession and its monolithic culture. It is believed this type of research is best articulated through the case study methodology. The case study is often used to explore a phenomenon within its own context using a variety of data sources including interviews, focus groups, and document review, among others. Not unlike Weickian conceptions of sensemaking, Stake (1995) and Yin (2017) assert the case study method is based in a constructivist paradigm; one that recognizes relative truth is in the eye of the beholder and is achieved through a process of introspection and retrospection.

**Conclusion**

This case study research offers scholars and practitioners alike a unique opportunity to look more deeply into an aspect of police culture, its stories, through a lens that has been hinted at in the literature but not fully explored. An enhanced understanding of the richness to be found
in the stories of police organizations and their importance to the larger organizational culture is a new thread of research into policing at a time when an increased understanding of who the police are is critical to understanding how they make sense of their environments and how this process compels them to action. The answer to this question will benefit the recipients of police service (the community), those who frame the rules of their profession and evaluate their actions (policy makers and the courts), and those who lead police organizations (police executives) at a time where multifaceted challenges exist that require lightening quick decision making and generate post-incident scrutiny that has political, practical, legal, and operational ramifications.

This thesis will provide an in-depth literature review in Chapter 2 that will summarize the foundations of both extant thought on organizational storytelling and sensemaking as well as their combined effect on organizational culture and individual officer identity. Chapter 3 will provide a methodological direction articulating the use of the case study method to explore the intersection of storytelling and sensemaking among police officers through a series of semi-structured narrative interviews.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

**Introduction**

In today’s complex national policing environment much is said about the police, but less is truly known about them, who they are, or why they do what they do. In today’s complex law enforcement landscape where near-instant portrayals of police actions are shared via personal technology, some of what is said about the police is either captured by or the result of media portrayals following negative police/community interactions; given the ubiquitousness of social media, these statements are many times accepted as abject truth (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011; Sutton, Palen & Shklovskii, 2008). While
the public expression of discontent is understandable and encouraged in a free society, many times this does not fully portray who the police are or why they have become so. What may be easily captured in a soundbite or in a newspaper article does not necessarily allow for a more thorough review of the depth or complexity of the police, their culture, or their profession to be conveyed in a way that reflects their role and responsibility to society.

To address this perceptual divide, this paper will explore the relationship between sensemaking and storytelling in a policing context and how their role within a police department informs the culture and actions of its officers. As an artifact of culture, storytelling is a means to share cultural and organizational narratives with new and existing members (Gabriel, 1991; Geertz, 1973; James & Minnis, 2004; van Hulst, 2013) and a way to make simple the more complex realities of organizational life (Lawler, 2012). Policing is especially rich with stories, as Van Maanen (1973, 1974) found in his studies of police culture and assimilation, but still more research is required to fully appreciate the role of stories as both a sensemaking element and as a cultural phenomenon within police departments.

This literature review will begin with a review of sensemaking and its foundations, followed by an overview of sensemaking as derived both from Weick and other important scholars. It will continue with a discussion of its contemporary applications in organizational studies and a discussion of its role in policing and identity formation. The literature review will continue with a review of storytelling focusing on its development and evolution as well as its application to policing as a cultural artifact. This literature review will conclude with a brief discussion of both topics as elements of the culture of policing to illustrate how both play a prominent role in identity formation and suggest areas for further research. While not suggesting sensemaking and storytelling are synonymous, it is clear sensemaking and storytelling share
organizational connections, the further exploration within a policing context will advance the understanding of both as well as the culture found in policing.

**Sensemaking**

**Introduction**

Sensemaking has its roots in early American explorations of psychology (James, 1890), human nature (Dewey, 1922), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), culture (Geertz, 1973), and other concepts connected to man’s attempt to understand himself relative to his environment and how this placement impels certain actions. As these subjects ran parallel to each other, they came together in the late 1960s as Garfinkel (1967) and Weick (1969) began to ask what conditions prompted one to 1) identify a change in their environment, 2) assess its impact, and 3) cognitively process an action intended to address the change. This emerging research path was termed “sensemaking” for the first time by Weick (1969) in his discussion of how changes to the organizational environment necessarily drew the attention of organizational members and compelled them to act to address discontinuity or challenges to their expected norms. As a new theoretical framework in the broader field of organizational behavior, sensemaking offered scholars an assimilative construct with which to explain and understand individual and organizational behavior and meaning making in response to change.

Sensemaking is the cognitive process by which people work to understand novel, complex, or unexpected events using past experiences as frames of reference to guide present and future actions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 2012). It is a multistep process including perceiving cues of discontinuity in the environment, interpreting their contextual and temporal meaning, and reconciling these interpretations with a need to enact a sense of new order.
through action (Daft & Weick, 1984; Thomas et al., 1993; Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 1995).

Retrospective in nature, sensemaking is cognitively driven and action oriented; it is cyclic in nature with its processes necessarily repeating as required to maintain balance in individual and organizational life, is an inherently social process intended to enact structure to fluid environments and is intended to organize events through contextual understanding and consistent communication (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1988, 1995).

Sensemaking is also a set of activities aimed at coping with uncertainty and a search for meaning during and following unprecedented events (Boin & Renaud, 2013; Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012). When confronted with an extreme disruption to expectations, the natural balance of things is called into question in an organizational setting generating feelings of disequilibrium and a self-preservation instinct to return to a sense of normalcy as soon as possible. This may occur at the organizational level or it may occur on the individual level but the response to this change environment remains the same; the change situation itself sets into motion a process that assesses the circumstances of the event, evaluates its immediate or long-term impact, and prompts an action-oriented response (Weick, 1988, 1995a).

This movement towards action clarifies situations (makes sense of them) and reduces the equivocality or uncertainty of them by creating a link between thinking and doing (Weick, 2012). Sensemaking is central to continued organizational success, or mere survival in some cases, because it is at this point in the organizational life cycle that common meanings are developed and accepted which both informs and restricts the identities and actions of the organization and its members (Mills, 2003). While the action may appear to be swift in its delivery and may imply a lesser degree of consideration, it does not detract from its import. Sensemaking is “ongoing, instrumental, subtle, swift, social, and easily taken for granted (Weick et al., 2005, p.
The thinking, acting, and resulting sensemaking is dependent upon the present situational context and the past experiences of the individual or the organization. Langer (1989) describes context as “premature commitment, a mindset” framing the way an individual sees and understands a given situation. These frames are the subtle mental models called into use when equivocality is at its greatest and enacting order is most necessary. These frames are developed both individually and collectively from past, shared experiences that are bracketed into generalized categories of meaning that are institutionalized and available for immediate use when necessary (Brown & Lewis, 2011; Bruner, 1990; Feldman & Penland, 2003; Tsoukas, 2005). The use of frames models what Corley and Gioia (2011) call “prescience” – the process of figuring out what we need to know and how we need to know it in digestible chunks of information ready for consumption and use.

Sensemaking is not so much about truth and “getting it right” as it is about simply having the conversation and coming to a plausible conclusion. It is, as described by Weick (1995), an attempt to wrangle the emerging story so that it captures the most available data and is better able to withstand the scrutiny that results from sensemaking. Since absolute truth is not a necessity, plausibility becomes the standard (Weick, 1995). Kruglanski (1989) says accuracy is in the eye of the beholder and plausibility is based upon the utility it has for prompting action. Action creates additional stimulus and opportunities for additional dialogue that adds greater meaning to discussions of what is going on (Sutcliffe, 2000). While the search for objective truth is admirable, sensemaking, at its best, is an ongoing effort to understand and adapt to changing realities that emerge from concerted efforts to enact order and to look back and make sense of what has occurred to prepare for what will happen next (Weick, 1993).
Sensemaking Theory Development

As a relatively recent theoretical construct tracing its contemporary roots to the late 1960’s with the early ethnomethodological work of Garfinkel (1967) and Weick’s (1969) expansion of thought on cognitive dissonance, the foundations of sensemaking can be seen in the early work of Dewey (1922) who stated, “The primary fact is that man is a being who responds in action to the stimuli of the environment” (p. 200). Sensemaking as a concept is connected to three diverse fields: human–computer interactions, information science, and organizational studies. First introduced by Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) researchers to describe the processing of digital information to achieve an understanding of some state of the world and to derive from this understanding options for process completion (Pirolli & Russell, 2011), its application was initially restricted to information processing in the strictest, technical sense. Russell, Stefik, Pirolli, and Card (1993) explained their seminal work as the process of forming and working with meaningful representations to facilitate insight and subsequent intelligent action to determine which computations or processes are best performed by man or machine.

Dervin (1998), a systems and information management theorist, explored sensemaking as a methodological framework and as a metaphor of “human beings traveling through time—space, coming out of situations with history and partial instruction, arriving at new situations, facing gaps, building bridges across those gaps, evaluating outcomes, and moving on” (p. 39). Bridging the gap between human–computer interactions and later applications of individual and organizational sensemaking, Dervin (1983) adheres to the belief that all knowledge is subjective and must be created during an active human process in which reality is constructed by the individual, the understanding of which is built upon past experiences and understandings. Like later sensemaking theorists, Dervin (1983) says individuals use both the observations and experiences of themselves and others to construct an accessible picture of a subjective reality that
mandated by changing situational factors that require constant assessment and reassessment.

The diverse field of organizational studies has explored sensemaking and related concepts since its inception and provides several areas of research that feeds the larger body of literature on sensemaking. Beginning with the seminal work of Festinger (1957) on cognitive dissonance, early organization theorists studied how people adapted to environmental change, failed expectations, and attempts at reconciling personal with organizational values and beliefs (Bugental et al., 1968; Manis, 1978; Staw & Ross, 1978; Weick, 1967). Other convergent lines of thought include how language “endows” occurrences with context specific meaning (Polyani, 1967), the movement away from notions of objective reality to a more subjective reality/constructivist perspective (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Dervin, 1983), how personal beliefs inform future decision making and actions (Salancik, 1977), and how order is restored during and post-crisis (Gephart, 1993; Weick 1990, 1993). Finally, the social aspects of sensemaking processes were covered in depth through research on strategic change (Barr, 1998), its impact on organizational outcomes and culture (Drazin et al., 1999), and its role in organizational and social influence (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993).

**Weickian sensemaking.** Largely attributed to the foundational work of Karl Weick (1969, 1979), sensemaking is a cognitive process through which information is acquired, analyzed, and operationalized to guide a subsequent action intended to enact order to a given situation (Thomas et al., 1993; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is an exploration of the as yet unknown stemming from the belief that recognizing and then attempting to explain it is the best way to gauge how much one understands about a seminal event and its impact (Ancona, 2012). It is a process of discovering the new world post change event (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015) and part of an iterative process in which people generate meaning from what they interpret
(Weick, 1995). This process is activated once a challenge to normal expectations overwhelms the capacity of the organization or the individual to respond either in a timely fashion or in a manner most advantageous to continued success or growth. Maintaining immediate system stability is the chief goal of sensemaking (Weick, 1988, 1993, 1995a).

Sensemaking begins with immediate action, local context, and concrete cues that prompt the processes initiation (Weick et al., 2005). This action is most often seen in the form of communication, verbalizing what has occurred with others to assess if initial assessments are correct, and if initial understandings are valid in this social context. This begins a cycle of action in which communication begets action, the result of which prompts more communication and so on in a continuing process that ceases only once equilibrium is restored. For Weick (1995a), sensemaking is an active process of constructing shared meaning as people interpret events for which there may be little context, are novel, or critical and putting that new understanding into action to reclaim stability (Cornelissen, 2012).

This process is grounded in a series of questions needed to comprehend the events that affect us, their meaning, and their implicit call to action. These questions include “how does an event become a moment of significance to individual and organizations” and “what does it mean in a specific organizational or situational context or, perhaps more informatively, what’s the story” (Weick et al., 2005). The answers to these questions compel a next question which is “now that I know what I know, what do I do about it?” This individual or organizational dialogue is part of the process of organizing events into meaning. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) stated, “Organization is an attempt to order the intrinsic flux of human action, to channel it toward certain ends, to give it a particular shape, through generalizing and institutionalizing particular meanings and rules” (p. 570). Once begun, this iterative process continues within the
organization in perpetuity or until the organization suffers a decline requiring reinitiating the sensemaking process (Daft & Weick, 1984; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1988, 1993, 1995a).

Sensemaking is organizing. It asks the question “what’s the story” and provides a structure to catalog the information that will provide the response (Weick, 1979, 1995). In an organizational setting, sensemaking pays equal attention to the subtle nuances of the organization, its manifest culture, and the organization’s stories as it does to its policies, practices, and public pronouncements of what the organization stands for. To search for meaning through sensemaking is to appreciate the small subtleties of organizational life knowing size or prominence does not imply significance (Weick et al., 2005).

It can be said that sensemaking precedes the organization itself. It is only through the meaning making found in the recognition of circumstances, personal involvement, and coordinated responses that organizations themselves are constituted and the organization itself is defined. This constructivist/interpretivist perspective is reminiscent of Kant (as cited in Ponterotto, 2005) who said, “Human perception derives not only from evidence of the senses but also from the mental apparatus that serves to organize the incoming sense impressions” (p. 129). Efforts at sensemaking are at their most active, and most important, when the current state of one’s expected world varies significantly from the present reality or when there is no immediately acceptable response to a new unknown (Weick et al., 2005). It requires of the organization or the individual to continuously ask the questions “what is,” “what was”, and “what can be” as they collectively or individually conduct their ongoing search for meaning.

Sensemaking occurs both in the present as contextual change is occurring and retrospectively, or post-event, when time allows for consideration of the event and plausible
responses (Weick et al., 2005). It begins when aberrant facts are noticed and bracketed. This first step in sensemaking reveals the difference in one's environment and the necessity to take some action to address it. At this moment, bracketing is the process of creating a new meaning for something that has already occurred but does not yet have a meaning for the individual or organization (Magala, 1997). The process of bracketing collects, for the first time in the sensemaking process, the raw materials that must be assigned a common meaning to be shared with others to come to agreement about its relevance and presumptive next steps (Chia, 2000).

Weick’s seven elements of sensemaking. Weick (1995) describes seven elements of sensemaking that articulates the social process of how individuals, groups, and organizations construct meaning from their experiences and how this constructivist perspective frames present understanding and future actions. First, sensemaking is grounded in the notion individual identity is central to one’s sense of self and, therefore, how they view their sense of equilibrium when it is disrupted. Weick’s (1995) apt appropriation of E.M. Forster more fully describes this by saying “How can I know what I think until I see what I say” (p. 18)? That is to say, one can never fully appreciate the impact or importance of an experience until they have had time to think about and constitute it to a formative personal reality through retrospection and introspection. Weick (1995) continues that sensemaking “is triggered by a failure to confirm one’s self” and that its primary function is to maintain in the individual a positive self-conception that allows them to persevere during times of discontinuity and flux (p. 23).

Second, sensemaking itself is an act of retrospection as one reconciles present circumstances with past experiences. The importance of retrospection is based in Schutz’s (1967) discussion of the “meaningful lived experience.” To Weick, this is self-evident as one can only appreciate the value of a lived experience after it has occurred, and sufficient time has
passed to consider it in relation to the time and context of its placement. Weick (1995) elaborates on this point by returning to Schutz (1967) who stated:

When, by my act of reflection, I turn my attention to my living experience, I am no longer taking up my position within the stream of pure duration, I am simply living with that flow. The experiences are apprehended, distinguished, brought into relief, marked out from one another; the experiences which were constituted as phases within the flow of duration now become objects of attention as constituted experiences…. For the act of attention—and this is of major importance for the study of meaning—presupposes an elapsed, passed away experience—in short, one that is already in the past (p. 51).

Third, sensemaking occurs as people enact or articulate their environments through narrative accounts and understanding that frame actions, compel action, and reduce equivocality during times of change. Weick (1995) is acutely aware that people contribute significantly to their environment and that they are co-creators of a wholly subjective reality through conceptualizing and enacting their responses narratively. By providing narrative structure to a situational occurrence laden with context, the individual brackets experiences into more easily digestible chunks of information for immediate or later use based, in part, on previous exercises in bracketing. Action is crucial for sensemaking with Weick (1995) saying that mere will to change the environment is insufficient; considerate steps must be taken to implement sensemaking informed behaviors to respond to environmental change and reduce equivocality.

Fourth, sensemaking is, at its most basic level, a social activity during which time experiences are shared among group members to enable both retrospective and collective sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005). Weick (1995) cautions that one should not fall too easily into the trap that sensemaking is entirely an individual act. Rather, intersubjectivity is critical to enacted
sensemaking as meaning is co-created with others who may view circumstances differently or from different perspectives. Similarly, Walsh and Ungson (1991) and Gephart, Topal, and Zhang (2010) state organizations are social groupings of individuals and are at their most base level intersubjective networks that generate and share the common language that frames a shared cultural meaning. These shared meanings provide the foundation upon which sensemaking is built through near constant exchange of information and understanding that constitutes organizational realities.

Fifth, sensemaking is an ongoing process continuously undergoing review and change as one adapts to changing conditions. The only constant is change and as Thayer (1988) said, everything is always in the process of becoming what it is or will be. Weick et al. (2005) said sensemaking is the process of articulating the emerging story in such a way as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a singular event which allows for the incorporation of more data and is more resilient in the face of criticism. As the search for meanings continues, people may describe their activities as the pursuit of accuracy to get it right. However, that description is important mostly because it sustains motivation. People may develop better stories, but they will never get a story that describes a singular, objective truth.

To understand the fluidity of reality and to adapt to the constancy of change, ongoing bracketing, or the parsing of contextual elements and explanatory communication is necessary to make sense of situations as and after they occur. On this point, Taylor and Van Every (2000) stated:

We see communication as an ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find ourselves and of the events that affect them. The sensemaking, to the extent that it involves communication, takes place in interactive talk
and draws on the resources of language in order to formulate and exchange through talk symbolically encoded representations of these circumstances. As this occurs, a situation is talked into existence and the basis is laid for action to deal with it (p. 275).

Sixth, sensemaking requires people to extract cues from social or situational context to determine what stimulus or information is necessary to retain to complete sensemaking activities. It is triggered by events for which agreement or understanding of their contextual meaning is ambiguous, next steps remain unclear, and outcomes are uncertain (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking is necessary when organization “members confront events, issues, and actions that are somehow surprising or confusing” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21) and when these events create a demand for an explanation (Louis, 1980). In this sense, the act of sensemaking is noticing that something is amiss or that one’s expectations have not been met, requiring some level of effort to assess, understand, and act to return to an individually or organizationally defined normal. Magala (1997) stated this requires the creation of a new meaning for an event that has already occurred and disrupted the environment and does not yet have meaning or a name.

And finally, sensemaking values plausibility over accuracy when rationalizing past events and current actions to complete the iterative process of sensemaking while preparing for the next challenge to balance or equilibrium. Sensemaking itself is not the search for an objective truth; by its very nature and the nature of people, sensemaking is an inherently subjective process in which people construct their meaning to suit their needs. Plausibility over truth allows for decisions to be made temporally in the face of flux and actions to be taken to reduce equivocality in the face of change. Physical action facilitates the cognitive process of sensemaking by generating new data and creates opportunities for further dialogue that serves to
enrich the sense of what is going on, what it means, and what it means for the individual or the organization (Sutcliffe, 2000).

**Sensemaking & Policing**

Policing is prone to environmental and situational flux (Braga & Bond, 2008; Flynn & Herrington, 2015; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Weick (2009) and Colville et al. (2012) characterize flux as the key element against which sensemaking is enacted saying not only has continuous change become the norm for organizations, but also that near constant environmental discontinuity leading to change is becoming the new norm. This implies a temporal element to sensemaking that illustrates that the pace of change dictates the pace of sensemaking and, in turn, organizational or individual responses. In such circumstances, it is the natural inclination for people to make sense of the flux in such a way to allow them to regain perceptual stability and to resume the affected activity.

Perhaps the greatest disruption a police officer could experience is a violent, armed confrontation. While police officers enter the profession with the knowledge they may have to use force in response to a violent confrontation, training scenarios rarely replicate the lower brain stimuli that prompts a fight, flight or freeze response such an encounter may generate (Goleman, 1996). What can follow is a condition defined by the military and adapted by the police called overwhelmed by events (OBE). Colonel John Boyd USAF, a combat fighter pilot, military strategist, theorist, and researcher who studied soldiers’ responses to violent conflict and challenges to personal safety, developed a sensemaking response to OBE called the OODA loop in which one 1) observes, 2) orients, 3) decides, and 4) acts in response to a situational disruption (Richards, 2003). In a policing context, the OODA loop forces the officer to enact a sensemaking paradigm through identifying the threat and immediately act to respond under
conditions of grave uncertainty very much in a Weickian manner (Richards, 2003; Rosenthal, Charles &‘t Hart, 1989). Though based upon military combat situations, it has applicability to policing where violent confrontations can occur and illustrates an adaptive sensemaking paradigm that, if adapted specifically to policing, could provide a leadership framework to law enforcement leaders during times of crisis or when confronting novel situations for which there is little to no previous context or experience (Figure 3).

![OODA loop](image)

*Figure 3. OODA loop. Adapted from C. W. Richards “A swift, elusive sword: What if Sun Tzu did a national defense review?” Center for Defense Information, February 2003, 22.*

Similarly, identity formation plays a significant role in sensemaking being both informer and informed as a cultural artifact. Beginning with Albert and Whetten’s (1985) description of identity as that which is the root and enduring character of an individual and an organization, Weick et al. (2005) described identity as *who we think we are* within the context of the organization and the key element in shaping how we enact order and how we interpret events that surround us. Identity is foundational to how we view the world; therefore, it is not coincidental that identity is listed first among Weick’s (1995) seven elements of sensemaking process. When the individual, organizational, or, in the case of policing, cultural sense of identity is challenged the primary goal is to construct new accounts of identity that reconcile a new reality with a new identity in such a way as to allow for a return to stability.
Maitlis and Christianson (2014) found that sensemaking is most often triggered by an experience or a challenging event that undermines one’s ability to do work that is central to their identity. In a profession as heavily dependent upon identity formation as policing, making sense of disorder occurs in large measure based upon the organizational identity of the police organization and how its members are assimilated into it (Bradford, 2014; Twersky-Glasner, 2005). Sensemaking is, as Cunliffe and Copland (2011) said, an act of embodying the everyday, lived experiences of the organization and its members with the goal of maintaining both stability and identity.

Policing is recognized by its symbols and those symbols (badges, patches, uniforms, etc.) manifest organizational identity. Girling, Loader, and Sparks (2000) stated, “Police and policing activity provide a set of symbolic tools that people use to describe and discuss their social environment, their place within it, and their hopes and fears for the future” (page number). Police officers are alternately part of and set apart from their environments. As embedded servants of the community and as practitioners of community-based policing, many police officers are more so a part of their community today than ever before (Morin, Parker, Stepler & Mercer, 2017; Scott et al., 2016). Yet, by virtue of their uniform and other symbols that convey their authority they are intentionally differentiated from those they serve. This dichotomy places police offices naturally in a state of flux as they try to unpack who they truly are relative to who their community thinks they are.

Identity formation is about creating a story about who the individual is in relation to their environment. In a policing context, the identity one holds informs both their place and view of their environment. When a police officer’s personal or cultural identity is challenged, as has occurred in today’s law enforcement landscape, it challenges basic underlying assumptions they
hold about themselves and their place in their environment. Weick et al. (2005) stated,

...who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors’ shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity. Who we are lies importantly in the hands of others, which means our categories for sensemaking lie in their hands. If their images of us changes our identities may be destabilized and our receptiveness to new meanings increase (p. 416).

Sensemaking, it would appear, is a critically necessary skill for both organizations and individuals if interested in adaptation and survival. Why then is sensemaking seen as such a challenge to modern policing (Boin & Renaud, 2013; McMaster et al., 2012)? Sensemaking most often occurs during or following times of crisis when the capacity to quickly evaluate risk and reward, liability, and obligations are most severely tested and one’s identity is most challenged. Mitroff (2004), in his extensive work on crises, makes a distinction between crisis management, which is purely responsive, and crisis leadership, which is simultaneously forward focused on the “future unthinkable” (p. 11) and a respect for and understanding of past events and organizational responses. Organizational rigidity inhibits effective sensemaking, as does cultural norms bred into the very fabric of the organization; defeating these is one of the goals of sensemaking. Many times, this culture is a product of the organizational narrative, otherwise known as storytelling, and an understanding of this phenomenon can reveal much about the police organization and its culture.

Counterarguments to Sensemaking

While widely viewed as a plausible, if not seminal theory of information management and cognitive decision making, there are some who remain critical of Weick’s work. Mills
(2008) recognizes the heuristic value of Weick’s work, saying it makes some important contributions to understanding organizations. Where Weick lacks development of his work, Mills (2008) suggested, is in his offering what is essentially an ethnomethodology of organizations. For critical scholars like Mills this assumes a continuation of the patrician structures of organizations and a perpetuation of existing power balances. Rather than acting as a critical theory to facilitate social change, sensemaking, Mills (2008) says, demeans underrepresented populations in organizations and naturally places them in lesser positions to make change.

Weber and Glynn (2006), building upon the work of Taylor and Van Every (2000), suggested that Weick lacks a certain understanding of the organization as a vehicle for communication that institutionalizes its members through several internal contradictions and tensions. Rather than being wholly critical of Weick, they called his work somewhat incomplete and posited that an extension of his work should include greater consideration of the role institutions play in priming sensemaking via social cues, editing sensemaking feedback through social processes, and triggering sensemaking through institutional contradictions and ambiguity.

While it is not unexpected that time would expose cracks in the foundation of sensemaking, its applicability to this research remains unchanged for several reasons. Weick (2009) characterizes flux as the key element against which sensemaking is enacted saying that not only has continuous change become the norm for organizations, but also that discontinuous continuous change is becoming the new norm. This implies that the pace of change dictates the pace of sensemaking and, in turn, organizational or individual responses. In such circumstances, it is the natural inclination for people to make sense of the flux in such a way to allow them to regain perceptual stability and to resume the affected activity. This notion is common in policing
where sudden change that challenges individual and organizational stability is the norm.

**Storytelling**

**Foundations**

Storytelling as a contemporary academic subject of study owes much to Geertz (1973) and his advocacy of ethnography and “thick description” (p. 16) as crucial elements in anthropological research. In describing the essence and essentials of a Balinese cockfight, he articulated for many the inherent value to be found in the simplest of stories—the context, the subtext, the language, the nuance, the descriptions, and the details that make up everyday life and inform our understanding of it. Stories portray the culture of a group, the hidden and not so subtle meanings of things, and, perhaps most important of all, help to make sense of one’s reality. In the search for our subjective truth, there is perhaps no better indicator of meaning than the stories we tell and no better vehicle to make sense of our subjective reality than to tell stories about it. Van Maanen (1988) describes the whole of social science research, man’s academic search for meaning, as storytelling and the foundation of achieving a greater understanding of who we are and where we sit in our world and Mumby (2013) calls it one of the most important ways people produce their social reality.

Telling stories is among the oldest of human endeavors and it remains a fundamental element of contemporary society (Krause & Smith, 2014). The need to capture and retell what has occurred is as primitive a need as is the need to hunt and gather. Stories serve many purposes, the most central of which is their ability to translate the complex into the simple (Lawler, 2012). The more ambiguous a situation is the more likely metaphors and stories will serve as sensemaking tools to order the experience and to return to the natural and simpler order of things (Boland & Greenberg, 1988).
Lewis (2011) describes storytelling as an act of sensegiving, a recursive process that enhances our understanding of the present and of the past. Young and Saver (2001) stated, “To be without stories means…to be without memories” (p. 74). In considering the retrospective nature of sensemaking, creating memories from the past is necessary to digest the present and to move towards the future. To paraphrase Lewis (2009), we are the story and the story is us; a simple truth that speaks to the value of storying the events of our life. There is a constitutive role stories play in social organizing, particularly the words used to convey reality and, Grisham (2006) asserts, it is precisely the language of stories that causes organizational reality to exist. It is, as said by Mumby (2013), a prime example of communication constituting reality.

In addition to making reality more real and accessible, storytelling in an organizational environment serves as a leadership education and development tool. Perhaps the singular, seminal leadership book, James MacGregor Burns’ “Leadership” (1978), is a collection of great man stories seamlessly blended with critical assessments of their flaws and failures. Tales of leaders and leadership themselves can become a subtle leader in an organization (Denning, 2008; Parry & Hansen, 2007). More than just a tool to perpetuate a prescribed organizational narrative, the most effective stories have the ability move to the center of the communicative leadership process from the fringes of the organization and serve to constitute and coalesce the various elements of the organization into a single, aligned social entity.

The value in studying the organizational narrative is substantial. Gabriel (2000) advocates for increased research about stories and the organizations they represent to enhance our understanding of them saying “stories open valuable windows into the emotional, political, and symbolic lives of organizations” (p. 2) and that they serve to humanize and make more accessible a sometimes distant and abstract entity. Bate (1984) calls organizational narratives
key to organization members making sense of the phenomena occurring in their environments through social interactions, observation, and self-reflection while Wilkins (1983) says they make the more abstract concepts of the organization real and provide a script of past experiences to model desired present conduct or operations.

The most effective stories have key elements including plausibility, are told by a single narrator for truth and credibility, are possessed of a certain duality that values both storyteller and listener equally and generates a shared meaning of mutual benefit to the individual and the organization (James & Minnis, 2004; Kaye & Jacobsen, 1999; Lawler, 2011). Research has shown positively oriented stories are better received than negatively oriented stories (Harris & Barnes, 2006) and the stories that engage the listener are those which engage their past experiences to help make sense of present realities (Driscoll & McKee, 2007; Grisham, 2006; Langer & Thorup, 2006; Ooi, 2002). The important role of the listener cannot be understated as it is considered an element of organizational and individual resistance to change when organizational narratives are not heard or are rejected thereby reducing significantly the likelihood of enacting sensemaking strategies in response to changing environmental conditions (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002).

Plausibility is a key element in storytelling; that it is believable and relevant to the listener and the unique time/place circumstances is critical to its receptivity and, ultimately, use as a sensemaking tool. Similar to aspects of sensemaking, determining a story to be plausible is a process by which the story, and its supporting backstories or meta-stories, are deemed to be reasonable given the circumstances so much so the listener is inclined to use them to guide their actions (Denning, 2006; Driscoll & McKee, 2007). Gabriel (2004) has said, “I have long found this view that the truth of a story lies in its meaning rather than in its accuracy compelling”,
asserting an interpretivist–subjective reality position that puts the onus on the listener to first accept the story as plausible and then to derive from it a subjective meaning sufficient to prompt action. Bruner (1990) said narratives of any type need not be true or even complete; what matters most in police storytelling is that the story seems believable within the sociocultural context in which it is shared and that they “seem” to reflect what may have occurred in a frame that is commonly understood by the listeners and easily accessible.

**Storytelling in Policing**

There is a distinct culture in American policing, the foundation of which is built upon a sense of belongingness to the organization at the macro level and to the sub-unit–squad level at the micro unit (Ingram, Paoline, & Terrill, 2013). A feeling of belongingness helps to define individuals as members of a group, binds them to the objectives of their organization, and provides them a lens through which they view and make sense of their world (Geertz, 1973; Schein, 2010; Weick, 1995).

Storytelling in a policing context is present in both the popular culture and academic literature. Popularly, police shows and movies have long captivated the nonpolice by creating a police mythology best represented by *Dirty Harry*, the *Lethal Weapon* quartet of movies, or the television show *Cops*. The extant, academic literature is more balanced. According to Smith et al. (2014), the literature on storytelling in policing has covered topics as diverse as the police station itself, criminal trials, police humor, police culture, oral histories, and police leadership among many other public safety topics. Cop stories have become so common they are almost cliché, yet they are exceedingly relevant, though understudied, as an important part of the knowledge management or knowledge transfer among and between police officers (Burnett et al., 2011).
Police stories, while they can be entertaining, are also purposive. In addition to passing on institutional, individual, or organizational knowledge that may be of critical importance as a police officer navigates the challenges of the job, a process Van Hulst (2013) describes in policing as a means for new recruits to learn how to be police officers, they facilitate the organizational learning process Burnett, Pederson & Smith (2011) describes as knowing through narrative. This is an important concept during times of crisis or disequilibrium.

Police departments are full of storytellers (Fletcher, 1999). Officers share stories of and about the job to entertain and educate, to process the distinct variety of the job and, perhaps most of all, to make sense of the violence, poverty, or the patently unexplainable. Storytelling is, as Fletcher (1999) called it, an essential part of the officers’ equipment not unlike a gun, a pair of handcuffs, or a police radio. Narration in policing is near omnipresent; police officers interview witnesses and suspects, they write police reports and testify in court, recount their activities during interviews, and assimilate into the occupational culture through hearing the oral traditions of their police department (Burnett et al., 2011).

Fletcher (1996), an ethnographer in the tradition of Geertz and an adherent to the belief culture is revealed through stories, found police stories are divided into two, distinct categories: the personal and the organizational. The personal stories of police act as a catharsis of sorts, making meaning from past experiences while sharing them with an understanding audience, while the organizational stories are the permissive or prohibitive oral traditions that guide an officer's’ behavior or define the organizational culture in which they occur.

**Police Culture & Storytelling**

Two lines of thought of police storytelling drive the discussion. The early sociologists and ethnographers who explored police culture (Manning & Van Maanen, 1978) relied heavily
upon observation and officer informed storytelling as accurate representations of the police reality. This view tends to see police storytelling as illustrative of the culture and individual identity and takes largely at face value the perceived truths and validity of the police narrative. The other view is one which views police storytelling as somewhat self-serving and less representative of the objective truths of the job (Van Hulst, 2013). This view describes police storytelling as palliative (Fielding, 1994; Waddington, 1999) and mostly a way to fill the time between calls in an otherwise mundane job that is not accurately portrayed with the former view in what has been called the “Canteen Culture” (Van Hulst, 2013).

The “Canteen Culture” stands in direct opposition of the operational police culture, but that fact alone is not cause for discord among the advocates of each respective position (Van Hulst, 2013). What is mutually agreed by both is that stories serve a necessary and critical purpose in policing; they perpetuate the culture, they enhance the teller of tales, they educate the novice, and they bind together the social aspects of police organizations. Police stories do different things at different times and serve different purposes. The stories themselves perform different types of work such as capturing past events, ordering present reality, providing meaning to events, assisting in identity formation, promoting organizational points of view, or carrying a message the teller wishes to be conveyed (Forester, 1993; Gabriel, 2000; Polanyi, 1979; Reissman, 2008). What is clear is that the police culture is both influenced by and influences the stories that are told and, as a result, a brief review and understanding of police culture is helpful.

Police culture is well known for its mythos—the stories, war stories, or fish stories that are used to integrate new employees, inculcate culture, make sense of the job and its effects on officers, and to memorialize individuals or events. The mythic nature of policing uses storytelling as a powerful tool in using archetypal devices such as heroism, heroes, and epic
narratives of watershed police events to create a better understanding of the organizational and occupational culture (Krause & Smith, 2014). These stories of heroism begin with a change in the environment that propels the police officer towards a heroic act, an act that must be assigned a meaning post-incident, and one that will, itself, become part of the historical narrative of the organization. On this point, O’Donnell (2013) stated, “Mythical themes occur and recur in narratives because they represent life experiences, beliefs, values and behaviors that organize social interaction…Myths offer examples of right and wrong, explain baffling of frightening phenomena, and provide models of good and evil” (p. 81).

Storytelling as a communication tool used to reduce stress and anxiety during times of flux or crisis (Kopp et al., 2011) is part of the fabric of policing. Every new officer is partnered with a senior officer to learn the job but also the organization. During this first of many interdependent relationships a new officer will develop, they are frequently told stories and cautionary tales about where significant events occurred such as the line-of-duty death of an officer or other event of unique significance to their department. These policing vignettes are offered as a cautionary tale to new officers and are passed from one police generation to the next. Borrowing from the work of James and Minnis (2004), these vignettes are broadly characterized as stories of prohibition, stories of organizational structure, stories of career potential, stories of career ending acts, stories of support, stories of learning, and stories of organizational identity.

Storytelling can be viewed as a natural byproduct of sensemaking as evidenced by the work of Weick (1995), the process by which individuals make sense of heretofore unheard of situations using the culture and context of an organization to do so. Islam (2013) stated, “Among the different forms of sensemaking, stories are unique because of their simultaneous ability to structure organizational environments and preserve the indeterminacy of environments as lived
experiences” (p.30). Memorializing the present for use in the future is a fundamental element of storytelling and a key component of the process of sensemaking. Stories are, as O’Neil (2002) pointed out,

…discourse which has been repeated by some organizational member to other organizational member(s) to fulfill some need, and which possesses a degree of color, evoking emotion in the listener(s), and resulting in some memorable quality regardless of whether the communication is based on actual events, is mythological in nature, or exists somewhere in between (p. 5).

Deal and Kennedy (1999) say stories are often used to espouse the fundamental values of an organization, Boyce (1996) says an organization's ethos can be communicated via storytelling, and Browning (1992) declared stories to be a critical form of communication used to memorialize historical events and heroic acts of an organization's member. Each of these points is found in policing; these stories are the cultural artifacts of an organization (Schein, 2010) with equal or greater value than manuals, policies, or other communiqués (Kopp & Desiderio, 2009). The study of narrative is well suited to the police story typology in that it opens the organization up to explorations of time, place and social connection (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). Narrative inquiries, particularly those in policing, are studies of events in transition, are specific to locations and are concerned with the personal conditions of the stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Storytelling is perhaps no more on display in policing than at a police officer’s funeral following a line-of-duty death. Neuhauser (1993) stated heroic stories, such as those eulogized at police funerals, have the capacity to provide stability during or following crisis, boost morale, convey strong leadership, and remind listeners of the heraldry of the organization and the valor
of the individual. Eisenberg and Goodall (1997) maintain that stories of legendary heroes of good and evil contribute to the strength of the culture’s ideology and reveal the beliefs and values of the organization. Campbell (1988) points to the heroism inherent in a police officer line of duty death saying that they “who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself” (p. 151) fulfills the definitional requirements of “hero” and provides for a unique type of narrative powerful enough to sustain stories of disorder, violence, justice, and the heroes themselves (Lule, 2001).

Campbell (1988) said this type of anguish and suffering is inevitable; however, the mythos of the individual or of the collective communicates how to face it, learn from it, and move beyond it. These stories have the ability to reintroduce organizational direction and rally its members to a common, unifying cause. Many times, the resulting discourse is fed into the policies and practices of the organization and becomes a part of the larger police department culture and mythos. Entirely relational, storytelling is a form of inter- and intragenerational communication within a police department that gives meaning to the policies and life to the culture. Storytelling is a primary form of communication in policing and defines the reality of the profession.

**Sensemaking, Storytelling, and Policing**

Contemporary thought on organizational communication has come to agreement on the notion that *communication constitutes organizations/reality (CCO/R)*, a notion advanced by several authors in the field (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, 2000; Putnam and Nicotra, 2008). Communication describes what exists in and of itself distinct from objective reality. The idea of social constructionism, the perspective that says communication constitutes one's reality, helps to define one’s identity, and is a prominent feature of organizations in general.
and policing specifically (May and Mumby, 2005). Loader and Mulcahy (2003), in part drawing upon the work of Sir Robert Peel (as cited in Lentz and Chaires, 2007), the founder of the London Metropolitan Police, advance the premise that the mere fact of how the police are socially constructed as an entity sets them apart from the general citizenry. They continue that for its members, policing becomes the means by which they find their place personally and professionally and how social identities are formed both individually and collectively (Loader and Mulcahy, 2003). Girling, Loader & Sparks (2002) (as cited in Bradford, 2014) stated, “Police and policing activity provide a set of symbolic tools that people use to describe and discuss their social environment, their place within it, and their hopes and fears for the future” (p. 24). These identities are founded and communicated through the social construction of the police identity.

Especially in a profession like policing, organizations are propelled and sustained more so by its artifacts, rituals, ceremonies, stories, myths, heroes, and the like than by its rules or manuals. One of the more common artifacts of policing is the sense of “gallows humor” or “black humor,” so called due to the officer's’ propensity to find humor in situations entirely bereft of any. The is reminiscent of the “Canteen Culture” where stories are told to enhance personal status or to kill time in an otherwise mundane job as well as reflecting the more constitutive nature of police storytelling (Van Hulst, 2013). Horan, Bochantin & Booth-Butterfield (2012) for example, studied humor in police officers as a potential coping mechanism against the stresses of the job. Stress in law enforcement is commonly called “burst stress,” where an officer can go from calm to hyper stressed within seconds (Howard, Donofrio & Boles, 2004). There is also the built-up stress that slowly eats at officers and has led to increases in alcoholism, divorce, and suicide (Bochantin, 2010; Cummings, 1996; Kirschman, 2004). To
combat these acute and chronic stressors, humor is often used by police as a coping mechanism and serves as a culturally appropriate way to vent emotion, regain a sense of control and reinforce shared values.

Building upon the work of Folkman and Lazarus (1988) and their Transactional Theory of Emotion, Horan et al. (2012) begin with the assumption that difficult experiences elicit a negative or a positive feeling, the response to which is predicated on the cultural context and the situation itself. In situations where a negative response is appropriate, humor is often injected to mitigate emotional stress and achieve a sense of stability while other options are assessed. This process can occur at a rapid pace in policing as each day is often punctuated by several opportunities to make emotional evaluations of situations and self.

Not unlike sensemaking, humor is often employed to make sense of the senseless in policing. Personal crisis can be as impactful as organizational crisis and requires not an organizational response but rather an individual one. Humor is this sense acts as an antidote to the discordance of a situation (Patriotta, 2003) and allows for the opportunity for officers to constructively vent anger, frustration, or sadness at a given situation and allow for overall improved mental health and relationships outside the job (Bochantin, 2010; Miller, 1994). And like other effective organizational communication strategies, humor is entirely relational and ripe with context.

**Storytelling, Sensemaking and Police Culture**

Of the several types of organizations typically studied focusing on traditional storytelling or organizational narrative lines of research, policing is rarely among them. Policing, however, has been the source of a great deal of organizational research on topics as diverse as the future of policing (Greengard, 2012), police–youth interactions (Kennelly, 2009), and racial stratification
during traffic stops (Rojek, Rosenfeld, & Decker, 2012), among other, more typical subjects. But with relatively few exceptions, the connection between storytelling and sensemaking in policing has not been as prominent. A further exploration of the connection between storytelling and sensemaking will fill a gap in the literature that may serve to identify the role each play in the development of the police identity both on an individual and organizational level and how this translates to service delivery and public perception.

Beginning with Westley (1970), the contemporary study of police culture has a long history of seeking to understand those who serve the cause of public safety through policing and the reciprocal nature of how this cause both defines and is defined by its members. The evolution of the literature has shown police culture to be less of a monolithic, singular norm of common experiences across the occupational culture and more of a diverse, social phenomenon wholly dependent upon the organization and its environment (Chan, 1997; Haarr, 1997; Paoline, Myers, & Worden, 2000).

There is, however, value in reviewing the shared experiences at the microcosmic, organizational level as Paoline (2004) indicates the values and attitudes to found in distinct sub-groups in policing can vary widely. Building upon the work of Worden’s (1995) synthesis of police role typologies, Paoline (2004) indicates, for example, distinct cultural developments in policing are based upon officer assessments of their role in the organization, a role that is largely defined by internal social processes, perceptions, and norms each unique to the organization’s culture. Police culture in this sense is the internal, social process of sharing attitudes, values, and norms among and between police officers in a profession that is often characterized by disequilibrium, violence, uncertainty, and conflict (Chan, 1996; Loftus, 2010; Paoline, 2003, 2004).
Seeking to make sense of the senseless is an all too common occurrence for the police. Sensemaking has received extensive attention in the literature from its original conceptions (Weick, 1969, 1979), to include organizational applications (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), crisis situations (Weick, 1988) and its utility during ethically challenging situations (Caughron, Antes, Stenmark, Thiel, Wang, & Mumford, 2013) among many other topics, yet not as much inquiry has been conducted specific to policing. Boin and Renaud (2013) have discussed sensemaking during operational crises in policing, Colville, Pye, and Carter (2013) have discussed sensemaking during and following terror attacks, and Maguire and Katz (2002) have discussed sensemaking in combination with loosely coupled systems in the application of community-based policing principles.

The exploration of storytelling as means to facilitate sensemaking among police officers may serve to identify the role it plays at different stages of a police career, aid in understanding how officers make sense of the seemingly senseless and provide insight as to how the stories told in policing reflect an organizational culture that is manifest both to the organization's members and to the community they serve. In unstable environments like policing, one's understanding of present circumstances shaken by unprecedented change instigates a search for meaning, or a story that explains what is going on, why, and what happens next. Similarly, this process of seeking to understand can “expose the flaws in logic upon which yesterday was built” (Colville et al., 2011, p. 8).

This perspective is critically relevant to organizational behavior, particularly when applied to a policing context given the pace of change and the increase in social and organizational instability following a year of discord between the police and the community after a series of deadly force encounters between police and African-American citizens. One need
only follow the news to see near weekly stories of high-profile, officer involved uses of force, protests and counter-protests, and public and government criticism of police leaders, police departments, and police tactics. Unlike in years past, change is the new normal not only in policing but also across all organizational environments (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002); the unorthodox and the rare have become the expected and the commonplace requiring police departments to keep up, make sense, and act (Cunha, Clegg, & Kamoche, 2006; Lampel, Shamsie, & Shapira, 2009; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2003).

**Conclusion**

Sensemaking and storytelling have parallel academic histories each based upon the notion that narratives help to make sense of the present and prepares officers for the future. In assessing these distinct tracks, it is clear that policing is very much a story-based profession, one in which reconciling disequilibrium in dependent upon a cache of organizational narratives filed away for this very purpose. Finding a closer connection between how the organizational narrative makes sense of the organizational environment is the future of researching this topic and worthy of additional review by both policing and organizational theorists alike.

Enhanced understanding of how storytelling informs sensemaking in the policing context will shed new light on how the police view themselves and the work they do. Like any other organization, the police have uniquely personal cultural norms that are developed and shared through a social process the goal of which is to make sense of their environment, their responsibilities, and their shared history. Following the oral tradition, the shared history of police departments is captured through stories and become part of the fiber of the organization by becoming the defining organizational narrative.
The logical progression of this research was to assess the efficacy of this self-assessment relative to the community the police serve. Part of the ongoing dialogue regarding police–community relations centers on a lack of cultural competency and understanding that is often ascribed to the police. If there exists a disconnect between who the police think they are and who the community think they are, then great value can be found in addressing the competing perceptions and closing the perceptual gap for the benefit of both the police and the public. This pending dialogue speaks to the heart of police legitimacy, the notion that the community places their trust in a police organization believing they are legitimately using their community provided authority wisely and in the best interests of the public.

The perception of self must first be explored from the police perspective before discussions of its inherent truth or reception are begun. This perception of self begins with assessing the organizational and individual identities of police; identities that are based in the history of the organization captured in the stories they share and manifest in the actions they take on the street when dealing with the community. As described by Weick and others, action is the consequence of sensemaking—it is the natural byproduct of thinking back on past events either personally experienced or institutionally shared. It is here at the intersection of storytelling and sensemaking that contemporary American policing finds itself. The next question is “where do we go from here?” The answer, of course, is forward towards increased understanding of these dependent cultural phenomena and towards a better understanding of the police and their place in a free society.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The study of storytelling is an exploration of the subtler nuances of organizational life. Culture, language, tradition, history—these are the things organization members rely upon to assess the importance of change events and to extract meaning from their situational context (Alvesson, 2011; Geertz, 1973; Hofstetter & Harpaz, 2015; O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Schein, 2010). As is illustrated through a review of the literature, this study proceeded from the premise that the collective experiences of police departments and its members are captured through its stories and narratives and that these oral traditions, based on the collective past experiences of the organization, are used by police officers to make sense of contemporary realities. This is especially important to the understanding of police as the process and results of sensemaking compels action (Brown et al., 2015; Colville et al., 2012; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1988, 1995a; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). Reviewing how the stories common to policing help police officers make sense of their environments has received scant attention in the literature providing this research with an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of the police in contemporary America.

The study of the role of storytelling as an element of organizational culture, described alternately as the “thick description” of the details of everyday life (Geertz, 1973, p. 16), man’s cataloging of his search for meaning (Van Maanen, 1988) or the way in which people produce their social reality (Fisher, 1987; McPhee & Zaug, 2009; Mumby, 2013) has received extensive attention in the literature in areas as diverse as anthropology, sociology, folklore and management. Similarly, the study of sensemaking, articulated by Weick’s (1995) theory on how one makes sense of the events that impact them by drawing upon past experiences, has also been
broadly covered in the field of organizational studies (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001; Abolafia, 2010; Malsch, Tremblay & Gendron, 2012; Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). The combination of the two has been situated largely in traditional organizational settings (e.g., Gabriel 1998, 2000; Hopkinson 2003; Tsoukas 2005; Colville et al., 2012; Islam, 2013) and offers much for application to other fields, particularly law enforcement with its own, rich cultural traditions and storied history. There is, however, a noticeable lack of research that evaluates the two in organizational settings prone to more acute discontinuity, particularly those of significance to the community at large such as in policing.

Grounded in the qualitative research tradition this research asks, “What role does storytelling play in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment?” In answering the primary research question, it is the goal of this research to identify the distinct narrative constructions that bind storytelling with sensemaking, how they are shared among and between organizational members in a large, southwestern police department and how do these narratives capture or reflect the culture of the organization. The exploration of subjective meaning, as co-created by the researcher and respondent, is well suited for a research methodology that is based in the qualitative tradition, proceeds from a constructivist paradigm and uses the case study as a methodological approach to facilitate the exploration into a phenomenon (storytelling informed sensemaking) within a particular context (policing) through a variety of sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Qualitative Research Method and Rationale

Methodological Considerations

Trauth (2001) states simply what one wants to learn suggests how one should go about it. In selecting the proper research methodology, the researcher must ask “how can one go about
finding what they believe can be known” (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) mindful the answer to that question will provide the foundation for their research and its results. Ponterotto (2005) defines methodology as the “process and procedures of research” saying that it “flows from the researcher’s positions on ontology, epistemology, and axiology” (p. 132). Research methodologies are largely based on four main principles of inquiry that ask what counts as “reality” (ontology), what counts as “knowledge” and how does one go about acquiring it (epistemology), what is acceptable as rigor in the pursuit of inquiry (logic), and what counts as the fundamental values that guides the inquiry process, particularly in regards to the role and voice of the inquirer (axiology) (McGregor & Murnane, 2010; Pluye, Hong, Bush, & Vedel, 2016; Ponterotto, 2005).

Selecting the right research method is critical to the successful conduct of inquiry and is considered to be one of the defining attributes of scientific endeavor (Hallinger, 2013; Jovanović, 2011). Two primary methods exist—quantitative and qualitative—for scientific inquiry that rises to the level of contributing in a meaningful way to the wider body of knowledge. The former seeks an objective truth through carefully controlled experimentation while the latter seeks to derive meaning from subjective experience. Matching method to study is foundational to ensuring research efficacy and provides a vision as to where the research is heading, why this path has been chosen, and what the research hopes to accomplish (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**The Qualitative Tradition**

The focus of this research sought to define the process of subjective meaning making in a unique situational context that is prone to discontinuity and flux as is policing. As such, the qualitative research tradition will be followed for this research. Creswell (1994) defines qualitative research as a process of inquiry that explores a social or human problem through the
study people in a naturalistic environment. Qualitative scholars believe the best way to understand a phenomenon is to view it within its own context and embrace a holistic research approach that considers people in their natural environment through in-depth, flexible interviews, focus groups, document review and case studies (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Clark, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This research follows a qualitative tradition and the work of contemporary scholars such as Creswell (2013), Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 2011) and Miles et al. (2013) to provide a method that searches for richness of meaning as a way to reveal the complexity of individual and organizational experiences. In application, qualitative research methods are characterized by a research process that explores these social phenomena, defines local meaning, and illustrates organizational context (Creswell, 2013; 2014). They are most often utilized when the goal of the research is to “empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). It is from the social construction of subjective reality that qualitative research methods begin and align with supportive research paradigms.

Creswell (2013) further describes qualitative research as a situated activity that places the researcher out in the world and within a specific, organizational context. It relies upon context, perspective, and interpretation to explore a social phenomenon and to derive meaning from this exploration. Qualitative researchers study people in their natural environments “attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Qualitative research methods are “well suited to the study of dynamic processes, especially where these processes are constituted of individuals’ interpretations” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 24). Because the qualitative research method uses as its focus the perceptions
of individuals and because of its attention to organizational context as an influence over meaning making, it is often chosen to conduct research into those organizations and processes that are dynamic in nature (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hinings, 1997; Pettigrew, 1992).

**Constructivist Research Paradigm**

A paradigm is the way one sees the world; it is both a set of beliefs and assumptions about the world and the methods and techniques one uses when conducting research (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) said the selection of the research paradigm is a crucial next step in the research process that illustrates the intent, motivation, and expectations of the proposed research after the research direction and questions have been chosen. Dobson (2002) states the choices made early on in the research process, including the considerate selection of a research paradigm, play “an important role in the choice of methods because the underlying belief system of the researcher (ontological assumptions) largely defines the choice of method (methodology).” Critical to research success, no other ensuing research decisions can be made without first identifying the guiding research paradigm that aligns with the selected research tradition.

The underlying research paradigm of constructivism guides this research. It begins with the ontological belief one’s reality is a product of a wholly subjective perspective informed by past experiences overlaid upon current circumstances and context (Charmaz, 2014, 2015). It is built upon the epistemological belief that research findings are co-created by the researcher and the respondent through subjective transactions and interpretations and furthered by the methodological belief that there exists an hermeneutical responsibility to constitute the experience of truth through dialectical exchange between researcher and respondent (Chandra &

The constructivist perspective is one that compels an understanding of a specific social action, grounded in time and context, which requires the researcher to seek meaning in that action and its results (Bodner, 1986; Doolittle, 2014; Schwandt, 2000). Aligned with notions of sensemaking, Fosnot (1996) said of the constructivist perspective:

Learning from this perspective is viewed as a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning-making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols, and further negotiating such meaning through cooperative social activity, discourse, and debate. (p. ix)

Constructivist paradigms reject the positivist idea of a naïve realism, or the notion there exists a singular, objective reality; constructivists maintain a more relativistic posture that recognizes there exists multiple realities that, while differing based upon perspective, are nonetheless equally valid (Schwandt, 1994). They hold that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual (Hansen, 2004) and that subjective remains hidden until brought to the surface through social interaction and the process of intersubjective meaning making (Sciarra, 1999; Schwandt, 2000). Similar to theoretical frameworks like Weickian sensemaking, constructivists believe as Kant did that “human perception derives not only from evidence of the senses but also from the mental apparatus that serves to organize the incoming sense impressions” (Hamilton, 1994, p. 63). The cognitive process of sensemaking—seeing, processing, understanding, acting, learning, and assessing—is itself an individual constructivist approach to enacting an order that
acquires meaning only through later discussions with others and reaching a collective agreement as to its relative importance (Gruender, 1996; Kantar, 2014).

While the very nature of subjective meaning assures it must begin with the individual, the construction and articulation of reality and the identification of its meaning can only truly be elicited through dialogue between the involved parties through a process of intersubjective meaning making or, in the case of research, between researcher and participant (Ponterotto, 2005). To this point, Schwandt (1994) stated,

We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience.... We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth. (p.197)

There is a transactive exchange of ideas and a negotiation of context among and between people in an organizational or social setting that shapes understanding and meaning making through discourse, acting as a mirror to reveal subjective truths and to reflect social norms or organizational values. In this sense, meaning is not something that exists independently just waiting to be discovered; rather, it must be culled and cultivated through a dialogical process of exchange between social actors as a means to assess a discrepancy in expected situational or environmental norms (Park, 2010). In a constructivist paradigm, the researcher acts as both revealer and reflector by drawing out individual understandings of events and experiences through social interaction with the participants and then reflecting them back towards as means to help articulate first and then to co-create their meaning both for the individual and for the organization (Breuer, Mruck, & Wolff-Michael, 2002; Flick, 2014; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This process contributes to the organization’s canon of meaning through the creation of
organizational narrative, or story, that once developed is shared with current and future members and becomes embedded as culture.

A key element of the constructivist approach is this necessary dependence of the researcher on the participant and vice versa (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Lather, 1992; Merriam, 1998; Peters et al., 2013; Ramoglou & Tsang, 2015; Robottom & Hart, 1993). The meaning of an event or an experience cannot be known until it is shared, and it cannot be understood until there is agreement as to its context and impact (Searle, 1995). For the purposes of this research, the researcher–participant relationship was central to unpacking the experiences of police officers in a large, urban southwestern police department through exploring how stories inform the meaning they assign to particular, police work related events. As qualitative research seeking to draw out latent experiential meaning, this research required a naturalistic design in which the researcher becomes closely connected to the participants through a nearly embedded relationship that used face-to-face interviewing, focus groups, or participant observation as a means to capture and collect data for analysis and summation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000). The methodological approach that best suits the intent of this research is the case study.

Methodological Approach

Introduction

The methodology chosen for this research is the case study method. Case study methods are among the most commonly used research methods in qualitative research and offer a flexibility that is well-suited to explore the more nuanced aspects of organizational life and situational contexts (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Yazan, 2015). As part of the qualitative tradition, the case study methodology is exploratory, focusing on organizational specific contexts and the processes of intersubjective meaning making where the boundaries between phenomenon
and context are not clearly defined (Klenke, 2008; Creswell, 2014). By its very nature “it is improvisational, not procedural” (Van Maanen, 2015, p. 41).

Case study is equally appropriate for theory building (Yin, 2009) and theory testing (Eisenhardt, 1989). Its application to this research, however, is exploratory not developmental. Stake (1978) said, “It is the legitimate aim of many scholarly studies to discover or validate laws. But the aim of the practical arts is to get things done” (p. 7). As a methodology that fits neatly into the “practical arts” category, the value of the case study method to this research is its ability to help explicate the process of contextually specific meaning-making in a large, southwestern police department through a selective sample of participants that represent their organizationally specific uniqueness in such a way as to offer members of the organization the opportunity to recognize the importance of the sensemaking process in policing and the value of their organizational narrative as informative of organizational culture.

Rowley (2002) says case study methods are well suited for the study of contemporary phenomena where the relevant conditions or processes cannot be manipulated, only observed. Case studies focus on the specific contexts of specific situations people live in and how this context informs how they make sense of these situations, processes or environments (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2011). They are most adept at answering research questions that ask how or why a certain phenomenon occurs and helping to identify the meaning ascribed to the answer (Rowley, 2002; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009) with Creswell (2013) saying,

The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participant's view of the situation. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through
interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives. (p. 24-25)

Naturalistic in nature, case study requires in-depth contact and exploration of the phenomena, an immersion among and within the social grouping engaged in navigating the phenomena, and an iterative exchange of ideas and understanding as researcher and participant sift through organizational nuance to reach the kernels of meaning fully aware this meaning may yet change (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). The value in the application of the case study method to the current research is summarized by Van Maanen (2015) who said,

As we read more, learn more, experience more, our confident hold on what we study lessens. Our interests broaden, our assumptions and conceits are challenged, our positions in the world change and we discover that things are always far more complicated and less stable than our early portraits or models would suggest. I now despair of ever tying things down – anything really – neatly and definitively. (p. 39)

The constructivist nature of the case study methodology, which relies heavily upon participant’s perspectives and context, to co-create meaning (Kenny & Fourie, 2014) combined with the intention of this research to explore the role of storytelling as an element of sensemaking in a large, southwestern police department, served to align the research methodology with the conceptual framework. Miles and Huberman (1994) identify the importance of this alignment saying it helps to create the boundaries of what is to be studied, a critical first step in case study research. To impose boundaries around the case to be studied is to express a desire to understand it better (Merriam, 1988). Proceeding from this point, the selection of this research methodology is intended to rely largely on the study participants
understanding of the phenomena of storytelling as an element of sensemaking in policing and the social nature through which meaning is derived from this process (Creswell, 2013).

**Case Study Defined**

Definitions of “case” vary by degree with the most widely accepted definitions more similar than different. Adelman, Jenkins, and Kemmis (1983) describe a case as “an instance drawn from a class,” Stake (1995) defines a case as the object of the study, Merriam (2009) calls it the unit of analysis, the process of study or the outcome of study, and Yin (2002) defines it as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13).

For the purposes of this research, the definition of case study builds upon the seminal work of R.E. Stake and comes from Abma & Stake (2014) who said the case study is a way to “unravel the complexities of one demarcated entity” (p. 1150). They define the case study simply as a study of how particular things work in a particular setting (p. 1151). The case itself is of interest as a unique phenomenon alone and not in comparison to other cases or phenomena (Stake, 2005). Similarly, the definition of case used for this research is also from the foundational work of Stake (1978) who said,

> The object of a social inquiry is seldom an individual person or enterprise.
> Unfortunately, it is such single objects that are usually thought of as ‘cases…’ The case need not be a person or enterprise. It can be whatever ‘bounded’ system is of interest. An institution, a program, a responsibility, a collection, or a population can be the case. This is not to trivialize the notion of ‘case’ but to note the generality of the case study method in preparation for noting its distinctiveness. (p. 7)
A bounded context is one in which the phenomenon being studied is bracketed from its larger social or situational context and separated out for research and review in terms of time, place or some other physical or social boundary (Creswell, 2014, p. 465). For the purposes of this research the boundaries are defined by the study site, the large, southwestern police department being studied. Once the boundaries have been set, this case study approach will be an exploration of the phenomena through an acute exposure to the organization’s members through in-depth data collection utilizing multiple sources and analysis strategies to elicit a contextually and organizationally specific understanding for immediate application (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013; Creswell, 2013).

Following a naturalistic paradigm, case study research recognizes that notions of reality are wholly subjective and therefore very personal, embraces the idea of a codependent and interactive relationship between researcher and participant, and is idiographic in nature relating specifically to the unique facts of the case (Abma & Stake, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This appreciation of subjective context is summarized by Smith who stated, "The context has great impact on social behavior... the subjectivity of the researcher is not only inevitable but provides the only means of knowing, and control is instituted through multiple perspectives and methods" (As cited in Merriam, 1985, p. 628). It is this subjectivity that is the focus of this research and the guiding principle in exploring the meaning police officers ascribe to certain situations and how this guides their actions.

**Seminal Scholar & Application**

This research followed Stake’s case study model drawing upon its constructivist orientation, flexibility in application, its focus on the uniqueness of the phenomena in its own context, and its recognition that the boundaries of the case study are set by organizational traits
that play a role in co-creating the phenomena through the organization's members (Boblin et al., 2013; Stake, 1995, 2005; Yazan, 2015). Given these traits, the Stakian model of case study is well-suited to the exploration of the discontinuity that characterizes the contemporary law enforcement environment and how socially constructed meaning is achieved and shared through storytelling.

Stake (1978) calls the case the “object of social inquiry” saying that its value lies in its distinctiveness among other, social phenomena (p.7). In Stake’s perspective, the case is “a specific, complex, functioning thing” and an “integrated system” that is bounded by the study to purposely explore issues that are “intricately wired to political, social, historical, and especially personal contexts” (Stake, 1978, p. 17). This particularity guides the researcher towards an in-depth inquiry of a situated phenomenon explored in such a way that is of value to organizational consumers of research and to help the practitioner further their understanding of the subject and its application to practice (Simons, 2009; Stake, 1978, 2006).

Paradigmatically, Stake is a constructivist saying, “Most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 100). In his view, qualitative researchers using the case study method are interpreters and gatherers of interpretations more than creators of new theory or knowledge (Yazan, 2015). Stake (1995) recognizes the implicit value of perspective over absolute truth saying, “There are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view” (p. 108).

Stake recommends a flexible research design to allow researchers to adapt as the study evolves using emergent issues (Abma & Stake, 2014) as “a conceptual structure in order to force attention to complexity and contextuality [and]…. because issues draw us toward observing, even
teasing out, the problems of the case, the conflictual outpourings, the complex backgrounds of human concern” (Stake, 1978, pp. 16-17). Stakian research methods adhere to a belief the case study should proceed in an iterative fashion in which the study unfolds as it is continuously clarified and redefined (Stake, 1998). Baxter and Jack (2008), following a Stakian path, say the course of study cannot be charted in advance adhering to a constructivist perspective that subjective truth must be discovered as perspectives are unpacked and interpreted.

He goes on to identify three distinct types of case studies—intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Stake (1995) advocates for the use of the intrinsic case study if the research is intended to explore a unique situation with the recognition that the results may have limited transferability. He says to use the instrumental case study if the intent is to gain insight and increased understanding of a particular situation and to use the collective case study if more than one case is being studied in comparison to another (Stake, 1995). In line with the focus of this research, an instrumental case study was employed to guide this research to illuminate a particular issue (sensemaking) that is grounded in and bounded by a unique situational context (storytelling in policing) (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 1978, 1995).

Research Site & Participants

Research Site & Organizational Description

The site for this research was a major city police department of over 4,500 sworn and civilian employees serving a population of over a million residents in the southwestern United States; for the purposes of this research it will be referred to as the Southwest Police Department (SPD). This department provides public safety services to one of the largest cities in the United States across urban, suburban, rural, and desert environments spread out over an area greater than 500 square miles. As one of the largest police departments in the United States, it provides
a full complement of law enforcement services through five major divisions—Patrol, Investigations, Community Relations, Support Services, and Strategic Services.

Following the case study methodology, the research included within its site the exploration of a bounded system—the process by which the SPD uses organizational stories to assist its officers’ with the process of sensemaking—during an acute period of time and thorough the in-depth collection and analysis of multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Smith, 1978; Stake, 1995).

**Research Site & Participants Access**

Access to the research site was obtained through formal written request to the Executive Assistant Chief of the department (Appendix A). This request included the following:

- Author introduction & purpose statement
- A summary of the research questions and underlying conceptual framework
- A formal request to conduct this research at the research site using members of the organization as respondents
- The specific activities to be conducted while at the research site and the anticipated amount of time they may take
- Assurances of IRB approval including the ethical treatment, anonymity, and protection of research participants
- In keeping with the scholar–practitioner model, assurances to share collected information with the organization

Upon receiving access to the research site, the selection of research participants was achieved through non-probabilistic, purposive sampling. Maximum variation was sought and achieved by specifically selecting participants based upon specific characteristics that represent a
cross section of the department (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990). Patton (1990) says maximum variation leverages the diversity that can occur in relatively small samples and uses it to its advantage saying, “Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program” (p. 172). For the purposes of this research, the following characteristics have been identified as adding diversity to the construction of the sample:

- Demographics (age, race, gender, sexual orientation)
- Tenure
- Current assignment/employment status
- Assignment history
- Prior law enforcement service
- Prior/Current military service
- Family members involved in law enforcement

**Sample Size & Recruitment of Participants**

Participant selection is among the most important choices in the research process (Reybold, Lammert, & Stribbling, 2012). The study of experience is dependent upon identifying those who have both the experience and the ability and inclination to share it in such a way as to illuminate its situational relevance. Polkinghorne (2005) stated, “Participants…. for a qualitative study are not selected because they fulfill the representative requirements of statistical inference but because they can provide substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation” (p. 139).

The participants selected for this study were current or former members of a large, urban southwestern police department with a range of tenure, a diversity of experiences, and representative demographics. Based upon this sampling criteria, thirty-six potential participants were identified and recruited via email (see Table 1), nine responded with their willingness to
participate, and six were selected that met both the sampling criteria and availability requirements for this study. The potential participants were selectively sampled and reflect the demographic makeup of the selected department by percent representation.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selective Sampling Pool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the participants in this research \((n = 6)\) were current or former members of the SPD. The relative size of the sample is not indicative of its informational value; Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) say sample size should be determined by its ability to illustrate the particular rather than its potential to explore the general. To that end, the researcher selected current and former members of the SPD who met the requisite criteria of various demography, tenure, and assignment history based upon purposive and snowball sampling. The sample was identified first by tenure—one to ten years, ten to twenty years, twenty years or more, and retired. This identification was made with the intent to acquire a breadth and variety of experiences to resemble the stages of a police career including the reality stage \((0 \text{ to } 5 \text{ years})\), the disenchantment stage \((6 \text{ to } 13 \text{ years})\), the personalization stage \((14 \text{ to } 20 \text{ years})\), and the introspection stage \((20 \text{ years or more})\) (Violanti, 1983).

From this initial pool of potential participants, two participants per tenure requirement were identified and contacted via email to explain the intent of this research and to solicit their participation; upon agreement, this was followed by a formal request letter included:
- Author introduction & purpose statement
- A summary of the research questions and research intent
- A formal request to participate in this research with a description of the specific activities to be conducted and the anticipated amount of time they may take
- Assurances of IRB approval including the ethical treatment, anonymity and protection of research participants
- Assurances to share collected information with the participant for verification purposes prior to publishing

No incentives were offered for participation in this research other than the opportunity to contribute to enhanced understanding to the profession of policing and the unique processes of the police department being studied.

**Participant profiles.** This research study engaged six participants who were current or former members of large, urban southwestern police department with a range of tenure, a diversity of experiences and representative demographics (see Table 2). While there were similarities to be found among the group to include common work assignments, generational peer relationships, and exposure to the same critical events (albeit from different perspectives), there was a diversity of experiences among them that illustrates the breadth of story-informed experiences as told by natural storytellers (Fletcher, 1999). Their responses to interview questions provided rich detail into the role of storytelling and sensemaking in their police department.
Table 2

Summary of Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Miguel</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Eric</th>
<th>Jay</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Lina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>27 years (Retired)</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>37 years</td>
<td>30 years (Retired)</td>
<td>18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior LE</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the participants were current or former members of the Southwest Police Department (SPD) a major city police department of over 4,500 total employees; four were active in law enforcement and two were retired. The participants were on average 49.5 years of age, averaged 24.2 years of service, and had a number of assignments and experiences that represented the variety available to members of a major city police department. In general, retired officers provided a breadth of experiences while current officers provided greater depth.

Ethical Treatment & Protection of Research Participants

The ethical treatment and protection of research participants was of paramount importance to this research. Given the unique nature of policing that lends itself towards being an insular culture (Manning, 1995; Paoline, 2003) that tends to look skeptically at academic endeavors (Tewksbury & Vito, 2011; Marks, Wood, Ally, Walsh, & Witbooi, 2010; Alpert et al., 2013) assurances of ethical treatment are crucial to ensuring not only officer participation but the free exchange of ideas between the researcher and the participants. Maintaining confidentiality is similarly important as it undergirds a participant's sense of autonomy in what they chose to
share, with whom and how (Wiles, Crow, Heath & Charles, 2008). Confidentiality in a research context means information provided by the participant will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher and that once presented this information cannot be used to identify the participant (Allmark et al., 2009; Kaiser, 2009; Wiles et al., 2008). The protection of research participants was ensured through acquiring Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through the Northeastern University Office of Human Subject Research Protection. Upon agreement, participants provided informed consent through signature with the understanding consent to participate could be withdrawn at any time.

**Data Collection, Condensation, Coding, and Analysis**

The purpose of data collection is to gather the raw material necessary to answer the research questions; the purpose of data analysis is to organize and interpret meaning from the data and to draw realistic conclusions about its use (Polit & Beck, 2006). Data collection and analysis for this study followed the model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013). Using this model data is collected and analyzed following a three-step process that includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2013, p. 12).

Qualitative data is the summary of human experience and offers a richness that explicated human experience as it is lived (Schwandt, 2001). To fully understand the complexity of human experience is to embrace the varieties with which it is catalogued. Polkinghorne (2005) summarizes this expertly by saying,

> Experience has a vertical depth, and methods of data gathering, such as short-answer questionnaires with Likert scales that only gather surface information, are inadequate to capture the richness and fullness of an experience. People have access to much of their own experiences, but their experiences are not directly available to public view. Thus, the
Data gathered for study of experience need to consist of first-person or self-reports of participants’ own experiences. (p. 138)

Determining a study’s data collection method affirms its boundaries, frames future data analysis, and the identification of implications and application (Boblin et al., 2013; Creswell, 2013). Case study research allows for a number of data collection methods including interviews, document review, archival records, physical artifacts, direct observations, and participant-observation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). Case study is not restricted, however, to one method of data collection. Its strength as a methodology lies in its ability to utilize multiple data sources to maximize data collection and enhance data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Stake (1995) has said that it is the use of multiple data sources that uniquely distinguishes case study methods from other qualitative methods and is its greatest strength.

Baxter and Jack (2008) stated the use of multiple data sources allows for a convergence of ideas and information that each contribute to the researcher’s findings and understanding of the phenomenon being explored. It is this convergence that adds immeasurably to the strength of the findings (Patton, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2005; Baxter & Jack, 2008). Similarly, strength is added through the process of triangulation or the process through which varied sources of data are assessed and validated or refuted against each other (Hentz, 2012; Stake, 1995).

**Data collection.** Data for this study was collected via semi-structured interviews with six current or former members of a large, southwestern police department. Data collected via semi-structured interviews was guided by several open ended questions, designed to elicit a depth of response as well to promote avenues for further discussion (DeCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Based upon the direction of the interview, differing follow-up questions were asked to further the conversation with each respective participant. Each interview was conducted in a private room
unrelated to the participant’s current or former employer (i.e., community center, church office) and ranged in time from 80 to 90 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and immediately uploaded to a professional academic transcription service for transcribing; original copies of the recorded interviews were then housed in a non-networked external hard drive accessible only by the author. The transcripts themselves served as the data source for subsequent coding and analysis.

Interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they allow for a depth of thoughtful response and allow participants the opportunity to narrate their experiences. Because of the native involvement and understanding of the phenomena under study (the process of using stories as an element of sensemaking in policing) by the research participants there is a “local groundedness” that increases confidence in the data that was collected (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11). This allows for capturing a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 16) of participants’ experiences to aid in extracting a local meaning from social context and culture that vividly conveys to the reader both intra- and inter-case meaning as articulated by the participants.

Interviews were conducted between the researcher and the participant at the research site in a private office. During this time, informed consent was secured, assurances of ethical treatment were given, the study was explained, and the participant had the opportunity to ask any questions they had (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Seidman, 2006). Following this administrative introduction interviews commenced, each anticipated to be no more than 90 minutes in length. Data were captured by digital recording, note taking, and the completion of post-interview memoing to capture resonant themes (Hunter-Revell, 2013; Miles et al., 2013). All interviews were transcribed both for data analysis and participant confirmatory purposes (Creswell, 2013).
Throughout each interview, the researcher was engaged in the practice of note taking on field notes to capture resonant themes and comments made by the participant. These notes captured thoughts, research possibilities, and themes for later consumption or consideration. As an additional data source, these notes served to guide the process of jotting, or the practice of annotating comments on collected data, during the data analysis phase. Jotting is essentially an analytic sticky note (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) that “holds the researchers fleeting and emergent reflections and commentary on issues that emerge during fieldwork and especially data analysis” (Miles et al., 2013, p. 94).

Upon completing the interview, but prior to full data coding and analysis, the author completed analytic memoing to document research reflections and thought processes regarding consumption of captured data (Miles et al., 2013). The intent of analytic memoing is to refine the initial, broad thoughts captured by note taking or jotting into more specific pieces of meaning to provide focus to data coding and analysis (Saldaña, 2013). Conceptual in nature, analytic memos take the abstract and make it more real serving as a primary vehicle for making sense of bulk data and culling from it the fine details of meaning (Miles et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2013).

Finally, participants were asked if their narrative-provided data is captured in written form (i.e., official department police report, internal memorandum, social media post, etc.). Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter (2000) say that document review is among “the longest established method of text analysis among the set of empirical methods of social investigation" (p.55). As policing is widely considered to be a storied profession the history and activities of which are routinely documented (Fletcher, 1996, 1999) it was expected that much, if not all, of the data collected verbally will also be memorialized in official or personal records. Official
department records will be acquired through official request and personal records will be acquired through the consent of the participant.

**Data condensation and coding.** The process of data condensation began with the transcription of the digitally recorded interview to serve as the corpus of analysis. Condensation is the process of combining this corpus with field notes, jottings, memos, and pre-interview decisions such as selecting a theoretical framework into a manageable data source suitable for in-depth analysis (Miles et al., 2013 Saldaña, 2009). Tesch (1990) says data condensation is not merely making the corpus smaller through elimination, but rather an organizational and interpretive process through which truth is revealed. Miles et al. (2013) says condensing makes data stronger.

The condensation process began with jotting and note taking during the interviews themselves. Jotting captures the initial thoughts and impressions of the researcher as emergent themes and ideas begin to reveal themselves and points towards key concepts that require further analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Miles et al., 2013). Next each interview was read once to verify accuracy in transcription and then a second time highlighting key phrases, emergent themes, or especially salient quotes. This first cycle coding process began also the process of analysis as coding itself is an act of analysis (Miles et al., 2013).

Codes were identified using both in vivo and descriptive coding in an attempt to most accurately capture the voice and intention of the participant. These codes were either portions of the respondent’s voice (in vivo) or short summaries of their intentions (descriptive) that captured the essence of what they were trying to say (Saldaña, 2013). During this first review of the interviews 132 distinct in vivo codes, 252 distinct descriptive codes, and 82 distinct stories were
identified (see Table 3). The 384 micro codes were combined into 43 macro codes based upon similarity, repetition, or intention and documented in a frequency table (Appendix B).

Table 3

First Phase Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Miguel</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Eric</th>
<th>Jay</th>
<th>Kent</th>
<th>Lina</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Vivo</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once first phase coding was completed a summary memo was drafted that captured the main points made by each participant with particular attention paid to elements of the intersection of sensemaking and storytelling. This served to further condense the source material into its most relevant responses to the research questions and was a deliberate attempt to extract meaning from the interviews, jottings, and field notes (Hunter-Revell, 2013). During this phase of analysis initial themes began emerging that centered on narrative exchange or sharing, key storytellers, consumption, and application of stories and distinct story types.

Data display. To more clearly align these emerging, broad themes, this condensed first phase analysis was placed into a table to more linearly document the relationship between the source interview, emerging themes, and its coding category (see Table 4). Certain phrases were bolded to capture its importance and for additional analysis.

Table 4

First Phase Coding table (ex.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Notation</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Coding Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I started hearing stories, specifically from Scott Reutter about things that his dad was involved in over his career, as actually the DPS work can be ... I had these stories, they were in the back of my head, and it seemed in speaking with Bill Reutter, that he was able again, to look respectfully at his life, and that his life made a difference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heard stories from the Reutter family</th>
<th>Assimilation Cultural</th>
<th>Descriptive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact - This is the goal of police stories</td>
<td></td>
<td>In Vivo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second phase coding commenced with a deeper review of the 43 macro codes for aggregation into analytical constructs that would be used to reach research conclusions and for a discussion of research findings. Most importantly, this phase of analysis helped to reveal an integrated schema (Miles et al., 2014) that identified how stories serve as an element of sensemaking in policing, revealed distinct story types and subtypes, and illuminated how these stories are developed and shared among members of the same police department. Similar codes arose among each of the participants and several could equally have been placed in primary and secondary aggregate categories.

The intention of the aggregation table is to make illustrative the final synthesis of data condensation and guide the research towards conclusions and findings. Each of the listed macro themes speak to common threads shared by each participant about the role of storytelling in policing and its importance as an element of sensemaking including, but not limited to,
discussions about audience, camaraderie, coping, mentorship, operations, and the permissive and prohibitive nature of stories.

Second phase aggregation analyzed and combined macro themes revealing six superordinate themes—Affiliation, Educational, Occupational, Coping, Mentoring, and Identity—that captured the essence of the stories told in the participants police department and their role as an element of sensemaking.

Data Storage & Management

All data collected were protected in accordance with research ethics and the protections afforded research participants by the Northeastern University Office of Human Subject Research Protection. Participant interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and saved to a research database. Each individual file was assigned a participant code (i.e., Participant 1) and every effort was made to restrict identifying information being captured or made public. This file and its contents (digital and textual) were stored on the researcher’s personal, external hard drive and no one else had access to it or its contents. All original research data will be destroyed upon defense of this dissertation and all anonymous, participant coded data will be retained for seven years post-defense and then subsequently destroyed.

In addition to the ethical implications of data management, there is also practical implication as well. Miles et al. (2013) state that how data is managed from the beginning of a research project strongly influences how it can later be analyzed. With this in mind, the researcher will employ Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDA) to manage the volume of information collected throughout the research process. Miles and Huberman (1994) identify fourteen ways in which the use of a CAQDA program can support
data management and rigor in qualitative research including data coding, linking, display, content analysis, and as a coding platform for data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Given the various sources of data found in this research, the process of data analysis will follow a similar path across the sources to ensure accountability in analysis and trustworthiness of results. Data analysis is an ongoing process of exploration that begins as soon as the study is conceived and concludes upon final submission and defenses. Morse (1994) said this of data analysis:

Data analysis is a process that requires astute questioning, a relentless search for answers, active observation, and accurate recall. It is a process of piecing together data, of making the invisible obvious, of recognizing the significant from the insignificant, of linking seemingly unrelated facts logically, of fitting categories one with another, and of attributing consequences to antecedents. It is a process of conjecture and verification, of correction and modification, of suggestion and defense. It is a creative process of organizing data so that the analytic scheme will appear obvious. (p. 25)

As with all qualitative inquiry, there was no clear differentiation between the timing of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases (Hunter-Revell, 2013; Janesick, 1994; Miles et al., 2013; Stake, 1995). The data analysis process is multifaceted and iterative and occurs throughout the research process as a process of both discovery and refinement. Data analysis is about deconstructing our first impressions, research inclinations, and biases to identify meaning among the data. Stake (1995) said data analysis, particularly in case study, is “a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (p. 71), adding:
There is no particular moment when data gathering begins. It begins before there is commitment to do the study: backgrounding, acquaintance with other cases, first impressions. A considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case. Many of these early impressions will later be refined or replaced, but the pool of data includes the earliest of observations. (p. 49)

Saldaña (2013) describes data analysis as data coding or the process by which “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute to a portion of language-based data” (p. 3) is evaluated by the researcher for meaning relative to the research questions. Coding is reflection on data and its meaning and is used for the heuristic process of discovery (Miles et al., 2014). Perhaps most importantly, coding is an ongoing process of recognizing what key data is emerging rather than mining for the data later (Miles et al., 2013).

Data analysis for this research followed the path laid out by Miles et al. (2013) and Saldaña (2013) that begins with the initial researcher–participant interview. The contents of these interview were digitally recorded for later coding; however, throughout the interview the researcher engaged in the process of “jotting,” or the quick capturing or key points or salient ideas that emerged as the initial interview was occurring (Emerson et al., 2011). Similarly, analytic memoing was completed after each interview to capture the researcher’s initial reaction to the data and to refine his thinking on its meaning and coding potential (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008; Holton, 2007). Glaser (1978) advocates for the use of analytic memoing to capture notions and ideas that may otherwise be lost among the volume of collected data and
Polit and Beck (2006) say that the creation of these memos serve to document ideas that may initially seem inconsequential but develop greater importance relative to other collected data.

The coding process continued with a review of the memos created by the researcher to identify what emergent themes, if any, arose during the data collection phase. Andrews, Squires, and Tambokou (2008) state there are no overall rules regarding the best way to code narrative data. Given this flexibility, as well as the exploratory intent of this research, first cycle coding included more than one elemental coding category to enhance research accountability (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2005; Mello, 2002) utilize both in vivo and descriptive coding methods.

In vivo coding is appropriate for coding interview transcripts and helping the researcher become more attuned to the participant’s language, descriptions, and worldview drawing directly from the participants own language for coding categories (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding is appropriate for coding field notes, documents, and other collected artifacts and summarizes data in a short word or phrase suitable for later indexing and categorizing (Miles et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2013). Second cycle coding collected the broad categories identified during first cycle coding and placed them into more distinct analytical groupings to better articulate emergent pattern codes (Miles et al., 2013). It is the process of making more coherent seemingly distinct coding categories through synthesis and additional analysis (Morse, 1994). Second cycle coding develops metacodes for organizational purposes and seeks to find deeper meaning through this organization (Saldaña, 2013).

The second method of data analysis was a first and second cycle coding review of documents related to this research. The intention of the interview was primarily to capture the lived experiences of the participants (Schwandt, 2001). As a secondary data source, the
researcher located official department reports that memorialized the experiences described by the participants when available as well as other personal (social media posts), professional texts (department memos, newsletters, and publications) or external (media stories) sources summarizing these same events. Document review is a form of content analysis and “the longest established method of text analysis among the set of empirical methods of social investigation” (Titscher et al., 2000, p. 55). Once similarly coded, a tertiary analysis was conducted of common or emergent themes identified between participant interviews and textual analyses for final data analysis from which findings were drawn.

**Trustworthiness and Verification**

In keeping with the foundational practices of ethnography advanced by Geertz (1973), the primary method by which trustworthiness and verification were achieved was through a thick, rich description of the phenomena under review and a faithful articulation of the lived experiences of the research participants as shared during interviews. Baxter and Jack (2008) identified several additional elements that can enhance trustworthiness in case study research. The first two-part requirement is that the research question is clearly written and properly articulated through the research introduction and that the case study method is suitable for the research. For the purposes of this research the research question was consistent with case study method by being exploratory in nature, process focused, and studying a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Stake, 1978, 1995; Yin, 2002).

Next, purposive sampling strategies have been utilized to populate the case. As described above, purposive sampling was used in this study to gather data from “particular settings, persons, or events [that] are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 1997, p. 87). Additionally, data
collection and retention management strategies are used. For this research all data were systematically collected and stored in a CAQDA program and on a secure external hard drive. Finally, data is analyzed in a rigorous manner. For this research, data analysis followed the seminal analysis path set by Miles et al. (2013) and Saldaña (2013) that encapsulates the above methods for qualitative use.

Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) state that verification in qualitative research consists of “the process of checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain. In qualitative research, verification refers to the mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigor of a study” (p. 17). Verification and the pursuit of internal validity were achieved through triangulation of data. Case study lends itself to enhanced credibility due to its reliance upon multiple sources of data.

Stake (1995) identified four methods of triangulation—data source triangulation, investigator triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and methodological triangulation. This research relied upon data source triangulation and the multiple sources of data used for this study to increase trust and reliability. To achieve greater trustworthiness is to use multiple sources. Baxter and Jack (2008) stated case study research design principles lend themselves to including numerous strategies that promote data credibility or “truth value” (p. 556). In an effort to promote data credibility, all data collected from participants were transcribed and summarized for them for their review in a process known as member-checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member checking allows presenting captured data to the participants, so they can confirm its credibility and intention.
Internal Validity and Generalizability

Notions of internal validity are most often concerned with quantitative research findings and less often with qualitative research findings (Golafshani, 2003). As research based in the constructivist–interpretivist perspective exploring phenomena and processes, it is important to note that traditional, positivistic understandings of research validity may not necessarily apply here. Constructivism is rooted in the idea that there are multiple, equally plausible versions of reality that are a product of social construction and result in intersubjective meaning making (Creswell, 2014). Truth is relative, and interpretations of meaning are embedded in the unique situational context (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Qualitative research that follows this orientation places the researcher in the position to be an interpreter of experiences rather than an arbiter of fact (Yazan, 2015). In this sense, quantitative concepts of validity and reliability do not neatly translate into qualitative research, though they are present, as they are rooted in the positivistic tradition (Yazan, 2015).

Internal validity in the qualitative sense is “rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects” (Winter, 2000, p.1) confirmed through triangulation of data. Davies and Dodd (2002) state that the term rigor has been substituted for more positivistic terms such as validity and reliability, but that their intention remains the same. Validity, in this sense, is gained by assessing the “truth value” of a study’s findings (McGloin, 2008). Truth value is concerned with the ability of the researcher to thoughtfully deliver applied research and the data that undergirds it and is gained either by peer review of results or by triangulation—in the case the use of multiple data collection methods—the use of multiple data sources, prolonged exposure to the phenomena, participant validation to assess the truthfulness of the data, and the researcher's evaluation of it.
Qualitative studies that follow a structured methodological plan allows for the researcher to make inferences from the data in such a way that these inferences are deemed valid and, therefore, trustworthy and credible (Kohlbacher, 2005).

Threats to internal validity in qualitative research include history, maturation, testing, instrumentation, regression, selection, mortality, selection–interaction effects, and ambiguity about the direction of causal inference (Campbell, 1957; Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Bergh, Hanke, Balkundi, Brown, & Chen, 2004). In order to reduce the likelihood these threats will negatively affect the research, steps were taken including: ensuring the study was conducted in a timely fashion to prevent the intrusion of seminal events mid-study that may affect its outcome, ensuring the study was conducted in a timely fashion to prevent holistic, maturative changes from occurring among the participant group, and participant data will be recorded and maintained for review by other researchers for confirmability (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Researcher-specific threats to internal validity associated with his position and rank within the research site were mitigated by initiating and maintaining all participant communications through his Northeastern University email account accompanied by a statement defining his role as a researcher and not as a member of the organization.

Following Whitmore, Chase & Mandle (2001) the following techniques for demonstrating internal validity will be followed—design consideration (purposive sampling, triangulation), data generating (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, verbatim, transcription of interviews), analytic (member checking, use of CAQDA, completing literature review, memoing), and presentation (providing evidence that supports interpretations, acknowledging researcher perspective and bias, providing thick description). The guiding principle for ensuring internal validity for this study comes from Maxwell (1992) who said,
“validity is not an inherent property of a particular method, but pertains to the data, accounts, or conclusions reached by using that method in a particular context for a particular purpose” (p. 284).

Case studies dwell on the particulars of the cases under review; generalizability is rarely the intent as it is foundational to case study that each case is sufficiently unique to require individualized consideration of its specific context, the value of which lies in its being so unalike any other. Therefore, attempts to ensure external validity in this way will be avoided. William Blake, in refuting the importance of generalizability, said “To particularize is the lone distinction of merit” (as cited in Stake, 1978, p. 6). Its aim is to study the phenomenon in its native context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear (Yin, 1981, p. 59).

**Presentation of Findings**

Data collected through this research will be presented in Chapter 4 as evidence of its results. Following the advice of Miles et al. (2013) the presentation of the findings of this research will follow their three-step process of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Upon completion of data analysis, data were condensed to the most relevant thematic elements that answer the questions of the research in order to abstract key themes and make the data stronger. These themes will then be presented in a data table that highlights their connection to the participant, their relation to the research question, and the meaning the participants assign to certain experiences. The purpose of data display is to present organized information in such a way as to make research conclusions more evident to the reader.

Finally, the research conclusions will be drawn and presented after what was an iterative process by which initial conclusions were challenged until researcher and participant satisfaction was reached. Final conclusions will be supported both textually and visually based upon data
collection. Direct quotes will be used to support research conclusions and network models and/or data tables will be also used to support research conclusions.

**Positionality**

The notion of positionality is inherent in all people who define and construct an understanding of the world they inhabit based upon the subjective reality they frame with the biases they acquire over a lifetime of experience (Kinchloe & Steinberg, 1998). Positionality defined is the idea that acknowledges that the demographic, relational, and power dynamic roles occupied by each of us influence our perception of self as well as our perception of *other* (Briscoe, 2005; Carlton-Parsons, 2008). This distinction between self and *other* is foundational to establishing the positionality from which researchers originate and the direction from which research begins.

The real-life difference and manifestation between the self and the *other* is a product of the identity one assumes or is assigned. Foucault (1980) stated relational dynamics inform identity development and these identities serve to develop and maintain power relations that naturally create in–groups comprised of like-minded individuals who distinguish themselves by the dissimilarities with the *other*. And the language one chooses as a descriptor of role or social identity is especially powerful (Duzek, 2002). Social identity is the result of people self-classifying into various social categories such as race, gender, organizational affiliation, sexual identity or orientation, religious affiliation, or age (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and its assumption serves the dual purpose of enacting a social order both in terms of self-identity and in *other*-identity.

The contemporary concept of identity has evolved over time from when identity was largely assigned by those in or possessed of power to those who had power wielded upon them.
Today, however, in a much more uncertain time characterized by social, political, economic, and legal unrest, the concept of identity, particularly how we define ourselves, carries a far greater weight in defining who we are as a means to balance the disequilibrium that may define our social contexts (Howard, 2000). The idea of identity as a means to define the self among a sea of others struggling through uncertain times is a prevalent theme in contemporary American policing and worthy of additional discussion.

Roles

There is a certain self-awareness that is required of all researchers to properly assess the positionality and biases they possess that informs the manner and subjects of their research. Indeed, the experiences we seek to understand through our research interests are largely determined by our position in society and a thirst to understand them better (Briscoe, 2005). While the term “bias” typically evokes a negative connotation, it is necessary in research; Carlton-Parsons (2008) in her work on educational access identified this as the capital view. While usually referenced to issues of race and equity, its value can also be seen as researchers recognize and celebrate the positive aspects of group membership, such as culture, as invaluable to achieving enhanced understanding. As such, I am mindful of and embrace the roles I fill as they strongly influence the research direction I take. These roles, broadly defined, are police officer, white male, scholar–practitioner and cop’s kid.

As a police officer and as a scholar–practitioner, I am acutely aware of the duality of the unique space I occupy both in policing and in academia and what those roles imply. And I am equally aware that both positions I hold are, in part, the result of being raised in a family of police officers who honored and valued the profession, along with a personal tendency towards public service and academic interests. These identities, police officer, scholar–practitioner and...
cop’s kid, are what most define me and are foundational to my ongoing self-development and path towards self-actualization (Nganga, 2011).

As a police officer I am, by the very nature of my position, a member of the community I serve; yet because of my authority and the prohibitive nature of my role I am set apart from the community. While Peel may have asserted that the “police are the community and the community are the police” (Lentz & Chaires, 2007) there has always been that necessary divide that creates the other; the assignation of that role is wholly dependent on the position one has and the authority (or lack thereof) that comes with it. As a member of the police I have a close, cultural understanding of the profession and its needs to evolve to meet the increasingly complex needs of the community. Additionally, I have a deep care and concern for the profession, as I truly believe it to be a noble endeavor and am eager to provide an evidence based assessment of it through my research to help it and its members improve.

Continuing the discussion of positional power, I am aware that by the nature of my whiteness and my maleness I am privileged to a certain degree in a society that affords me tacit, if not explicit, advantages not afforded to other, non-white citizens (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmidt, 2005). Perhaps the most evident of these advantages is simply the benefit of the doubt, the idea that because I am white, I am more educated, more economically advantaged, and not a part of the other (Briscoe, 2005; Carlton-Parsons, 2008). I am aware that, as a white male, I am a member of the so-called “privileged” class of people and with this position I will be granted access to people and places others may not. What is beyond dispute, both in society and in the literature, is there exists a systemic racial and gender inequality that by its very nature privileges me oftentimes at the expense of others (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Fine, 1997; Powell et al., 2005). Similarly, as a police officer I am aware that I am among the 73% of all police officers who
identify as white and the 88% who are male, placing me squarely in the majority of all American police and, presumably, a position of power (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013).

As a scholar–practitioner enmeshed in the police culture, I am inclined towards a relentless level of personal and professional self-improvement through academics with the belief it will enhance my understanding of my role as a servant of the community and better prepare me to assume progressively highly levels of responsibility in a rapidly evolving law enforcement landscape. The definition of scholar–practitioner I ascribe to is one in which I strive to enhance my practice as a police leader and improve the broader academic understanding of the culture by generating new knowledge through research production and relationships (Kram, Wasserman, & Yip, 2012). And yet, as a part time academic involved in a hybrid doctoral program, I realize I may never receive the academic credibility of full time doctoral students attending to their studies full time on campus. Similarly, as a scholar who is also a police officer, I must be cognizant of the perception and suspicion of being a “smart cop” in a profession that tends only to intersect with academics when it is critically evaluating police practices.

Admittedly, being raised in a police family is perhaps my strongest bias as a researcher of police culture. As a child raised in New York City during the 1980s, I saw first-hand the violence and crime in the city and the role my father, aunts, uncles, and cousins played in its prevention. I especially remember looking up to my father who said he tested for a job when he got out of the military but that he found a profession in doing so. In my father, I learned what a public servant was; someone who stuck up for the little guy, helped old ladies across the street, and protected those in need from those who would seek to do them harm. I tend always to see the best in police and believe most serve the needs of the community out of a spirit of service.
and a desire to do “good” with a capital “G.” This position is one I have held the longest and the foundation upon which the others are built.

**Affirmations and Threats**

Despite the duality inherent in these roles, there is much to be gained from a research perspective by embracing it. As has been covered extensively in the literature, it is preferable to study the group in which one is a member rather than having that review conducted by a privileged *other* (Briscoe, 2005; Collins, 1991; Delgado, 2001). In today’s society in which police are under greater scrutiny than since before 9/11, a more balanced view of police and the police culture will do more to add to the body of knowledge than a more discursive review by an *other* (*other* defined as a non-member of the police culture rather than a so-called racial or ethnic minority).

Once recognizing the value of the police researching the police and embracing this research perspective, I can be more aware of the pitfalls of universalism or the inclination to view my subject of study through perhaps a too jaded lens. Conversely, as a culture under scrutiny for legitimate reasons, my positionality allows me the opportunity to less discursively conduct research on the police culture that may subordinate the identity of police through marginalization, hypercriticism or overgeneralizing (Pennycook, 2001; van Dijk, 1997).

There are, of course, threats inherent in my positionality to the validity to my proposed research. As stated by van Dijk (1997) a researcher who is a member of the group is likely to perceive and represent the group in a way that constructs a social identity that protects and serves the interest of the group. Similarly, recalling Foucault (1980), the power inherent in social identity creation is its ability to maintain existing power relations. Given the state of police–community relationships what is necessary is open dialogue that makes vulnerable the flaws of
the profession, as well as those intent on correcting them, as opposed to a perpetuation of a power dynamic characterized by the closed culture that policing sometimes may be.

There are also those who could rightly advance the idea that a more distant review of policing from a less subjective, nonaffiliated researcher would better serve the needs of increased understanding. Police have earned over time a perception of being a closed culture and this position is not without merit (Paoline, 2003; 2004). And as a relatively privileged white male with a stated affection for police, the culture and the profession, it can be said I am part of the group (European white males) who have largely dictated the direction of social science research that can be construed to be narrow in focus and results as well as biased towards presupposed conclusions.

Positions and biases are not something to be hidden away out of fear of jeopardizing research credibility. Rather, they are something to be recognized and understood and incorporated into the best of research. Failure to do so, makes suspect the intentions on the researcher and undermines the research before it can stand on its own.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore the role storytelling plays in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment. Specifically, this study sought to delve more deeply into the social process of organizational narrative exchange to identify the types of stories that develop in a specific police department and how they are shared among its members. The findings of this research reveal six superordinate themes that identify a process of organizational narrative exchange that describes
the sensemaking process in policing as reliant upon the creation and sharing of stories to provide a bank of organizational experience from which to draw during times of flux.

This study explored the intersection of storytelling and sensemaking in a policing context and answered the primary research question “What role does storytelling play in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment?” This study found the sharing of stories among police officers to be fundamental to the way they make sense of sudden changes in their environment discovering a cyclical process in which utilizing stories from the past to make sense of the present creates additional individual and organizational narrative for later use. This finding, and other supportive findings will be discussed in greater detail throughout this chapter.

This study was further informed by secondary research questions “What are the different types of stories that develop in the police department being studied?” and “How are the stories that act as sensemaking tools shared within the police department being studied?” This research developed a police story typology derived from the organizational narrative that categorizes the different story types based upon organizational need and identified the ways they are shared among members.

This chapter will discuss the findings of this research using Weickian sensemaking as a theoretical framework to answer the research questions and provide a summary of the findings and their application to the research questions. Additionally, this chapter will identify the key themes that emerged connecting storytelling to sensemaking in policing as supported by participant responses. Findings as they relate to theory, previous research, and their practical application as well as conclusions drawn as a result of this research will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5.
Organizational Landscape

The findings of this research are informed by the unique organizational landscape the Southwest Police Department inhabits. As a capital city in the desert southwest, the city attracts a number of residents from across the country. The population of Southwest City is among the fastest growing in the United States attracting significant numbers of transplants from the Midwest and Northeast. These transplants bring with them distinct ethnic cultures and regional attitudes that contribute to the overall culture of the community and the organization. Unlike some other major city police departments in similar sized cities, there is a less engrained organizational history allowing the Southwest Police Department to foster a malleable organizational culture informed by contributions from diverse populations invested in calling this area their home. This culture reflects the style of policing commonly found in the western United States; one that is characterized by strong community-based policing practices and less likely to be affected by historical scandals and misconduct.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this research result in the identification of six superordinate themes (SOT) that were common to each of the participants and build towards a typology of organizational narrative exchange. A key discovery of this study is this process of organizational narrative exchange illustrates how discontinuity is understood, acted upon, and mitigated through the recall of stories operationalized in the field. This occurs in the Southwest Police Department by bracketing these stories into easily understandable and organizationally specific categories of meaning. These SOTs—Affiliation, Educational, Occupational, Coping, Mentoring and Identity—capture the macro concepts of the storied nature of policing located at the intersection of storytelling and sensemaking and facilitate a social process of recognition of change followed
by an accessible understanding of its meaning and offering options for mitigative action (see Table 5). Secondly, this research identified the different types of stories that develop in a large, urban police department such as the Southwest Police Department and the manner in which they are shared individually and organizationally.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Educational</th>
<th>Occupational</th>
<th>Coping</th>
<th>Mentoring</th>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>• Sense of place or belonging</td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td>• Motivation</td>
<td>• Coping mechanism</td>
<td>• Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assimilation</td>
<td>• Cautionary tale</td>
<td>• Humor</td>
<td>• Camaraderie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Binding to the profession</td>
<td>• Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentorship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Practical Wisdom</td>
<td>• Practical Wisdom</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Encouragement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>• Assimilation</td>
<td>• Preparatory</td>
<td>• Operational</td>
<td>• Coping mechanism</td>
<td>• Prohibitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Historical</td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td>• Informational</td>
<td>• Cathartic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Camaraderie</td>
<td>• Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Realities of the job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cautionary Tale</td>
<td>• Cautionary Tale</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Prohibitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>• Assimilation</td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td>• Inspirational</td>
<td>• Experiential</td>
<td>• Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Exemplary</td>
<td>• Historical</td>
<td>• Operative</td>
<td>• Mentorship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Preparatory</td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td>• Informational</td>
<td>• Encouragement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Foundational</td>
<td>• Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Practical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Audience</td>
<td>• Cautionary Tale</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Informational</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>• Assimilation</td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td>• Practical</td>
<td>• Therapeutic</td>
<td>• Reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cultural</td>
<td>• Cautionary tale</td>
<td>• Occupational</td>
<td>• Coping mechanism</td>
<td>• Audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Camaraderie</td>
<td>• Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Preparatory</td>
<td>• Preparatory</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentorship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Historical</td>
<td>• Historical</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Prohibitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Explanatory</td>
<td>• Preparatory</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>• Chance</td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td>• Perceptual</td>
<td>• Therapeutic</td>
<td>• Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assimilation</td>
<td>• Explanatory</td>
<td>• Operational</td>
<td>• Coping mechanism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Historical</td>
<td>• Cautionary Tale</td>
<td>• Informational</td>
<td>• Humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Historical</td>
<td>• Audience</td>
<td>• Practical</td>
<td>• Realities of the job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Explanatory</td>
<td>• Practical Tale</td>
<td>• Political</td>
<td>• Cross-cultural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cautionary Tale</td>
<td>• Advocacy</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Audience</td>
<td>• Strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lina</td>
<td>• Social</td>
<td>• Historical</td>
<td>• Communication</td>
<td>• Practical</td>
<td>• Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Practical</td>
<td>• Practical</td>
<td>• Helpers</td>
<td>• Wisdom</td>
<td>• Survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td>• Operational</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Occupational</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cautionary Tale</td>
<td>• Educational</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Cultural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Second Phase Aggregation Table
The Role of Storytelling and Sensemaking

The primary research question for this study is “What role does storytelling play in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment?” The discovery of the six superordinate themes reveals their role in the Southwest Police Department and provides an answer to this question. These themes articulate the roles of story informed sensemaking in policing including as a means to bind the officer to the profession and to the department, as a way to educate the officer about the history of the Department and their place in it, to provide the organizational wisdom of lessons learned by previous generations of police officers, to provide strategies to cope with their experiences, to connect newer with experienced officers for individual, and organizational benefit and to assist with identity formation.

Overview of themes. The six superordinate themes (SOT) that emerged through this research reflect the synthesis of stories into the Southwest Police Department as part of the process of sensemaking through organizational narrative exchange (see Table 6). Building from first and second phase coding processes, the SOTs revealed through this study indicate the important nature of stories as a valuable commodity in organizational life to create and define culture, to assimilate members into organizational or professional life, and to provide functional instruction as to how to succeed in an organizational setting. These SOTs—Affiliation, Educational, Occupational, Coping, Mentoring and Identity—are the foundation upon which greater understanding of the process of storytelling as an element of sensemaking will be built through this study and illustrate the relationship of the SOTs to sensemaking among police officers.
The findings of this research indicate stories are used as a vehicle for sensemaking among police officers and serve as the catalog from which they can draw collective experience to assist with mitigating discontinuity during times of flux. To this point, John said,

Yeah so I guess if you have this catalog of information, if you proceed from the idea that a police officer has to be part historian to know what they’re doing today, how can you take from that catalog to help you do your job today?

Table 6

*Superordinate Themes and Roles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>The process by which one enters the profession from the outside and, once a part of policing, how one becomes bound to the profession through stories</td>
<td>Binds the police officer to the profession and/or to their police department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>The process by which stories are used as practical educational devices to teach, to explain, to caution and to convey organizational specific practical wisdom and a way to convey culture and organizational norms</td>
<td>Educates about the history of their police department and their place in it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational</td>
<td>The process by which police officers continue to learn their craft and the nuances of job vicariously through the experiences of others; looks to the past to assess the present and extracts cues from the environment to determine the situational context so the police officer can make sense of their environment</td>
<td>Provides the organizational wisdom of lessons learned by previous generations of police officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>The process of using stories to help police officers rationalize and understand the difficult experiences they face each day</td>
<td>Provides strategies to cope with their experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mentoring: An ongoing, relational process whereby a newer police officer learns from a more experienced police officer what the organization expects based upon stories intended to help them be who they are or what they can be as police officers. Connects newer officers with experienced officers for individual and organizational benefit.

Identity: The process of defining the emerging identity police officers develop and how that identity filters the professional world they inhabit compelling them towards certain actions. Assists with identity formation.

SOT #1: Affiliation

The findings of this research indicate a high premium is placed on affiliation, or the process by which one enters the policing profession and becomes a part of it, to bind the individual to the profession through the use of stories. Affiliation, in this sense, is introductory and allows new police officers to relate for the first time to the profession of policing and act as the foundation for later assimilation into their specific police department. This universality within policing was described by each participant as foundational to their developing understanding of the stories of their department as well as an important element of the process of organizational narrative exchange. John suggested that affiliation is an important concept in binding officers to the profession or the Department. He said it is important to share stories that show:

…things that we do or that we have done because it’s been done before is important to them (storytellers)…That’s what I would say, I think that’s very important because those are the type of guys (storytellers) that will pass on our traditions and our histories. We are starting to hire now, there’s guys coming on who don’t know a lot about this department, historically.
Sharing history with new officers to help make them better was described by the participants as the most important role of storytelling in a police department.

Before there is an “us” in the strictest organizational sense, the research reveals there must be an “us” in a more global, professional sense. Eric, a twenty-four year veteran of two major city police departments said,

While we are still a very diverse group, it is through the stories, again, whether it be written or oral, that we become kind of a unified group that does on some level create a sense of family. We are across-the-country, across-the-world law enforcement.

Affiliation, as articulated by this research, is the process by which one enters the profession from the outside and, once a part of policing, becomes bound to the profession through stories. The participants felt organizational affiliation was closely related to personal and professional identity and facilitates all other sensemaking processes throughout their career.

Matters of affiliation were a common theme among all the participants as helping police officers find their place in the social environment, allowing them to both define their role within the organization and the role of others interacting with the organization. Each of the participants felt such a strong connection to their organization, even those presently retired, that they pointed to it as the “how” they engaged in sensemaking as police officers in their particular police department. Their sense of place was developed by being Southwest PD officers, they acted as they did because they were Southwest PD officers, and their actions had organizationally specific meanings because they were Southwest PD officers.

Kent, at veteran of one of the busiest and most violent precincts in his Department, said working in one of the busiest and most violent precincts in the city provided him with experiences and examples for virtually every situation he would face in policing:
I don't know exactly how it came, but what happened is after eight or nine years of probably one of the busiest precincts anywhere, certainly in Phoenix, and probably arguably across the country at the time, set me up to have examples and stories to tell for almost every statute that you came across in the criminal law book.

For Kent, the experience of working in a busy and violent area created a close connection with his precinct and his fellow officers that provided him with experiences against which to assess environmental change and helped to keep him safe. Similarly, Eric, a former LAPD officer during the violent post-Rodney King era said, “Whenever there is a tremendous amount of violence inflicted upon the officers, it tends to unite them.” This creates a natural dependency and fosters a storied environment in which lessons commonly learned are also commonly shared.

Miguel and Jay, both long-time veterans of the Southwest Police Department spoke of the impact of senior officers bringing them into the profession and the organization through the use of stories. Miguel shared a story about the line of duty death of an officer as told to him by the lieutenant in charge of his police academy class. He said, “This lieutenant telling this story about his friends who died on the job and just cemented the fact of we are a family.” Affiliation was described as that which brings you to the profession, that which binds you to the job, and your fellow officers and that which keeps you connected to the organization while working and while retired.

**SOT #2: Educational**

This study also highlighted the impact of stories as educational devices. Practical education, more so than formal education, is a key story element identified through this research. In this study stories were found to be used as practical educational devices to teach, to explain, to caution, and to convey organizational specific practical wisdom; in this sense they were a
powerful vehicle to convey culture and organizational norms. This research found because stories are constantly generated in policing and frequently shared they are a useful way of capturing and sharing knowledge among an organization's members and introducing organizational and professional context to new members. Additional findings of this study show this lends itself towards the ongoing nature of sensemaking as both an individual and collective act where articulation is given to a unique experience to help gain a comprehensive understanding and craft a story that can be shared with group members for mutual benefit.

Miguel, a twenty-seven-year veteran now retired, summed up the practicality of stories as educational devices by saying “Everything’s from whatever’s [sic] happened” which illustrates a strong personal emphasis on retrospection and places value on the sharing of stories among members as a way to memorialize the past and to operationalize lessons learned for the present. Miguel’s statement summarizes, and other participant’s experiences support, that officers contribute significantly to their environment and that they are cocreators of a subjective operational reality that is informed by past experiences and used to understand present circumstances.

Miguel shared a story in which he was part of the audience when a senior lieutenant was offering practical advice on the realities of policing. He shared,

Lieutenant Kurtenbach took us into a separate classroom, just the Phoenix people. He pulls out his flat badge and is just a storyteller. He says, ‘See this, this is going to cause heat.’ He basically talked about the responsibility of being a police officer, ‘Don't abuse the authority. People are going to listen to you when you show up,’ and then the reality, ‘Bad things happen when you're working.’
Stories also serve as a way to introduce the common culture to new members to assist them with the process of assimilation. Eric said stories introduce the job and provide the expectation of what the future will bring adding, “…the power of storytelling when you are addressing groups (of police officers). It not only affects culture but when we can attach a story to it, it gives people some context as to how it applies.” He continued, “It's in our DNA going back to oral tradition, back in the days before even the written word. That’s how our culture was created, that’s how explanation of why things are the way they are.” Both the practical nature of educational stories and the culture they convey are illustrative of how stories assist police officers learn both what it means to be a police officer as well as how to perform the essential job functions in their new role.

**SOT #3: Occupational**

The participants stated the stories of policing and of a specific police department are shared in a number of ways including through formal and informal training, through “war stories,” through the social interactions, and through external sources such as the media or through pop culture. Each of the participants said storytelling is an important way for new police officers to continue to learn their craft and as a way to learn the job vicariously through the experiences of others. The participants each spoke of the necessary retrospective nature of policing that looks to the past to assess the present and it extracts cues from the environment to determine the situational context so that the individual can make sense of the change before them. To this point, John said,

Yeah so, I guess if you have this catalog of information, if you proceed from the idea that a police officer has to be part historian to know what they’re doing today, how can you take from that catalog to help you do your job today?
Distinct from educational stories, the participants indicated occupational stories serve as a resource to help them continue to learn the more technical aspects of policing in their particular department providing a roadmap towards successfully completing police related tasks. Kent, a thirty-year veteran now retired, stated,

It didn't take me very long to realize that the best way for me to help people understand criminal law is through the incidents that I had been on. It is portraying to them the stories that I had that you could put these things into a practical application.

As Kent described, police stories of this nature are actively transmitted both formally in the police academy, through field training programs, and informally through social relationships and allow police officers to draw from a bank of shared experiences to help them deal with the ambiguous situations they often face.

The value of stories told in the Weickian sense resides more with their plausibility than their accuracy; abject truth or being witness to the events of the story are not necessary according to the participants. Miguel said a powerful learning lesson from his career was the idea every operational policy has an officer’s name attached to it to give social or personal context to an organizational experience. He shared,

I never heard this story, but we actually have a policy. We had a policy of you will not place a cord as a restraint around somebody's neck. What the heck happened that we had to write that rule? To me, that's like common sense.

This story describes the occupational reality that there are some things that occur in policing that are beyond belief yet are true as part of the departmental canon. The consumption of this story shares this occupational lesson leaving it to the listener as to how much to believe of it or how to utilize it.
Illustrative of the instructional nature of these stories, Miguel used stories to convey the reality of policing through the thoughtful retelling of especially important, incident specific stories. He said.

I try to tell stories that magnify whatever point it is, whether it's gallows humor or ‘except for the grace of God’. We face death and the likelihood of being killed in our job and the happenstance sometimes of how police officers killed.

In Miguel’s experience, these stories are used to set up an occupational lesson, whether it be told through a short vignette or proto-story with a specific lesson to convey or through a more intentional retelling of a complete story told by more experienced officers intended to help the listener become a better police officer through becoming a better storyteller themselves.

**SOT #4: Coping**

Much of the police storytelling typology identified by this research focuses on how police use stories to rationalize and understand the difficult experiences they face. It is well known among police officers that stories serve as coping mechanisms intended to explain the instability inherent in policing, especially during times of personal instability or loss. This was consistent among all of the participants as each articulated the process of sensemaking begins once officers arrest changes in their environment through mitigative action based upon recalling narrative.

Fundamental to this research, and an important theme among the participants, is the concept of discontinuity or the experience of unexpected change that disrupts an officers’ expected norms and environmental stability. To reacquire a sense of continuity and to understand and process the effects of sudden change, the participants of this study all speak of the value of stories that help them cope.
The educational elements of police storytelling have previously been discussed in this research but there is also a learning process to be found through coping stories as well. Miguel, a prolific police storyteller and historian across social media platforms, describes storytelling as a cathartic process saying,

when I’m writing these stories, it’s almost like a therapy kind of thing. The stories that I’m writing about are helping me work through the PTSD I have now. It’s this therapy of talking about those things I couldn’t talk about before if that makes any sense.

In addition to the personal benefit he derives from sharing these stories, Miguel recounted a conversation between him and another retired officer that summarized the impact of their officer experiences. While discussing the long-term effects of a career in policing this fellow retired officer thanked Miguel for bringing up the shared experiences from their past saying, “We have been through a lot, haven’t we brother?” Miguel’s response, simply, was “Yes, we have brother.” This illustrates how collective experiential knowledge is shared throughout a police career, especially during times of flux, as well as the shared social process this collective catharsis follows. It also implies a process of ongoing sensemaking among retired officers who, with time and distance from specific incidents, develop different understandings or derive different meanings.

The examples portrayed by Miguel speak to mitigating the chronic effects of policing experiences earned over the course of a career. Kent addressed the more acute impacts of policing by sharing how he used stories to manage and assess the day to day experiences. He stated,

I shared information on calls, people that we had met, the things that I had done, with all of my family members. Whether people had died, whether the act was disgusting,
whether or not kids or families or parents were involved, I shared my career with my family.

This shows that coping can also be a shared process between police officer and family that is mutually beneficial. Kent continued “I think that the more information was shared with them, the more they believed in the organization, the safer they felt that I was at the time.”

**SOT #5: Mentoring**

Mentoring was a universal theme mentioned as crucial for socialization, assimilation, and continued organizational learning. A common theme from each of the participants was the characterization of policing as existing in a state of constant change and as an ongoing process of becoming what it is or what it will be. That is to say that policing, both as a profession and as an action, is fluid and requires ongoing intra-organizational guidance to be successful. Mentoring, as defined by the participants, can be summarized as an ongoing, relational process whereby a junior member learns from a more senior member what the organization expects based upon stories intended to help them be who they are or what they can be as police officers.

Parallel to the formal learning process, mentoring served as a way to bind the officer to the organization and to help them determine their place in it. Eric spoke with great affection of LAPD Officer “Snoopy” Smith, a senior Field Training Officer and Vietnam War veteran, and the lessons he shared with him that were less from the patrol manual than they were from the heart. He shared a mentoring vignette that shaped the direction of his career from that day forward:

He goes, ‘Eric, this is what I want you to do. You are very young in your career, you are very idealistic,” and he goes, "When you go home, I want you to look at yourself in the mirror. I want you to decide tonight, what kind of officer you want to be.’ “He goes, ‘I
want you to picture what you want the officers to say about you at your retirement party. Not what you did but who you were as a police officer. I want you to write it down. After tonight, I want you to make every single decision from that moment on, to attain that goal.’

I get emotional because it meant a lot. In a short amount of time, he set me on a path for success. I walked away from that really realizing that it's not the quantity of time that you spend with somebody. It could be just a one moment in time that you have with somebody. It's about the level of impact that you make.

Mentoring also served as a means to affirm one’s acceptance as a police officer and indicate earning status as an equal. Jay, a thirty-seven-year veteran of the Southwest Police Department, described a brief conversation with a senior officer on his squad. He said,

But anyway, that guy told me the last night that I rode with him, because I had to redistrict…. And when I got out of the car he said, ‘You know, you're probably gonna be a pretty good cop.’ That was probably the best thing anybody ever said to me, because I didn't know what he thought of me until then.

This peer to peer mentoring would be an important, repeated theme for each of the participant’s future success and sense of self as police officers.

**SOT #6: Identity**

The culmination of participant’s responses was summarized in how the stories told in policing help to define the emerging identity they have as police officers and how that identity filters the professional world they inhabit and compels them towards certain actions. The participants all said it was their experience that police officers who develop a strong professional identity through the process of assimilation into their department tend to incorporate it into their
sense of self such that the objectives of the department become theirs and the history of the department becomes their guide to achieving these objectives. These identities are further framed by the occupational culture of the organization as officers acquire common attitudes and values from their peers, leaders, and influencers as a means to cope with the common experiences and conditions members face. This research illustrated that identity is formed in part through trust—trust in the organization, trust in the story, and trust in the storyteller.

Police officer sensemaking begins with the idea that core identity is central to one’s self; the participants said all other aspects of sensemaking come from this place. Eric said, “Stories help mold the different cultures in the different areas and those stories again, when you hear those stories you think has that touched me in some way, is how I view myself.” The same is true of police officers, particularly those surveyed for this research. Though anecdotally well known, this research found police officers define themselves through their profession, so much so that Jay stated wistfully,

I'm not gonna have a great work to leave behind. I don't think that in 500 years they're gonna publish anything about me. Not that I ever felt that I warranted that in anything I did, or certainly not my intellect or my force of personality was gonna leave a lasting. I'm not the messiah. But I guess if you had ... If you built bridges, you'd at least have a bridge to show for it, and I've got a prison full of assholes that nobody really cares to think about. And I'm proud of that, but it's not really what I'd call a life's work.

As an extension of Affiliation, identifying with the profession of policing was important to each of the participants. John said,

They (the stories) tie me to a centurion who worked a beat Rome in the first century.

That’s speaks to one of the most important things about this job and I kind of hit on that
earlier, it’s the brotherhood and the fraternal aspect of it. These calls and these stories they have a same core to each of them.

Identifying as a police officer was a necessary first step for the participants to identify with their organization, a process critical to their individual sensemaking. It would also redefine who they were after becoming police officers. Several of the participants spoke of the distinction between their pre-police lives and their current one. Jay selectively shares stories with his nonpolice friends know they’re experiences are far different than his own, Eric pointedly sought out police relationships to help develop him from police officer to police leader and John was raised and socialized in a police family network he is replicating today with his own family.

Eric, drawing upon his experiences in two major city police departments, said of the impact of stories on his organizational identity,

These stories really will direct people through their careers because it sets again the tone and tenor of how that work group operates and whether or not the way you see yourself, if that is in alignment with precinct or that work group.

This sense of self is a crucial stabilizing factor for police officers when confronted with sudden change that requires retrospective informed action. Knowing who they are and where they fit within their organization was self-defining for each of the participants.

Jay spoke to this saying, “When the last person that worked with me has gone from here, I will cease to exist as far as the Phoenix Police Department is concerned.” For Jay, who he is as a person is informed in large measure by who he is as a police officer. It is this identity, shaped by experience and informed by the stories of his department that is the foundation of sensemaking for each of the officer participants. Matters of identity discovered through this research showed that stories give life to people and events and serve as the organizational
memory. Showing the power of story, Jay asserts when that memory fades, so too does the person or the event.

**The Role of Story Types & Sensemaking**

A secondary question this research seeks to answer is “What are the different types of stories that develop in the police department being studied?” The types of stories identified by this research are as diverse as the participants who shared them. There is, however, a commonality to be found among them as each of the participants shared similar versions of the same story type and in some cases told the same story from a different perspective to articulate the story type. Similar to the first step of sensemaking where differences are first noticed, separating stories into distinct types was for the participants the first step in a process of creating a new meaning for something that has already occurred but does not yet have a meaning for the individual. It is through this process that the novel experience is bracketed into more easily digestible chunks of information from which meaning can be extracted. Subsequent action proceeds from this bracketing and is essential for the sensemaking process to continue towards prospective meaning making of what is and what could be.

Proceeding from the organizational narrative writ large, this research identified three broad story type categories comprised of eleven macro story types and thirteen micro story types. This emerging organizational narrative typology reflects the distinct story types that are shared within the Southwest Police Department. The macro story types are Organizational, Educational and Social each of which are comprised of micro story types that more fully articulate this typology as illustrated below (see Table 7).

Table 7

*Story Type Summary Table*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Type Summary Table</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational Story Type</strong> – the embodiment of the collective lived experiences of the organization and its members based upon their interpretations of everyday events, actions and their meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Micro Story</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Heroic</strong></td>
<td>Stories that recount seminal events, individuals or actions in a heroic manner that illustrates a lesson to be found within the incident or results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>a. Memorial</strong></td>
<td>Intentional retellings of the stories surrounding the loss of an officer/s many times during heroic acts and the impact on the organization and its members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Historical</strong></td>
<td>Stories that capture the history of the organization and its members; they give life to people and events and serve as organizational memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>a. Exemplary</strong></td>
<td>Stories that are illustrative of the best of the organization and its members as defined by the storyteller and accepted as part of the organizational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>b. Race &amp; Policing</strong></td>
<td>Stories describing the intersection of race, racial attitudes and policing and the effect on the organization or individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Lore</strong></td>
<td>Stories that share the legends of the department, the truth of which cannot be verified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Story Type - those stories intended to teach a lesson, share an experience or assist the listener in some way succeed in policing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Cautionary Tales</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Operational</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>a. Realities of the Job</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>b. Survival</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Permissive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Story Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 (continued)

Social Story Type – stories that encapsulate the social interactions common to organizational life in a police department

1. Banter or Gossip
   - Stories that assist with organizational assimilation, decompression, knowledge transfer among other aspects of the socialization process

2. Mentor
   - Stories that highlight in policing the connection to an individual or individuals who used their experiences to assist the participant enter into and acclimate to policing
     a. Assimilation
        - Stories that are intended to bind the listener or the teller to the profession globally or the work unit locally through use of emotion, heroic devices or common bonds or objectives
     b. Confirmatory
        - Stories that confirm incidents unique to the department or the work unit in such a way as to share a moral or lesson
     c. Descriptive
        - Stories told for no other reason than to explain the realities of the job to non-police officers in a sanitized fashion
     d. Explanatory
        - Stories that act as explanations of why things are the way they are or how things came to be
     e. Preparatory
        - Stories used to prepare police officers for what is to come in policing

3. Therapeutic
   - Stories that serve as an outlet to release some of the feelings associated with police work
     a. Coping Mechanism
        - Stories told as a means to process the realities of the job to those who possess the native understanding of what that means
     b. Humor
        - Stories told to capture the unusual events common to policing and to illustrate the juxtaposition of the story and the setting and their combined influence on policing
        i. Gallows Humor
           - Stories that are a dark retelling of a traumatic event in a humorous way as a means to enhance understanding of its impact
As component parts of the organizational narrative, an emerging police story typology (Figure 1) is revealed showing the relationship between macro and micro story types and providing to the organization and its members a repository of stories from which to draw as sensemaking needs arise. As illustrated below each of these story types are connected linearly to the organizational narrative writ large and are shared throughout the organization as a means to enhance sensemaking through the process of organizational narrative exchange. Like Smith et al. (2014), this typology identifies unique story types plotted organizationally in a relational fashion. Where this research furthers the discussion about the role of the Police Story is as it moves towards the creation of a distinct theoretical framework that proposes a theory regarding the social process of organizational narrative exchange as a fundamental element of sensemaking in a large, urban police department that enhances understanding of an emerging area of police organization research.

As evidenced by the identification and delineation of distinct story types described by the participants of this research there arose a typology of police stories that exist within the Southwest Police Department (Figure 1). Proceeding from the larger organizational narrative, these stories are sorted into three broad story types—Organizational, Educational, and Social story types—each with their own macro and micro subcategories. Taken together they represent the breadth of stories that may be found in a police department, though by no means is this typology considered to be complete. Rather, the findings of this research would indicate that there exists opportunities to identify other story types that may vary based upon the law enforcement agency to be explored and the unique facets of their organization and mission (i.e., Sheriff’s Offices, State Police, rural vs. urban agencies, etc.). When combined with the findings
of how stories are shared within the police department a new theoretical framework begins to become clear.

Figure 4. Police story typology.

Organizational Story Type

The organizational narrative is the embodiment of the collective lived experiences of its members based upon their interpretations of everyday events, actions, and their meaning. In a policing context, the organizational narrative not only captures a distinct reality but also allows for new perspectives on this reality through the process of organizational narrative exchange. As related to this research, organizational stories are those pieces of the larger organizational narrative that are unique to the organization itself, its history, and its members. They include the Heroic, the Historical, and the organizational Lore.
**Heroic stories.** Heroic stories as described by the participants are those that recount seminal events, individuals, or actions in a heroic manner that illustrates a lesson to be found within the incident or its results. John, raised in a family of police officers and a student of his department’s history, said, “…the guys on the job, they didn’t seem real to me, they almost seemed like legendary, almost like mythical figures…I looked up to them my entire life.” He was referring to the sacrifices officers made to protect the public and each other, the epic gun battles they were in, and the important cases (like the Miranda investigation) his department is known for.

Both Miguel and Jay shared a story, the line-of-duty death of one officer and the immediately subsequent death of another officer responding to the initial scene, told to them at different times by the same person, Lt. Gerd Kurtenbach, while in the Academy. Though they were peers but not coworkers or friends, Miguel and Jay both took the same lesson from the story— we take care of each other and bad things are bound to happen. Both described the rush of officers who responded to a motorcycle officer who had been shot, and would later die, on a traffic stop. Another motorcycle officer was responding to brother officer’s call for help when he was struck and killed by a passing motorist who failed to yield the right of way. Miguel called this instinct heroic, characterizing the best of the Department; Jay said this taught him about the fragility of life and the dangers of the job.

Miguel shared another story to illustrate an act of heroism he witnessed on the job and its effect on him. As a Gang Unit supervisor, Miguel and his squad were assisting Narcotics Detectives with the service of a search warrant at a known, violent gang member’s residence. Upon making entry the team was immediately fired upon and a detective was struck with
multiple rounds. In the hail of gunfire, this detective returned fire providing ample coverage for his team to extract him to safety and get him to medical assistance. Miguel said,

> When you go in there and you see the rounds that were being put out at him and that he was shooting back. You could see where he was shooting back and they were shooting at him. The fact that he lived through that is just fantastic. It's just phenomenal. It was like, ‘Holy moly.’ Then talking to Marco afterwards, where he's laying on the gurney and he says, ‘Why is my foot there?’ He was shot ... I forget, it was the femur or some place, but his boot was right there on his chest.

As Miguel arrived at the ambulance he saw this detective’s leg was misshapen and bent at an awkward angle no leg is supposed to have. Yet as they spoke this detective asked only of his team and of the results of the search warrant before being whisked away to the hospital and emergency surgery. The fact this detective lived, let alone able to speak about the incident so soon after being gravely wounded, was so impactful to Miguel it shaped his future storytelling efforts using this story as an example of heroism and survival.

**Memorial stories.** A subcategory of the Heroic story is the Memorial story. These stories were described by the participants as the intentional retelling of the loss of officers and its impact on the organization and its members many times during heroic acts. The value of memorializing organizational shared history was powerfully described by each of the participants. These stories sum up the great deeds and the great loss of either the living or the dead to ensure their story and their sacrifice is not forgotten. A fear expressed by several of the participants was a failure to capture these stories is to give them away to history and the impact of the loss of the officer will no longer have voice to the things they have done to make their department what it is. Eric said,
I think a lot of it too is so that the great deeds of either the living or those who have passed are not forgotten.... and if those stories aren’t told and retold then we’ll lose the value of that person being here, their life and the things that they have done to make this department where it is.

Capturing legacy was an important notion articulated by each of the participants. Memorial stories are important because they carry on the legacy of officers who have been lost because they can no longer do it themselves. John added,

One of the most important things I believe is to carry on the legacy of the guys we’ve lost because they can’t do it themselves. Each of them had a story, each of them had something important to them and this place was important to them, they ended up losing their life for it.

Each officer had a story of their career, defined in large measure by their last story. The end of their life, however, is not the end of their story; to the participants it was just the beginning.

**Historical stories.** Historical stories, as the name implies, capture the history of the organization and its members. A common theme among each of the participants was that stories give life to people and events and serve as the organizational memory; when that memory fades, so too does the person or the event. Each of the participants spoke respectfully of the history of the organization with Lina saying, “They (stories) help keep our history alive.”

There was a thread to most interviews that recognized that history, particularly hard times, tends to repeat itself. Historical stories provide a guide to the officers and their organization on how to be successful in the present. This is captured intentional retellings of important narrative histories, through social sharing of seminal events, or through more official
channels such as call for service comments made by dispatchers who advise a certain location is especially dangerous or anti-police and send additional back-up without request.

The cycle of organizational history helps officer’s figure out what was done in the past, what worked or what didn’t work, and what effect this past has on their present. Miguel took history as a guide to be successful in the present saying,

To understand there's a cycle to this...You can figure out what we did in the past, how we made things safer and we've all ... You hear the stories of cops being ambushed. You go into a scene and the dispatchers are saying, ‘Stand by and make sure we get a backup before you go in there,’ because we've all heard those stories.

**Exemplary stories.** As a subcategory of the Historical Story, Exemplary Stories are illustrative of the best of the organization or its members as defined by the storyteller and accepted as part of the culture. There is a close connection to the history of the Department and its impact on policing that defines the exemplary story. Extensions of Heroic and Historical stories, Exemplary stories are the parables of a police department. They capture both history and heroism, but their intention lies in capturing the best of the organization to serve as an example to the next generation of officer and act as the goal to which they can aspire. They are used as examples to share with new officers the history and excellence of the department and its members and to illustrate that even the simplest of actions, such as properly questioning a suspect, can have long lasting and impactful repercussions. Sharing the Exemplary Story reflects an organizational pride that becomes part of the organizational culture, a culture that is shared as illustrations of the best of the organization.
John spoke of his close connection to the history of the Department and its impact on American policing through his friendship with retired Lieutenant Carroll Cooley, lead investigator in the famous Miranda case. He said,

Carroll is very well known for the arrest of Ernesto Miranda, the questioning, all that stuff. The story that he tells and how he told it, that’s extremely important to me and I’ve asked around, a lot of our young officers have no idea that Miranda originated in Phoenix.

Eric, a former LAPD officer, learned much from his senior officers who policed Los Angeles in a post-Rodney King environment. Following the acquittal of four LAPD officers accused of using excessive force on Rodney King, the city erupted in riots in the most affected areas, areas like the 77th Division in South Central Los Angeles. Due to a combination of politics and posturing, actions that should have been taken by the LAPD were not. Eric shared,

As these guys told the story, they had tears in their eyes. Every single one of them told me that they felt that they let the citizens of 77th down - because that's where they worked - they let the citizens of 77th down and that we were there to protect them and we let them down and here it is a couple of years later and they were still very upset about it.

To Eric this reflects an organizational pride that became part of the organizational culture; a culture he would share with his new department and the officers under his charge.

**Race and policing.** Another element of the history of the organization mentioned by several participants was the inextricable connection between Race and Policing. Participants shared both how elements of race impacts service delivery and the treatment of the participant or
community member. Miguel began his police career in an affluent suburb east of the Southwest Police Department where he experienced subtle racism on a number of occasions. He said,

Then another one was my training officer ... I'm driving and I notice citizens were looking at me. I go, ‘Hey Bob, why are these people looking at me?’ He goes, ‘Manny, people in Scottsdale are used to seeing your kind in the back seat, not in the front seat.

Jay worked in a community of color early in his career where socioeconomic lines were made clear to him. He said, “I was told by my first sergeant on walking beat that my job was to hold the lid on the garbage can and keep the have-nots away from the haves.”

In each case, both Miguel and Jay experienced or were witness to racist attitudes during a formative time in their career. Despite this they chose to use their experience as a lens to view police–community relationships in a more hopeful light. To illustrate this point Eric said,

In looking at the media, you would have thought like every LAPD officer was this ogre and white supremacist who doesn't care about the black community and the whole thing. I can't tell you how many times I'd be walking down somebody's driveway at 2 o'clock in the morning, I'd see this little old black lady look out the window and not always the same house but, ‘Hey, who's out there?’ What we would do we would take our badge and we would cap it and shine our light on the badge and without fail they would say, ‘Okay, you be careful. My back doors open if you need anything. Let me know if you need any water, or food or whatever.’ We never heard anybody say, ‘Get out of my yard.’ There was nothing other than support.

Lore. Department Lore are the legends of the department, the truth of which cannot be verified. They exist in the canon of the organization, are generally accepted as fact, and hold an elevated position of importance within the organizational narrative. John said,
I guess the best way to put it is what I like about them is these stories ties us all together, no matter the time, no matter if we know each other, no matter if we’re friends, they tie us together and it provides...it’s almost like a direct link back to that time.

John said the importance of maintaining and respecting the Lore of the department is critical because “...once they’re gone, they’re gone. Much of it is oral history.”

Eric transitioned from the LAPD in a post-Rodney King environment. Despite the events surrounding Rodney King happening before he joined the LAPD their effect was palpable over a year later. Eric shared,

I’ll tell you a story that has really become a part of the fabric of Los Angeles Police Department. I worked 77th and I worked Newton and I heard it at both precincts and I heard the story probably 50 times, and each time it was different, but the basic common part of the story was, there were so many officer involved shootings during the riots that in 1994, actually, so beginning of ’95, when I was at 77th division, they were still doing their walkthroughs.

This is to say that the violence stemming from the 1994 L.A. riots was of such magnitude that over a year later officers were only then giving their statements to investigators about their response, very often officer involved shootings, to it. Once a member of the Southwest Police Department Eric heard the legend of Officer Tim Bush. He said “I mean everybody has heard a story about Tim Bush standing on top of police car basically challenging everybody to a fight. That becomes part of the lore you have.” This story was told by several participants, none of whom had direct knowledge of the incident, but all of whom drew motivation and certain reverence from it.
**Educational Story Type**

This research has found policing is characterized by ongoing adaptation (sensemaking) based upon continuous learning from shared organizational experience (stories). Learning in this context originates from the actions and behaviors of the Department’s members creating the learning environment and the opportunities to share experiential and narrative lessons internally. In this way police officers serve as the agents of their own organizational change through the integration of lessons learned from their experiences and their peers through the course of their duties. The participants characterized the educational story type as those stories intended to teach a lesson, share an experience, or assist the listener in some way succeed in policing.

**Cautionary tales.** Perhaps chief among the educational story type was the Cautionary Tale, so called as they share lessons conveyed through story typically focused on a negative previous occurrence within the organization. Lina spoke about the effects policing has on those who do it speaking at length about her own critical incident and the collateral effects it had on her physically and psychologically and the emotional impact it had on her squad. She also experienced another critical incident as an officer, the line-of-duty deaths of two of her friends that triggered a negative process within the department. She said,

> We, as a department, are kind of a Jekyll and a Hyde when it comes to stuff like that.

> When someone is seriously hurt or killed, we become the brotherhood, the sisterhood, the thin blue line, but the minute that calms down a little bit, we become cannibals. Then, it's pointing fingers, and doing all of this.

The lesson derived from this Cautionary Tale for Lina was the importance of getting help, offering help to the officer in need, or having help imposed upon the officer who may be struggling. Of the struggles of her squad post-critical incident Lina said,
I think the main reason it happened is because back then, we didn't get help. We thought we're always 10 foot tall and bulletproof, and we're not, we're human beings. Take the uniform off and say, "You know what? I can't do this right now. I need help.

As a supervisor today, Lina said this lesson alone is what guides her treatment of her officers and allows her to help them through the sensemaking process during routine or novel events.

**Operational stories.** Participant’s responses defined Operational Stories as those told to illustrate a successful operational tactic and its application to a similar scenario when an officer’s sense of stability during a significant environmental change is challenged. Miguel said,

> I learn from hearing stories, the senior guys telling me stories. They're just great stories...because the cops that I worked with, the stories that they told me was how to identify a felony warrant guy and how you can tell when somebody's on something and just getting ready to run, those type of things.

As part of the ongoing sensemaking that is necessary to succeed in policing, Jay said of Operational Stories “They had a ... it was like a parable. Yeah. Absolutely. It was a parable. It was a lesson. This happens, and this is how it was handled, and you can do the same thing.”

Kent, a long-time Police Academy instructor, said,

> So, now it becomes the practical application. I think that the only way that you could now have an influence on people was to say, ‘Okay, let's relate it to stories. Let's relate it to incidents. Let's relate it to the types of conduct that people have engaged in over the past.’

The element of influence was important; those with credibility, such as Kent, were able to use stories to help officers make sense of the events before them much like the bank of organizational memory described by Eric.
Operational Stories had two subcategories illustrated by this research, Realities of the Job and Survival Stories. Stories describing the Realities of the Job are unvarnished descriptions of both the positive and negative aspects of the policing profession while Survival Stories are an inspiring retelling of a critical incident and the officer’s ability to overcome. Both of these story types are lesson specific intended to share with the listener a best practice for later use.

Realities of the job. Miguel spoke affectionately of one his mentors, Lt. Gerd Kurtenbach, who shared this story with Miguel and his fellow Police Academy classmates shortly before graduation to illustrate the reality of the profession they were entering:

"You guys are going to be cops now. I want to tell you a story." He was Lieutenant Gerd Kurtenbach. He told us the story when a motor officer was shot, killed and another motor officer responding to that scene was killed in a traffic accident, just a horrendous day for the department. Here is ... I'm getting choked up just talking about it. This lieutenant telling this story about his friends who died on the job and just cemented the fact of we are a family.

Stories of this type set the expectation for what the job of a police officer is and is not. Lina grew up in a rural area where she saw police officers and sheriff’s deputies’ community connected helpers. As a police officer in a major, urban setting she survived a violent deadly force encounter she was reluctant to discuss for several years until she became a supervisor responsible for young officers. She said,

I was extremely angry after what happened, because I was doing everything right. I was riding two-man, I was in the greatest shape of my life, but I still got crushed. How does that happen? I treated everyone with dignity and respect. I did everything I was supposed to do. I was working out. In the morning before shift, I was working ... or, in the morning
after shift, I was working out, before shift, I was treating everybody nice, everybody loved me, and I just got crushed. It took me a good 18 months to two years to get over myself.

After a period of self-reflection, she realized her experience had value to others to convey the reality of the profession her new officers were entering. Through retrospection she realized this better understood reality of the job was lost on her as a new officer. With this new understanding Lina felt a responsibility to share this lesson “What I took from it was, anything can happen at any moment, and just like in the Academy, from day one, they say, "If you find yourself in a pickle, keep fighting, don't give up."

To people outside of policing, the true realities of the job can be shocking. Jay shared this thought:

‘What's the grossest thing you ever saw?’ See, recently, I went around the backyard looking for the penises of young boys who had been butchered by their mother and fed it to their dog. That what you wanted to hear? That's pretty bad. They don't wanna fucking hear that. They wanna hear about somebody shit their pants or something like that. For them, that's the worst thing that could ever happen. Oh, no, I can deeper than that if you want to. I can tell you about things that people make horror movies about, okay? And it happens in real life.

Jay continued despite the horrific content of the story it accurately conveys a reality unknown to nonpolice officers. He said,

I'm careful and guarded about what I say around the ones that aren't (police officers) because I can tell you this story and you may even think it's funny, but they're gonna be
horrified because it's the worst thing they've ever heard in their life and they don't see the humor in it.

This reality, though disturbing, offers insight into police officers to non-police officers and shares a small part of their experiences in a way that humanizes the officer and the profession.

Survival stories. As a survivor of a violent attack Lina used her story to share the lesson, “What I took from it was, anything can happen at any moment, and just like in the Academy, from day one, they say, "If you find yourself in a pickle, keep fighting, don't give up." She continued, “Bad things happen to good people, and I'm no different than anybody else, and I survived.” Immediately post-incident, Lina stated she was not inclined to share her story as the feelings were raw and the long-term effects on her fellow squad members had yet to play out.

As a newly promoted sergeant, Lina shared her personal experiences with her young officers after years of self-reflection and the realization her experiences could be shared with others to make them better, to make them safer, and to prevent them from experiencing the negative fallout she and her squad did.

Permissive, predictive, and prohibitive stories. As a profession, policing adheres to a paramilitary model of rank structures, administrative division of roles, and geographic based area of responsibilities. To succeed in such an environment direction is given via orders through a hierarchical chain of command to line level officers. To illustrate what can, may, and cannot happen in policing the participants identified the Permissive, Predictive, and Prohibitive Story types.

Permissive Stories are those that model successful organizational and individual behaviors and say “do this if you want to be successful.” As a young detention officer prior to becoming a police officer, Jay was given this piece of advice from his supervisor to increase his
chances of success - “And he gave one piece of sage advice, and that was, "Say 'no' to everything until you figure out what you're doing." Jay was quick to point out the Permissive Story is not always correct but there is still value to be found in its lesson. Eric, on the other hand, learned much from a Permissive Story told to him by a fill in training officer. Following the investigation of a commercial burglary that required Eric and his partner to scale a wall to search the roof, the training officer said this to Eric "If this was your parents' store or this was your store, what would you expect from the police department?" I go, "I'd have expected them to check the roof." He goes, "Exactly," and he goes, "Treat everybody like that."

Predictive Stories were described as those that used a past experience to predict a similar occurrence in the future. John operationalizes the experiences of others into these predictive devices. He said,

In my personal recollections and that’s why I take value in other people’s recollections, its things that happen. As unique as they are, something similar will happen again. That’s what my interest in that comes from, because I think history repeats itself, and it does.

Miguel, who entered policing in the 1970s said “The similarities of what anybody who wants to be a cop now and when I came on in the late '70s are strikingly similar. To understand there's a cycle to this.” Both John and Miguel, separated by policing generations, spoke of the value of learning from the past to prepare for the present very much in line with the fundamentals of sensemaking.

Finally, Prohibitive Stories offer the lesson “don’t do this if you want to be successful.” Eric discussed how one of the great failures in his Department’s history pushed him towards positions of leadership. He spoke of the Las Palmaritas incident, where two officers were killed and another seriously wounded during a shootout with a heavily armed suspect. He said “It was
just a huge catastrophic failure in leadership and so to me, that story from Phoenix really ... I take a lot of those lessons and I have ingrained them into my own leadership style.” For Eric, he found value in failure by doing exactly the opposite of the on-scene supervisors; he now leads an elite tactical unit.

Kent’s Prohibitive Story was his own. He shared,

I screwed up a ton. You get injured for the first time because you get in somebody's face that you think you're going to lecture some place, and they're not going to have it from you. Somebody has to bail you out…. you got in your first fight because you were too immature to realize you needed to keep your mouth shut….I think that sharing those things, maybe it will keep somebody else out of that trouble, and maybe not, because maybe the only way you learn is by doing.

There is an element of “learning the hard way” that was discussed by several of the participants, a process Jay termed a “Hard-earned perspective and the splash of reality that you get every single day that you're on this job.” Despite the negative connotation of the term, several participants saw value in the prohibitive story.

**Social Story Type**

The Social Story type encapsulates the social interactions common to organizational life in a police department. The social nature of a police department is manifest in its culture and the pattern of shared assumptions and artifacts (i.e., badges, uniform appearance, thin blue line, etc.) that connects its members and mobilizes them towards the completion of organizational objectives through the process of adaptation to changing environmental conditions. Police culture is commonly shared outlooks and attitudes that are formed through experience in the police department’s specific a working environment characterized by the memorialization of
officer’s responses to environmental change. The participants placed perhaps their greatest emphasis on the social and cultural nature of policing as informative of culture, operations, and sensemaking.

**Banter and gossip stories.** As part of the social process of assimilation, decompression, knowledge transfer, and other aspects of the police socialization process, banter and gossip play an important role in connecting officers to each other. These stories are an act of social bonding over a subject or topic unique to the social group. For some, like Miguel, the banter was a way to decompress from a shift or to trade in department rumor. He said,

> When I had the gang squad as a sergeant, we were off duty at 2:00 in the morning, but we'd sit and shoot the breeze until 4:00 in the morning just from everything that we did that day and how so and so got caught cheating. Just fun stuff.

Jay said this type of communication was an important way to expel some of the more negative experiences cops experience saying,

> And that's usually when it'll spread the most, or if it's particularly juicy gossip. Then that goes like wildfire, but funny ones, they seem to spread faster than anything, because we're always looking for something to lighten the mood. This is a pretty dark profession if you allow it to be.

The embellishment of a story was described by Lina as a part of forming the police identity. She said, “It’s human nature to embellish on a story…..You’re not meaning anything terrible about it, it doesn’t mean you’re a bad person, but you’re trying to say, ‘Hey, I have worth, right?’” Similarly, John said,

> Some of the squads I was on, the guys would get together and have a drink and the stories got some blurred lines in those or not even having a drink, cigars. Sitting with some guys
having some cigars. You’re not going to be exact with times and circumstances and stuff like that. There’s much more levity given in those stories. Other times, I guess this is a type of a story is in an official capacity, they’re on point with what happened. Very similar to the big fish story, guys are around, kicking around a story, it changes a little bit every time it’s told.

**Mentor Stories.** Thematically, no other topic was as prominent in this research as the role and importance of the professional mentor. The participants defined mentor stories as those that highlight in policing the connection to an individual or individuals who used their experiences to assist the participant enter into and acclimate to policing. Kent had a career long mentor of whom he said,

I met a mentor in that that I ended up working for at every stage of his career until he left here as the chief. I worked for him as a sergeant, a lieutenant, a caption. I worked for him as an assistant chief, and then I ultimately worked for him as the chief. And that was Jack Harris who was my academy sergeant when I went back through full-time…. but it isn't a story in this particular case that I think that I can tell you as to why somebody becomes a mentor for me. But I can tell you that when you work for somebody who every day cares about the people that work for him. Every day cares about the way that he looks. Every day has polished shoes. And I know that seems like a small thing, right? You're attaching yourself to people within an organization who represent the whole organization. So, they're good communicators. They're a good people-person. They're good cops.

Mentor stories had a number of subcategories including Assimilation, Confirmatory, Descriptive, Explanatory, and Preparatory stories.
**Assimilation stories.** Assimilation stories are those that are intended to bind the listener or the teller to the profession globally or the work unit locally through use of emotion, heroic devices or common bonds or objectives. A strong influence on his LAPD career, Eric illustrated these stories by saying,

You wore whatever pins, whatever you had with pride. It was a badge of honor. You wore your uniform. If you were fat and out of shape, you made that uniform look bad, you paid the price. They would talk to you about it first. They'd always tell you, ‘People died wearing this uniform. Wear it with respect.’

**Confirmatory stories.** Confirmatory stories confirm stories unique to the department or the work unit in such a way as to share a moral or lesson. Miguel was newly assigned to an organized crime assignment at a time when the rules governing acceptable police practices were blurry. Recounting a discussion with his lieutenant, a former Vice sergeant, Miguel shared,

I'd always heard this rumor about a vice sergeant working prostitutes goes into a massage parlor and waiting to get his deal. During the massage, he gets (aroused) and supposedly before he can stop, the girl, she's sitting on him and grinding on him. My lieutenant goes, ‘That's a true story.’

Miguel continued this conversation helped to illuminate the boundaries of his new assignment and validated a story that was part of the organizational narrative. It also tacitly conveyed the sergeant in the story was now his lieutenant and helped Miguel understand how to best work with him in an investigative assignment.

**Descriptive stories.** Descriptive stories are told for no other reason than to explain the realities of the job to nonpolice officers in a sanitized fashion according to the participants. John recognized what other participants articulated which is nonpolice are fascinated by police stories.
He said, “I guess the best way to put it is, how important these irrelevant stories are to people who aren’t cops.” Interesting though these stories may been there must be caution in sharing them and the audience must always be considered. Jay said,

I'm careful and guarded about what I say around the ones that aren't because I can tell you this story and you may even think it's funny, but they're gonna be horrified because it's the worst thing they've ever heard in their life and they don't see the humor in it.

Among police officers these same stories take on a different perspective. Jay continued,

You try to be as accurate as you possibly can. At least I do, anyway, because I find that truth is stranger than fiction in most cases. You don't have to embellish them too much because they're usually pretty bizarre to start with, but again, depending on your audience. If you were to tell this to somebody that doesn't do this for a living, they would find it incredible. You tell it to somebody that does this (policing) and they're like, ‘Oh, yeah. That happened to me, actually.’ That's the kind of thing that you hear.

**Explanatory stories.** Explanatory stories were described by the participants as explanations of why things are the way they are or how things came to be. Jay, a 37-year veteran, said of the way things are in policing today:

And they always asked me, ‘What was it like when you came on?’ And I said, ‘Exactly like this. Same stupid fucking people doing the same stupid things.’ I said, ‘I wasted 37 years of my life because I made no difference at all. I'm just dealing with their great-grandkids now as opposed to them.’

Jay would clarify the intent of that comment to explain that in some areas of his city, the conditions that influence crime are generational, affected by economics, and unchanging. The
recognition of this point was, to him, an important insight into the community he served and into the motivations of the suspects he investigated.

**Preparatory stories.** Preparatory stories were told to the participants to prepare them for what is to come in policing. Each participant had experience with others telling them stories to prepare them for what they would experience in policing. Miguel was in a military reserve unit comprised largely of police officers from his area. One in particular took interest in helping him become a police officer. Miguel said,

“He basically talked about a class sergeant, a black class sergeant, who was just infamous for the military drill sergeant experience of ... Just in your face kind of a personality. Said, ‘If you get this guy, just remember.’ Again, it's just the stuff you know you're going to be doing the arm circles forever and he's going to be in your face, those types of stories. There wasn't one specific one, but he did mention one sergeant. ‘You're going to catch hell if you get this guy.’

For Miguel this insight let him know that the Police Academy experience, though rigorous, was nothing greater than what he had already experienced as a member of the military.

Eric’s roommate in college had a parent who was in a leadership role in the state police. Eric grew close to the family and learned much from his roommate’s father saying,

I started hearing stories, specifically from Scott Reutter about things that his dad was involved in over his career, as actually the DPS work can be ... I had these stories, they were in the back of my head, and it seemed in speaking with Bill Reutter, that he was able again, to look respectfully at his life, and that his life made a difference.

The foundation provided to Eric via these stories helped to affirm his desire to become a police officer and prepare for the realities of the job. He continued,
…we live retrospectively, and you are absolutely right. There was, looking back, those times with people that I trusted, and they were my friends that I cared about and listening to generationally the stories that Scott Reutter’s dad had told him and I happened to be present during a lot of those and it really started to help me make sense of the direction I wanted to go in my life.

**Therapeutic stories.** Every participant acknowledged that the weight of the job sometimes hangs heavy on them requiring an outlet to release some of the feelings associated with their work. Miguel said early in his interview that he told stories as a police officer and that he writes stories as a retiree to help vent the bad memories accumulated over a twenty-seven-year career and to help cope with diagnosed PTSD developed over a career in policing. This palliative or cathartic use of storytelling figured prominently among each of the participants.

**Coping mechanism.** The most common manifestation of the Therapeutic Story was as a Coping Mechanism. This subcategory of the Therapeutic Story is told as a means to process the realities of the job to those who possess the native understanding of what that means. This is of bi-directional benefit; the teller has the ability to process feelings through sharing their experiences and the listener is able to gain experience narratively through their interaction with the narrator.

Following the investigation of a fatal accident that required a large number of officers to manage, Miguel witnessed this therapeutic process firsthand. He shared,

I come back to the station. It’s like 5:00 in the morning, four hours after this incident (a fatal accident involving a decapitation) happened. The evening officers, who witnessed that, were still sitting at the station talking about, trying to talk their way through this horrific experience they had. This is before the department had the crisis intervention
teams are basically doing the same thing, getting the officers together and having them talk through what they just witnessed and explain to them perception and stress and venting.

As witness to this spontaneous therapy session Miguel was struck both by how naturally this process commenced and how he was witness to the process of sensemaking in action describing it as “... a teaching moment, but also a way of bonding and then a way of stress relief also.”

As illustrative of the sensemaking process, Kent pointed out the benefit of having a regular partner in policing, someone to spend ten hours a shift with sifting through the feelings associated with the experience of police work. He said,

But there's no doubt that whole entire time you're with a partner, you have that ability to talk about it. You have the ability to cope with each other on it. I don't think you know that's what you're doing at the time, but it certainly is an avenue that's there that I think that you're using.

This was referenced by other participants as well, this process of rationalizing experience into more manageable chunks of information from which meaning could be extracted and situations better understood.

**Humorous stories.** Another prominent form of therapy was the use of Humor, especially Gallows Humor, to help stave off the impact of negative experiences. Humor was used to capture the unusual events common to policing, told to illustrate the juxtaposition of the story and the setting and their combined influence on policing. Lina shared the following short story about her return to work following a critical incident during which she sustained a serious brain injury:
All right. One of the ice breakers after my incident, and I come back to work, my squad...I got two presents upon my return. One was a football helmet painted Phoenix PD colors with Phoenix PD insignias on it, my serial number on the back and, I was given the helmet and something like, ‘We’re still trying to find the short bus for you to drive,’ because I had a serious head injury. The second present was a pair of pink Super Girl panties. It’s still a very raw issue. I take it upon myself to walk into briefing the next day with the pink Super Girl panties on the outside of my uniform pants. The belly laughs and the people rolling on the floor, it broke the ice, but the funny part of the story is, then Commander Sherry Kiyler walks in, sees me like this, makes the comment, ‘Well, I’m glad that you have your panties on today, Lori.’ And she walks out of the room. That was kind of ... It was funny, but it was so needed to repair whatever had happened. It was like, ‘We can put this behind us. We can try and go forward.’

Gallows humor. Gallows humor was also a common therapeutic device employed by the participants in this research. This type of humor was defined by the participants as a dark retelling of a traumatic event in a humorous way as a means to enhance understanding of its impact. Miguel illustrated Gallows humor this way:

Gallows humor ... I went to an accident. It was January and the cop literally picks up a piece of the scalp, so you can see the steam coming out of the top of the guy's head and then put it down. He goes, ‘Look, smoke signals.’ That's gallows humor to me.

Kent described Gallows humor as a uniquely specific defense mechanism common in policing saying, “We may be the only people out here who can be humorous, or sarcastic, or condescending over death, whatever the morbid scenario may be. You can't let these things eat up at you.”
The Role of Organizational Narrative Exchange & Sensemaking

Another secondary research question of this study was: how are the stories that act as sensemaking tools shared within the police department being studied? Weick’s (1995) question “How can I know what I think, until I see what I say?” illustrates the social process of how organization members explore and assess equivocality and environmental flux in a discursive attempt to find meaning in the unexpected (Boje, 1991; Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) said, Stories posit a history for an outcome. They gather strands of experience into a plot that produces that outcome…. Stories allow the clarity achieved in one small area to be extended to and imposed on an adjacent area that is less orderly… they integrate that which is known about an event with that which is conjectural. (p. 128-129)

For police officers, stories help to impose order over the chaos of change and help to predict a response for an indeterminate future (Kelly & Bisel, 2014). What this means is that through the process of exchange clarity is found, meaning is discovered, and actions are conceived.

This research identified within the Southwest Police Department the social processes of organizational narrative exchange across three distinct strata—Foundational, Informational, and Developmental (Figure 5). Across each of the strata are both unidirectional and bidirectional exchanges of organizational narrative illustrating 1) organizational narrative exchange is a social process, 2) it is in some cases reciprocal, 3) it evolves over time as relationships evolve over time, and 4) it is the process through which stories are shared and act as an element of sensemaking.
Foundational Organizational Narrative Exchange

Foundational exchange is that which provides the police officer with a fundamental understanding of policing both formally and informally; it sets the initial expectations for the job and is the most malleable of the exchange strata remaining open to change as more validated or credible information is received. Each of the participants identified three ways in which the foundation of their understanding of policing was built—through external sources such as the media and entertainment, through their initial formal training, and through familial or social relationships.
**External sources.** As people inclined towards a career in policing, several participants were influenced by police stories such as novels written by Joseph Wambaugh, himself a former LAPD police officer who became a professional storyteller. A common theme that drew the participants to these representations were the depictions of the camaraderie in the stories specifically the relationships the officers had with each other and the ways authors integrated humanizing, personal stories with the stories of “the job.” Similarly, other participants were drawn to the reality of the stories Wambaugh told and the insight into the profession they gained from outside the profession and prior to entering it. What was most informative to the participants was a perceived reality-based point of view conveyed by authors such as Wambaugh whose previous experience as an LAPD police officer lent credibility to his stories and provided to some their first exposure to and understanding of policing.

Still others spoke of the influence of the media on perceptions surrounding policing, particularly following incidents that drew critical attention to the police. Eric and Kent specifically referenced a number of high profile incidents, including the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles and a number of high profile uses of force in Phoenix, as generating negative attention for policing and potentially affecting both new officers entering the professional environment or those considering policing as a career. As a counter to these perceptions, Kent asked directly what changes resulted from the King incident or other high profile uses of force in Phoenix. The implication being that despite the coverage of policing in external sources, resulting change is rare leading some of the participants to give less credibility to these accounts. Regarding external accounts, each of the participants discussed the importance of properly framing externally informed perceptions, particularly to those considering policing as a career or using them baseline against which later experiences would be considered and measured.
**Familial and social relationships.** As an internal source, familial and social relationships also played a key role in forming early understandings of policing. Social groupings of friends and family connected to policing were frequently mentioned as a source of police insight and as formative to their entry into and understanding of police work. So much so that the participants said these relationships and interactions serve as an experience that expanded their police family circle of friends and added to their growing understanding of policing, police culture, and the steps necessary to become a police officer. John, for example, said this positive foundation was directly responsible for his life choices, his military service, and his decision to enter policing as a career.

Conversely, others shared stories about their work as a police officer with their family illustrating how the process works familiarily. The benefit to Kent’s family was he believed they felt more comfortable with him being a police officer because he shared more information with them than was typical for a police family. The result was the family believed more in the organization and the safer they felt their family member was at the time. This comfort level led, in part, to his son becoming a Reserve Police Officer with the Southwest Police Department. He said his honest sharing of his experiences through storytelling rubbed off on his son and wife giving both a level of comfort that he could be safe and successful in his father’s career. It appears that, in each example, the innate trust placed in family or social relationships was key to the perception of policing becoming bound to the participant or used by the participant to share a perception intra-familially.

**Formal training.** The foundation laid by both internal and external sources was burnished by the participant’s initial exposure to policing through their formal training in the police academy and early on in their career. It was here, for the first time, that a direct exposure
to policing, specifically within their specific police department, formalized the participants understanding of the profession they were soon to enter and the culture of the organization they were joining. Fundamentally, the lessons taught in the police academy would serve as the lens through which the participants would view policing as well as their place in it. Jay stated the lessons he learned during his initial training while in the police academy provided the first formal training and acculturation into policing and served as a guide for his subsequent police career and the lens through which he viewed his experiences.

A frequent source of wisdom through narrative, police academy Lt. Gerd Kurtenbach shared personal experiences during formal training with Miguel and his police academy classmates as they were about to graduate from the police academy. Characterized as a powerful storyteller, Lt. Kurtenbach pulled out his flat badge, a symbol of the profession and an identifier of the Department and shared the reality of policing these new recruits were about to confront including the risk and responsibility that comes with the position and the likelihood that bad things will happen to them or their peers. Though delivered in an informal setting outside the regular academy curriculum, these stories carried the weight of formality due to the message and messenger. These two lessons summarized, “do the right thing” and “bad things happen to good people”, would later serve as the first point of consideration for the participants when assessing a sudden environmental change and then acting upon it.

**Informational Organizational Narrative Exchange**

Informational exchange presumes a basic understanding of policing that can be refined either through official, departmental means, or through peer relationships. This, too, is subject to change or adjustment as the officer develops additional relationships within their department that provides alternative perspectives or mentoring. In this sense, two primary methods of narrative
exchange exist as described by the participants—through policy and other official communications from department leadership and through social relationships with fellow officers.

Policy and official communication. As newly entered into a structured, paramilitary organization the participants all expected that department policy would frame their actions and drive their operational decision making. Post-critical incident official communications, called Employee Notification System (ENS) announcements, describe the incident that occurred, how the involved officers responded, and the initial investigative findings. Jay described the impact of the ENS as twofold—first, it shares organizationally an important event and, second, it encourages discussion among organization members in such a way as to facilitate individual sensemaking. In most cases, formal communications are unidirectional originating with the department directed to the recipient with little room for feedback or dialog.

Lina stated that official communications inform policy revision and address a need for operational change. Following the line-of-duty death of two officers during one incident one such communication was sent out that was particularly impactful on her. She said following the Las Palmaritas incident, where three officers were shot and two were killed, a policy revision went out revamping how the Department dealt with barricaded subjects and officer safety. Plainly referenced in the text of the message, Las Palmaritas as it is now referred to, this incident signaled an organizational failure of training, of leadership, and of anticipation to expect the worst when handling “business as usual.” Eric referred to this as the greatest failure in Department history but pointed out its lessons were captured and shared formally through policy revision and narratively as an important part of the Department’s officer-in-training program.
**Peer officers.** Official communications serve the purpose of sharing the facts of a situation and preface an organizational move towards policy review and change. Alternately, the consumption of these same facts through peer relationships is where a more personal meaning is extracted. Bidirectional in nature, the peer-to-peer exchange is necessarily dependent upon developing a shared understanding of a singular event as part of the sensemaking process. From tragedy comes learning, something that was evident to Lina when she arrived at her first precinct. She said from the first day she walked into the precinct the history of its loss is palpable, captured both narratively and through memorials to fallen officers. These stories and their representations became part of the local culture of the precinct, formed the fabric of the training program, and acted as powerful teaching tools to new officers in training or to officers newly assigned to the precinct. Stories of loss were common among each of the participants, requiring a community response to assess and understand the event and to extract from the tragedy a meaning intended to reduce future, similar occurrences. Learning from experience, even the more painful experiences of the organization, is an important learning tool. Sharing their understanding of the Las Palmaritas and other critical incidents the participants said telling this story is their way to support organizational stability through sharing hard earned, applied knowledge with younger officers with the hope these same mistakes are not made again.

Other than learning from tragedy, the peer-to-peer relationship was discussed extensively by each participant. Several participants said engaging in peer-to-peer relationships is a form of learning as well as a type of leadership. Most often, these interactions happened spontaneously with little preparation or intention. Most often this occurred when a group of officers or supervisors were sitting around assessing (making sense) of the shift or a particular incident and constituting a mutually agreed upon understanding of its meaning through dialog. Sometimes
consensus was achieved, other times it was not, but as is found in Weickian sensemaking uncovering an absolute truth was less important than the process by which an incident was explored. In both cases these interactions enhance the sensemaking process through the sharing of story and also allows for a cathartic release from the experiences of policing.

As a midway point between policy and peer, shift briefings were described as a time where the formal and informal blended together as yet another part of the sensemaking process. Typically, briefings begin with the formal—a reading of the previous shift’s events, requests for assistance from detective details, requests for additional patrol in a given area, or policy updates directly applicable to the work unit. Then a more informal process occurs when a story is told as a means to debrief an unusual call for service or to solicit feedback from the peer group and/or supervisor regarding a novel situation. This blended formal/informal briefing time is structured sensemaking time for the officers and offers benefit both to the storyteller who is mentally processing a past experience and to the listeners who are benefiting from a shared experience.

Following briefing, officers hit the street armed with the information they learned in briefing and able to digest it either alone or with a partner. Kent placed great emphasis on the partner relationship as a way to further digest and make sense of personal and professional realities throughout an eight or ten-hour work shift. This was described as a time for enhanced understanding, a period to express doubt or concern, and as a way to help each partner cope with the stresses of the job. Like much of policing that is relationship based, several participants described this as an unintentional though critical process of sensemaking.

As a way to build organizational and unit cohesion, peer interactions hold a powerful place in the sensemaking process. There is little formality in these interactions, in fact, their values lies in the informality that comes only with sharing common experiences as only police
officers will do with each other. Jay said police officers are storytellers by nature and tell their most important stories to each other. The stories told to and by police are at their most unfiltered when they are offered in informal settings such as in a patrol car, after work, or outside the professional environment altogether. Differing perspectives are welcomed as several participants noted that different perspectives exist, even among police officers, of the same incidents. Rooted in trust these interactions are times when officers share most openly and can be most vulnerable.

They also serve as educational vignettes to share organizational or individual experiences and values. Eric’s training officer, Snoopy Smith, would regularly share the lessons he learned personally as well as the lessons shared within the LAPD with his new officers. He shared one such interaction saying these lessons put him on a path over twenty years ago to becoming the officer he is today. The knowledge he took from this relationship is it is not the quantity of time that a leader or mentor spends with someone, rather it is the investment in that person and their long term success that matters most to the individual and the organization. This realization that rank does not equate to leadership created in him a desire to lead, to be a Snoopy Smith for someone else, using his experiences as narrative lessons to help officers grow.

**Developmental Organizational Narrative Exchange**

Developmental exchange is part of the evolution of the officer as they proceed deeper into their career and is intended to help make the officer better or more satisfied. The components of this exchange process are through informal leadership, formal leadership, and mentors. These strata of organizational narrative exchange presumes experience on the part of the storyteller and the listener and is both unidirectional and bidirectional depending upon the nature of the relationship.
**Informal leadership.** While policing is defined in part by a hierarchical structure, the value of the informal leader was indicated by all participants as significant to their growth as an officer and as a source of shared experience to be drawn on during times of flux. An informal leader was described by the participants as one without rank per se but possessed of a high level of operational proficiency, a history of success, a broad based of experience, and the credibility to lead in uncertain situations.

These stories are shared almost incidentally as part of the social and assimilative process of officers joining the department or working in a precinct for the first time. To provide a base from which to make sense of their new environment, stories are shared by informal leaders and act as on the job training and an extension of the formal training process of creating a police officers. Eric said that those who are intentional in seeking out this organizational knowledge are those who recognize the value of collected wisdom and know those who have captured it are those bet to share it. Other participants felt the same saying the value of sharing experiences inter-generationally is sometimes as important as the formal training officers receive saying these stories told through these relationships help newer officers “get it”—how to do the job of policing, how to fit in to the organizational culture and community, and how to understand and take meaning from the experiences they are about to have.

Several participants said they learned much from these informal gatherings with their fellow officers, some more experienced than they were but not possessed of rank or positional authority. Miguel and John both said of these interactions that these gatherings offered the opportunity to share others experiences during which time an informal leader would shape or guide the discussion towards one of both meaning and social bonding. Among supervisors of the same rank, Miguel was positioned to be an informal leader given his tenure and experiences. As
part of the continuous process of learning from others Miguel would regularly attend coffee meetings with his fellow supervisors, including at times his supervisor, and facilitate the process of organizational narrative exchange. He said this relational process was common and would routinely prompt mutual learning sessions where experiences would be shared, questions asked, and answers given.

Outside of the learning lessons to be shared through informal leadership there was also the more cultural aspect of informal leadership that helped to transition new officers into the organization. While a part of the LAPD, Eric quickly learned about the importance on uniform appearance that has become a signature of that department. He said the artifacts of his organization such as the unique uniform appearance and unit specific pins and identifiers were worn with honor. From the first day as a new officer, it was shared culturally and as a point of learning that appearance matters, both to the public and to your peers, that officers previously have given their life while wearing this uniform. The leadership lesson Eric shared was who they represented to others was the best representation of themselves, as if the uniform itself captured a common history and held its own unique meaning to those who wore it.

John, a student of his department’s history, took much from the experiences of the officers who have come before him and sees in them leaders even though they may be long retired. He said the value he placed on the experiences of others is rooted both in the personal history they collect but also in their utility as very often in policing the same types of situations occur and experience is the best teacher.

**Formal leadership.** Formal leaders are one of the primary ways both formal and informal information is shared within the organization. Orders and strategic direction are given in the form of interpersonal interactions occurring through the chain of command, the sharing of
official communications and through leader–follower exchanges. Typically, unidirectional, several of the participants described occasions where the sensemaking process occurred between them and a formal leader but they noted it was the exception not the rule.

Jay began his law enforcement career as a detention officer with the county Sheriff’s Office. Following one day of formal training his first detention supervisor gave him his first direct order saying, “Say 'no' to everything until you figure out what you're doing.” This tacit instruction, though self-limiting and not service oriented, was in retrospect, an important piece of advice to Jay who characterized it as his first opportunity to interact with prisoners, and enabled him to develop the ability to talk to people within the criminal justice system. As a police officer, this Jay would later be assigned to a specialty squad patrolling public housing projects in a high crime section of town. His vision of the job was to keep the peace and to ensure those who violated it would be held accountable. His sergeant summed up this responsibility saying his job was to “hold the lid on the garbage can and keep the have-nots away from the haves.”

In both cases the formal leaders leveraged their positional authority to deliver an organizational message that tends toward the prohibitive side of leadership. In other cases, the formal leader would prompt a sensemaking process that would benefit the participant as they continued their career. Miguel would spend a number of years working at the police academy training new officers. While there he worked for a civilian supervisor who had extensive experience training in the police profession. He came to view this supervisor as a mentor and friend in addition to being his supervisor. He spoke of how this supervisor used his extensive experiences in policing to adopt a predictive mindset that he shared with Miguel utilizing the lessons of 9/11 as a roadmap to the future of policing. This conversation with his supervisor would prompt a mental process that forced Miguel to consider the evolution of policing and how
that would affect the officers he was training at the academy. Later, as a patrol sergeant, he would use this lesson to help make sense of the line-of-duty death of two officers in an adjoining precinct and to help his newer officer’s process their first exposure to loss.

**Mentor.** As previously discussed, mentorship is a connection to an individual or individuals who used their experiences to assist the participant enter into and acclimate to policing. Each of the participants spoke fondly of a mentor or mentors who took genuine interest in them personally and professionally and shared with them the experiences of their career. The mentoring relationship is bidirectional with both mentor and mentee contributing equally to the relationship; the mentor to the development of the mentee and the mentee providing to the mentor their need for guidance and assimilation.

Kent quickly identified his police academy class sergeant as a mentor, one who would provide guidance to him throughout his career. Miguel said the relationship he developed with his police academy class lieutenant would guide him throughout his career. Years later when he was getting ready to promote to sergeant his class lieutenant, now a precinct commander, invited him to become a sergeant-in-training in his precinct with the tacit promise this mentor–mentee relationship would continue to develop him. Miguel’s mentor had a relationship with him predicated on mutual friendship and a desire to see him succeed. There is not obligation in this relationship only a desire to share experiences as a way to prepare the mentee for future opportunities.

Mentor relationships while mostly intentional can also occur unintentionally. Eric spent a great deal of time with his college roommates father, Major Bill Reutter with the State Police, and as a result of this familial relationship discovered in him a career long mentor. He shared this relationship began informally and unintentionally, his connection to his future mentor
developing incidentally through his relationship with his so. Through the years Eric heard stories from Major Reutter about policing and the relationships that develop among police officers and it resonated so strongly with him that upon graduating from college he had a lingering desire to serve as a police officer because Major Reutter was able to articulate that his life made a difference. These stories served as motivation to Eric to enter policing as a profession once his corporate career proved to be unsatisfying hoping to find that level of impact described by his mentor. This proved life-changing for Eric who aspired to be the leader Major Reutter was and this relationship put him on a path to become both a police officer and a police leader.

Recognizing the value of the mentoring relationship, John both sought out mentors and offered himself as a mentor as well. Speaking of Carroll Cooley, famed detective Lieutenant for his department, John said his connection to someone who would become a mentor came through the stories he heard from others attributed to or about Lt. Cooley. The organizational history, the lessons, and the shared experiences John heard provided him with professional guidance and personal interests that encouraged him to seek out and develop this relationship. Once he began to see the benefit of these shared experiences, John would share these stories with his young officers because he felt oral histories were valuable, yet fleeting, saying once these stories stopped being told, this part of history and its value would be lost to future generations of police officers. Jay, as a thirty-seven-year veteran, feels a responsibility for sharing his stories and experiences with others saying, “...I tell my story, or I tell our stories to us to help make ‘us’ better.”

The importance of mentors sharing stories and experiences with other officers was summarized by Kent who shared a conversation with his mentor, who would later become the chief of the department. He said the Chief shared organizational history to provide him with a
contemporary and historical context to serve the Department’s needs. The Chief said, "I need you here to look after the organization.” Kent took that responsibility seriously acting both in the moment to do his part “to take care” of the organization and later in his career as he shared the same advice and requests with others. Kent followed this direction because of who gave it, his mentor, saying the credibility of the storyteller was most impactful. He continued this created for him a career long relationship with a mentor who represented the whole of the organization and the bet of policing. He described the Chief as a good communicator, a good and genuine people-person, and a good cop. Mentoring, and the lessons shared through this process, was defined by the participants as setting the right example, modelling the right behavior, and making the right decisions in the best interest of the organization.

Conclusion

This chapter summarized research findings and provided insight into the process of sensemaking in a large, urban police department as informed by the stories of the organization. These findings will be further discussed in Chapter 5 as connections to theory and practice will be articulated and limitations and implications for future research will be described.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Implications

Implications for Research

Sensemaking in organizations is a well-established area of research dating back to the foundational work of Weick, who built his theory upon the work of leading organizational scholars Taylor, James, Festinger, Geertz, and others. Weickian sensemaking has its roots in studies of social psychology (James, 1907), human nature (Dewey, 1922), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), culture (Geertz, 1973), and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). As a theoretical construct, sensemaking has been used to research a number of diverse subjects
including how sense is made in an organizational setting (Clark & Geppert, 2011), the intersection of knowledge creation, transfer and technology (Dervin, 1998), change management (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005), crisis response (Colville, Pye & Carter, 2013; Weick, 1993), and as a component of ethical corporate decision making during times of flux (Mumford et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007) among other varied topics.

Exploring how individuals gather collectively into organizations to accomplish goals through mutually beneficial collaboration and to constitute their reality through co-constructed meaning making is fundamental to organizational studies and related research topics such as culture, communication, and leadership. That said, there has not yet arisen a general theory as to what sensemaking truly is leaving it open to application in a number of organizational settings. A review of the literature acknowledges that of all the diverse lines of research surrounding sensemaking it is, at its core, a process through which people attempt to understand and explain ambiguous or novel situations (Brown et al., 2015). As applied to an action-driven profession such as policing, the connection between what’s happening during a novel experience and what it means can be summarized thusly:

Lessening ambiguity implies that through action you can learn to discount what might have been going on and reach an answer to the question as to what is going on (i.e. ‘what is the story?’). Reducing equivocality suggests that action does not clarify by allowing you to eliminate lack of clarity but that action clarifies by shaping what it is that you are attending to and in the doing, shapes what is going on. (Colville et al., 2012, p. 7)

As a profession entrenched in the unexpected and the ambiguous, and as one that compels mitigative action, policing has received less attention in the sensemaking literature than other professions prone to discontinuity such as nursing, fire service, and emergency
management. Building upon the social and discursive nature of Weickian sensemaking, this research revealed a socially dependent process through which officers collectively create meaning, and thus mutual understanding, of the various discontinuous situations they are prone to confront. What emerged from this research is a distinct application of Weickian sensemaking to policing that relies heavily on the organizationally and culturally specific stories of the organization to provide a repository of collective experience from which officers can draw from when confronted with a situation that challenges their expectations and requires a certain action.

Illustrative of the importance of storytelling in policing, each participant provided unique insight into how the stories of their police department informed both their day-to-day actions as police officers as well as their identity as police officers, both key elements of story informed sensemaking. For example, Eric, a twenty-four-year veteran of the two major city police departments said of stories,

These stories and the lessons that I’ve garnered for them allows me to, it’s almost like a bank. These are just deposits in your memory bank and you’re able to just go to them and take these withdrawals and go, ‘I’m going to use this one, I remember so and so told me about this’ and I remember a certain story.

Similarly, Jay, a thirty-seven-year veteran of the Department, spoke about how the stories of his department added to his sense of self and how they informed the way he performed his duties saying they provided a “hard earned perspective and a splash of reality that you get every single day you’re on this job.” Both of these quotes are representative of the elements found in the theoretical framework of Weickian sensemaking and the application of the organizational narrative to the practice of policing.
The Role of Storytelling and Sensemaking

Chief among the intentions of this research was to explore the connection between the stories that are commonly shared among members of a large, urban police department and how they influence the individual and collective sensemaking processes. In considering the primary research question, “What role does storytelling play in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment?” It is the main finding of this research that police stories are a catalog of collective experiences both consciously and unconsciously drawn upon to help police officers assess changes in their environment, determine what actions have had success in similar situations in the past, and how best to implement a variation of these actions to address current situations.

Weick (1995), in breaking sensemaking down to its most essential element, poignantly asks “what’s the story?” This question, so simple yet deeply probing, is an instinctive cognitive prompt intended to begin the process of understanding, retrospection, and action. This research seeks to answer this question when police officers are the ones being asked. The “story” as illustrated through this research is both the immediate description of what is occurring in the present as well as the collective organizational and individual experiences that have occurred in the past and serve as the lens through which to assess the present. This dependent relationship between past and present triggers the process of generating, capturing, and sharing collective knowledge for later use by others within the organization.

What was revealed through the experiences shared by the participants was five key points that parallel the Seven Elements of Weickian Sensemaking and illustrate how the process of sensemaking is operationalized in a policing context. They include:
Policing is defined by frequent sudden environmental change that challenges a police officer’s sense of self and stability (Identity Central to One’s Self) and creates a need for to rapidly assess and adapt to these environmental changes in order to preserve self and others (Extracting Cues from Social or Situational Context).

The process of assessment and adaptation is both a cognitive and physical act that draws retrospectively upon both the individual and collective experiences of the police officer and their department (Retrospective in Nature).

Sensemaking occurs both in the moment through retrospection and action (Enacting Environments through Narrative Accounts) as well as post-event through conversation and consideration (Social Activity & Shared Experience).

Often these environmental changes are novel experiences for which there is no prior personal, situational, or occupational context that later become an occupational norm (Ongoing Process of Adapting to Changing Conditions).

Once sense of self and stability have been restored the experience can become part of the individual and collective narrative available for use by self and others at a later time; the relative or objective truth of the story is less important than value in application to self or others (Valuing Plausibility over Accuracy).

Beginning with the premise that the stories generated and shared within a police department are powerful elements of the sensemaking process in a policing context, this research showed a close connection between the extant literature on Weickian sensemaking and its story-informed application within the Southwest Police Department. What follows is a summary of this connection, its connection to the superordinate themes identified by this study, and a
description of the police specific processes of story informed sensemaking as discovered through this research.

**Identity central to one’s self.** Sensemaking occurs when an environmental change disrupts an individual's ability to confirm one’s self or to maintain individual stability (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Identity is such a powerful element of the police persona that one of the participants stated, “...when the last person that worked with me has gone from here, I will cease to exist as far as the Phoenix Police Department is concerned.” That is to say the stories that define who police officers are, once untold, cease to identify their subjects within the organizational context. Stories imbed experiences into the organizational memory of the Department and give life to their subjects. The identities forged by these stories are the base upon which actions are built and the first consideration in the sensemaking process.

In a policing context these changes often disconfirm the officer’s sense of expectation and prompt a cognitive process aimed at restoring stability and getting back to expected norms. Personal identity is crucial to police officers as it provides them with a sense of where they fit in the environments they work in (Bradford, 2014). Philosopher John Locke (Nimbalkar, 2011) said personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity and populates the tabula rasa through experiences and reflections. The responses from participants align with this element of Weickian sensemaking and illustrate a police officer’s individual work identity is formed, at least in part, by the co-opted experiences, most often successful, of other police officers who have come before them. Unanticipated changes in the work environment prompt the officer to question their sense of self and force them to recall and assume the identity of another who has previously succeeded in a similar situation to reacquire a sense of personal and environmental
stability. The stories police tell articulate their professional identities, thus enabling them to reacquire personal stability (Van Hulst, 2013).

Similarly, the collective identity of the profession or the Department itself was shown to be a strong influence on individual police officer’s responses to the interview questions. Several of the participants spoke about the near mythic nature of the profession and the sense of identity they derived from being a part of it. Common among the participants was a binding to the profession through other, social relationships that connected them to policing. Through family connections, law enforcement focused social groups, or military service this emerging identity was formative to their becoming as police officer. Notions of identity were informed through stories of personal experience or historical narrative shared via these social relationships. Thus, the historical narrative not only provides source material for contemporary consumption and operationalization but serves also to bind the officer to the profession writ large.

Before one develops an identity as a police officer they must seek out and become connected to the profession. The superordinate theme of Affiliation is described by the participants as introductory acting as the point of entry into policing and the first step towards binding them to the profession and all it entails. As with the Weickian element of identity, the binding agent for Affiliation are the stories the participants have heard, or the experiences they have had prior to becoming police officers. These stories come from other police officers they may know or be related to, from other sources such as popular media, or from their personal experiences. This serves as the foundation of an emerging identity as a police officer that will help inform their decisions and actions.

As a prominent theme throughout this study and across each of the participants, the superordinate theme Identity is closely connected to this element of Weickian sensemaking.
Both share a dependency on senses of self as foundational both to how one makes sense of change and how one derives meaning from the organizational narrative; together these are formative elements of police officer identity. Identity is the lens through which police officers see themselves and, by extension, comprehend and respond to their environment. Stories were described by the participants as part of the collective identity of the police organization and what they would integrate into self to create their work identity.

**Retrospective in nature.** Each participant recognized the temporal scale upon which they operate as police officers drawing a clear connection between what has happened in the past as informative to what happens in the present as operative. In fact, it is this retrospection that provided the most comfort to the participants who each described the oral tradition of the organization as a critical piece of their equipment. The history of the organization, and its captured narrative, was alternately described as a bank from which to draw experience, a connection to police officers of the past and their successes or cautionary tales that guide them away from the mistakes of the past.

Several participants spoke fondly of their connection to senior or retired officers and the gifts they shared with their stories and experiences. John spoke specifically of his relationship with retired Lieutenant Carroll Cooley, the officer responsible for the Ernesto Miranda investigation which led to the subsequent creation of the Miranda Warnings, used today in every police department across the country. Eric spoke of the lessons learned from the L.A. Riots of 1994 and how the stories he heard about it informed his view of policing, Jay spoke of the tragedies his police department experienced through line-of-duty deaths and the lessons he derived from hearing about them that made him safer and Lina shared a deep appreciation of the organizational past saying “They (stories) help to keep our past alive.” Each of the participants
looked backward into their departmental history, culled lessons from the organizational narrative, and operationalized them in the present.

Sensemaking itself is the act of comprehending present circumstances using the lessons of past experiences. Van Hulst (2013) said the stories told by police officers are not just retellings of past events but that they are also future scenarios for available for all police to learn from. None of the participants spoke of a truly novel experience for which there was no previous organizational or individual experience to guide them, highlighting the natural dependency on past collective experiences shared organizationally, or past individual experiences shared personally. All of the participants recognized the importance of collected wisdom and experience as crucial to their making the decisions necessary to recognize and react to change, to impose order through action, and to create new knowledge for future use. This, in summary, is sensemaking articulated in a policing context.

The act of looking backward so that one can move forward is closely aligned with the Educational superordinate theme. Each of the participants spoke of the value of the organizational narrative as a piece of their equipment as important as anything found on their gun belts, providing to them a tool to address sudden, environmental change. The use of stories provides to police officers historical, occupational, and cultural information that allows them to access organizationally specific, practical wisdom that will help them be better officers, help them be safer, and help them to understand their organization and their place in it. It is among the Educational nature of police stories that the cycle of organizational narrative exchange begins and continues. Retrospection begets contemporary action which itself becomes organizational narrative for later use.
Enacting environments through narrative accounts. May and Mumby (2005) adhere to the social constructionist philosophy that communication constitutes reality. As an element of sensemaking, stories serve to give life to experience and make it more readily accessible to members of the police department for consideration and operationalization. This constituted reality becomes the basis of one’s individual or organizational reality (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, 2000; Putnam and Nicotra, 2008) and defines the organization (May and Mumby, 2005) in the same way as Weick (1995) asserts that sensemaking is about organizing experiences for later consumption.

This process of enacting the environment post-change event can be as basic as an officer roundtable after a call for service where the officer’s work together to understand what has just occurred. Van Hulst (2013) calls this the “canteen culture” that arises out of necessity for police officers as a means to facilitate the sensemaking process through the telling and retelling of more elaborate stories from which to learn something new or to reflect on something known. There exists during this time a social exchange of ideas and experiences that begins the mental process of assessing the novel event and trying to bracket it into comprehensible chunks of information that can be first explained and then understood. Once this has been completed the participants describe a subtle process by which this mutual understanding is assimilated into the larger organizational narrative for use at the local level (e.g., squad, shift, or precinct) or the more global level (e.g., department, region, or profession).

The reality of policing is first explored through the stories of others. Shearing and Ericson (1991) say stories are an important tool for police officers to learn their craft from others and Waddington (1999) says they are used in the process of identity construction. Taken together, stories serve as a way to introduce new police officers to the profession and begin to
build within them the identity they will use to assess their professional environments and
determine their responses once these environments are disrupted. Shearing and Ericson (1991)
continue,

...police officers use stories to represent to each other the way things are, not as statement
of fact but as cognitive devices used to gain practical insight into how to do the job of
policing. For them the appropriate criteria for evaluating stories is not their truth value in
a scientific sense but rather whether the knowledge they capture works. (p. 491)
The community narrative found in law enforcement both subtly and overtly influences the world
view of the police, their professional reality, and, ultimately their sense of the role and the
responsibility the position of police officer entails.

Participants used stories as training tools to help less experienced officers and supervisors
make sense of the rapidly changing environment in which they served, supervised, and led.
Stories act as training tools that enable a police officer to recall, assess, and apply their lessons to
changing environment, mitigate its effects, and make sense of the result. As the senior sergeant
in his precinct at the time, sharing his stories was a way for Miguel to offer a constituted
description of the present reality of his assignment and share with his junior peers his view of
reality as informed by his experiences and perspective. In each case the story provided a view of
reality that allowed either the new officer or the junior sergeant to understand the environment
and to assume a place within it.

Like the Coping superordinate theme, enacting environments through narrative accounts
is a police officer’s attempt to make sense of an incident that has just occurred or one that may
affect them. Each of the participants spoke about the post-call for service debrief in which the
involved officer’s come to a mutual understanding of the event, reach agreement on the narrative
that would capture it, and give life to a story that would then be entered into the organizational memory for later recall and use. This is perhaps most importantly done following a critical incident such as an officer involved shooting or line-of-duty death of a police officer. As with other, less impactful aspects of sensemaking these event types occur very often with no previous context for understanding and challenge an officer’s sense of self and stability. Coping is a necessary process to regain these senses and to acquire some level of understanding so that personal or organizational meaning might be drawn from the critical incident.

**Social activity and shared experience.** Policing, at its very best and by its very nature, is a social endeavor, it is the everyday search for meaning co-created with others. As part of their daily responsibilities police officers interact with and communicate with a broad cross-section of their community including victims, witnesses, suspects, other members of their community, the criminal justice system, the political system in which they exist, and, perhaps most relevant to this study, each other. Each of these interactions is an exchange of information the intent of which is to allow the police officer to get to know the story, so they can gain an understanding that may inform their story whether that be a police report, courtroom testimony, or simply a conversation with another officer.

The same is true internal to police departments as each of the participants described the use of stories as a means to better understand their place in their professional environment. Each spoke of the importance of the shared experience saying they learn both from hearing stories and from telling stories and that stories represent a key piece of their ongoing development as an officer, part of the educational and assimilative process of becoming a police officer in their particular department, and an important way to engage with their fellow police officers. Described as parables, cautionary tales, or organizational knowledge, the stories shared among
and between police officers were part on the job learning and part canteen culture (Van Hulst, 2013). Stories, in this sense, provided a shared volume of experience from which newer officers could draw when confronted with an experience that was outside their norm or expectations through a process of assimilation into the larger social grouping of their Department.

Eric, the beneficiary of the stories and experiences of his LAPD training officer Snoopy Smith, spoke of the influence and impact of the stories he shared with him as a new officer describing it as the most important relationship of his police career. Snoopy Smith was Eric’s guide in his early search for meaning and helped him begin to create the identity he would develop as a police officer. In turn, Eric shared that same story and experience with the new officer’s he trained for the same purpose perpetuating the social process of sharing stories that provided the foundation for these officers to make sense of who they were and their environment. And like Eric, Kent found value in sharing stories with others as a learning tool and as a way to reduce the likelihood of them making the same mistakes as others had saying he learned a great deal from his experiences and from the experiences of others and it was his hope by sharing these stories that people wouldn’t make some of the same mistakes he did as a young officer.

The social aspect of policing is very much on display when police officers are sharing experiences with each other. Both the Occupational and Mentoring superordinate themes are social endeavors intended to help the police officer learn, grow, and improve as a police officer by vicariously assuming the experiences of others. Both as an element of Weickian sensemaking and as a prominent theme of this study, the act of sharing stories is both social and discursive, informing both individual and organization as a means to help make sense of policing environments. The participants said the Occupational superordinate theme provides the collected
organizational wisdom of lessons learned throughout the history of the department while the Mentoring superordinate theme illustrates the social connections between officers that serve to transfer knowledge for both organizational and individual benefit.

**Ongoing process of adapting to changing conditions.** Change is a singular event which disrupts individual and organizational stability and prompts an ongoing process of creating a new normal from the remains of the previous normal (Weick & Quinn, 1999); policing is a profession defined by sudden changes in the environment requiring the creation of a new normal from the old one. Sensemaking, as defined by Weick (1995), “is triggered by a failure to confirm one’s self” and that its primary function is to allow people to persevere during times of discontinuity and flux (p. 23). In this sense adapting to organizational or environmental change is an ongoing attempt to make sense of the change environment.

John spoke of the line of duty death of an officer from his precinct that was particularly influential during his early career. He said there are lessons to be learned from tragedy that if used right saying this situation awakened him to the reality that change, even one as dramatic as loss of life, is a constant in policing that requires a police officer to adapt to succeed. For John the possibility of a life-altering or life-taking event was part of his professional reality; to be best prepared for this reality John came to rely upon the stories he heard during his career and the experiences that were shared with him as instructive and informative. They were instructive in the sense they shared lessons intended to help him be safer and they were informative in the sense they shared the history and the tragedy of his department and the effects that remain.

Miguel took the stories he was told and the experiences he earned over the course of his career and shared them with younger officers and supervisors as part of a narrative exchange intended to reduce the negative impacts of change on others through his own experiences. He
said he tells stories that magnify the reality of policing, illustrated by gallows humor or through a “but for the grace of God” perspective that recognizes that while the police may face risk, this risk could be mitigated through sharing experiences that enable another officer to adapt appropriately. A consistent theme throughout Miguel’s interview was the need to consistently share stories with others as part of educational, as well as cathartic, process of knowledge transfer intended to make officers safer in the face of the ever changing landscape of contemporary policing.

Stories involving the participants were also described as important sensemaking tools. Lina was involved in a critical incident in which she suffered traumatic injuries and was forced to use deadly force to overcome an attack. While her physical injuries healed relatively quickly she and her squad mates dealt with the psychological impact for over a year as they processed the most significant change event they had ever collectively experienced. Prior to this incident, Lina believed herself to be in control of her police career and her environment. This situation, however, caused her to reassess and adapt to her new professional reality post-incident that changed her view of self and how she fit into the policing profession. Like Lina, each of the participants spoke extensively of the need to rapidly assess and adapt to situations using individual or collective experiences from the past.

Adaptation is necessary to sensemaking and a prominent theme found in this research. Among the superordinate themes related to adaptation are Educational, Occupational, and Coping. Each require the police officer to draw on past personal or collective experiences to adapt to a changing condition and each are dependent upon interacting with others to be successful. Adaptation happens in the moment as when an officer relies upon a past experience to help them respond to a sudden environmental change and over time as when an officer uses
past experiences to understand and cope with an impactful change in their personal or professional environment.

**Extracting cues from social or situational context.** Police officers speak anecdotally about their “sixth sense,” “Spidey sense”, or “when the hairs on the back of your neck stand up” to describe an intuition earned over time and through experience. Extracting cues from unsettled situations using experience as a guide is intuitive. Intuition is knowing without knowing why (DeBecker, 1997). Pinizzotto, Davis, and Miller (2004) say that intuitive policing is an unconscious act that comes from a police officer’s training but more importantly their experiences saying many times police officers are unable to articulate why they acted in a certain way or what prompted the cognitive processes that led to their actions but that “they sometimes retrospectively can plot their actions based upon what had been clear and present danger signals” (p. 4).

This would prove to be a crucial point in a number of stories shared by the participants as it highlighted a key reality of operating in a discontinuous environment. Each participant spoke of a circumstance in which an environmental change occurred rapidly and unexpectedly, unconsciously causing them to engage their sense of intuition, or experience informed cognition, to measure the present situation against a past experience to move towards the future in which they were safe. Closely connected to sensemaking, Akinci and Sadler-Smith (2018) describe intuition in a policing context as “independently formed judgement based on domain- specific knowledge, experience, and cognitive ability, shared and interpreted collectively. This intuition is sensemaking in action.

Miguel stated he drew upon his past experiences to help him assess situations and to make the right decision to adapt in the moment illustrating the need to learn from the past, to
succeed in the present and to prepare for the future. He shared the following vignette to illustrate this point:

I remember a traffic stop where I stop, and I had this feeling, this bad feeling before I approached that car. I just told myself, ‘This isn't good.’ I waved them off. I said, ‘Just go ahead.’ They're looking at me like, ‘What?’ There's three guys in the car. ‘Just go ahead.’ About a month and a half later, two robbery detectives come to the station to talk to me. They had arrested those three guys for being robbers. They said a Mexican officer had stopped them and they were going to kill him.

Taking cues from the environment is one of the main ways identified by the participants that police officers maintain their safety while performing their duties. Similar to sensemaking, the intuition developed by police officers with time and experience is a visceral mental process that allows them to adapt to a condition and act in response.

Jay said the simplicity to be found in context guided him when confronted with an ethical challenge or with a situation for which he had no immediate context or solution. In application Jay said he is able to respond appropriately to situations that would otherwise challenge his peers because he has either seen and/or experienced it before which prepares him to make a well-informed guess as to what he should do next in response to a change. Jay, a homicide detective, spoke of “knowing without knowing why” when assessing crime scenes that seemingly offered little in the way of evidence. Despite this, and through a retrospective, unconscious cognitive review of previous investigations and similar circumstances he was able to surmise many times what had happened and why strictly from what the environment was telling him.

Eric viewed his environment as the culture of the organization manifest in its members. Coming from LAPD, with its rich history and ceremony, Eric expected the same binding culture
when he transferred to the Southwest Police Department after two years. Instead he found a culture that was tacitly more relaxed and overtly less committed. In comparison to his previous department where the heraldry of the badge, the comportment of its officers and the honor of its history was woven into every aspect of his professional life, Eric found in his new department, and in his first precinct specifically, a certain permissiveness that offered very little supervisory or peer leadership and allowed for mediocrity to become an accepted norm.

He soon transferred to another precinct that had a wholly different culture, one that embraced the same ideals as his previous experience. He soon found a leader who spoke life into this culture through sharing the stories of the precinct, its members, and past experiences that were more akin to his LAPD experience. He said it was through the stories and oral traditions he heard and learned that set the culture of what is or is not acceptable behavior while in a work environment. In this environment he learned not only what were the acceptable cultural norms of the precinct, but he also learned how to succeed in an active and dangerous precinct through hearing the stories of past events by the officers who experienced them.

Extracting cues from the social or situational context stems from one’s identity. Fundamental to sensemaking is the need to reconfirm oneself following a disruption in the environment that challenges an officer’s sense of stability and calls into question their ability to move forward. The superordinate theme of Identity reflects this as each of the participants said they used stories to help them sort through discontinuity and to extract a meaningful narrative lesson for them to use to mitigate it in that moment. Similarly, post-change event, notions of personal identity are changed, refined, or supported through the sharing of the story and the process of meaning making with those involved or other, fellow officers.
This study found this may also occur by viewing the environment or a change event through the lens of others experiences. Each of the participants refer to incidents they experienced or heard about in the past as providing a cognitive template from which to act in the present. Thematically these templates are often provided as Educational or Occupational stories shared by peers, co-workers, or in many cases through a mentor. The superordinate theme of Mentoring was an important confirmation of the anecdotal description of the dependency of newer officers on more experienced officers. This study revealed not only did each of the participants rely heavily on mentoring guidance, but that mentors both emerged at a time of need or were actively sought out. For the uninitiated officer, successfully confronting the novel condition requires the sharing of both Educational and Occupational stories by a mentor, someone who is experienced and has a certain credibility based upon a history of success. Each participant had that someone who shared stories that made them better able to complete the tasks of policing in a changing environment.

Valuing plausibility over accuracy. An unexpected finding of this research is that in a “just the facts” profession where truth is valued above all else, the participants placed little importance on the absolute truth of a story recognizing instead that truth is relative, and the lesson of the story is wholly subjective. There is a certain relativism to be found in the typically realist police attitude towards truth in this sense; truth is socially constructed to meet certain needs and can be viewed differently by different people during different situations (Baghramian & Carter, 2017). The participants described policing as a storied profession pointing out the stories they tell—in police reports, while testifying, to each other—as just some of their professional narrative. They distinguished, however, between the official story and the stories shared among officers as humor, as catharsis or as education. When asked if absolute truth was
the goal of a police story to a person the participants said no; what was important was that it was an absolutely good story appropriate for the time or situation.

Similarly, others talked about the sociocultural value of storytelling that may not be rooted in fact. John spoke about how storytelling in this context was both palliative and informative; the stress of the job was released, and experiences were shared that would be cataloged for later use. Lina viewed such distance between fact and fiction on a more personal level sharing that embellishment is a natural manifestation of human nature to indicate to the listener the storyteller has worth or their story has importance or meaning for them. For both John and Lina, absolute truth is less important than is the lesson or the affect the story has on both the teller and listener as co-occupants of the same social and professional environments.

The stories shared by the participants are less deeply philosophical constructs than they are devices to share native understandings that leave open to interpretation the abject truth or value of the story or its component parts. The great value of these stories cannot be understated however—they condense into more easily accessible chunks of information the unpredictable, the historical, the humorous, or the tragic nature of police work allowing the listener to catalog the story and its lessons for later use. What has value to the listener is dependent upon their needs at the moment, the content of the story, or the context from which the story is told. The listener takes from the story what they need at the time reflecting the notion that what is most useful in the story is what is most useful for the listener, whether it be fact, fiction, or somewhere in between.

What is taken from the story, however, may not be its intent or best lesson. Lina shared her involvement in a critical incident and the collateral effect it had on the other members of her squad. At the time of this incident, Lina was with another officer riding as a two-officer patrol
unit searching for a violent suspect for detectives. Following the incident in which Lina sustained serious injuries and was forced to use deadly force, members of her squad who were not present for the incident blamed her partner who escaped the incident relatively unscathed. This led to this officer becoming ostracized on the squad to the extent a squad level intervention was necessary to address false perceptions of actions or inactions. In this instance the squad embraced a version of the story that while not true or even plausible gave them freedom to create a false narrative that shifted responsibility to the other officer. Lina said the tendency of some of her fellow squad members was to embrace an untruth as a way to mask their feelings of guilt at not being there for her at a time when she needed help.

Police deal with the abstract for a living, there is little absolute truth, so they develop a comfort with ambiguity and degrees of truth out of necessity. In some sense they embrace the unbelievable. Jay described the importance of this in his career saying that while the process of sharing a story in important the fact that the story may be unbelievable has value in its own right. Stories such as these lead to more dialog, more processing, and compels more meaning making through extraction as the listeners get to the most essential parts of the story and find the meaning that suits them or their situational needs. Despite the equivocality that can sometimes define policing, each of the participants rely upon the plausibility of may happen to help them respond to what will happen in their professional environments.

As described this finding was the most surprising revelation from the participants whose profession demands truth to ensure justice. But if one looks at Weickian sensemaking as an attempt to make sense of the senseless than it comes as no surprise this process requires a number of different views to assess degrees of truth and to extract meaning. These views come
in the form of all of the identified superordinate themes and the unique perspectives they each provide.

Identity is based in stability and the participants all describe maintaining stability as crucial to maintaining personal balance and performing the functions of a police officer. This identity is what they believe about themselves, not the subjective truth of who others think they are; what is plausible to them is what they integrate into themselves and how they see the world and their place in it. Affiliation is what binds them to the profession and its members. Shared narratives, the truth of which often cannot be confirmed or refuted, are offered and received without question as valid enough truths to help connect them to their job and their partners. Educational and Occupational lessons are ingrained forms of organizational wisdom shared inter-generationally among police officers. The truth of these stories is socially constructed in a relativist fashion with storytellers and listeners giving and taking from them what they need at a given time. Coping is a process of clinging to truths of past loss and ignoring the pain of the circumstances surrounding it. This lens looks to the lesson and past the pain in order to make sense of the greatest change any police officer may experience. And finally Mentoring captures all of the above and shares vicariously the success and failure, the past and the pain, and the meaning of what it takes to be a police officer, particularly in a specific police department. Truth is less important than meaning and meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

**Implications for Theory**

This research is rooted in the theoretical framework of Weickian sensemaking (1979) and its’ identified procedural dependency on organizational narrative as described by the stories developed, collected and shared within the organization to compel action during times of environmental change. Weickian sensemaking is comprised of seven elements that articulate
individual and organizational response to changes in the environment as a social process of adaptation, action, assimilation and acquisition of collective knowledge; these elements themselves are a theoretical framework (Helms Mills, Weatherbee, & Colwell, 2006; Mikkelsen, 2013) that enhance understanding of a unique phenomenon (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) and act as a cognitive schema that gives meaning to experiences (LaBianca, Gray & Brass, 2000). Maitlis and Christianson (2014) articulate sensemaking as a theoretical framework as having three “sensemaking moves”—noticing or perceiving cues, creating interpretations, and taking action.

Visions of sensemaking as a theoretical framework recognize that environmental change requires both cognitive and physical adaptation to promote a search for meaning, that meaning is co-created discursively, that the lessons learned experientially are captured as part of the organizational narrative, and that this narrative is perpetuated and shared as part of the process of organizational learning (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Thomas et al., 1993; Weick, 1979; 1995; Weick et al., 2005;). The key reveal of this research adheres to this framework showing that policing is rooted in process of seeing, interpreting, and acting upon changes in the environment and that this process if fueled by both organizational and individual narratives collected and shared within the organization and that this process is self-perpetuating.

As a theoretical framework built upon the human requirement to adapt to the present utilizing one’s experiences of the past, Weickian sensemaking is seemingly custom made for policing, a profession defined by environmental change and forced adaptation. Theoretical frameworks exist to explain, predict, or understand certain social phenomena or to challenge or extend existing knowledge (Abend, 2008). This research accomplishes both. First, this research explains in depth the social phenomena of organizational narrative exchange within a large urban
police department, how this process serves as a tool to enact sensemaking at both the individual and organizational level and identifies an emerging typology of police story types that act as the collective experiences of the organization drawn on during times of flux. Second, it extends Weickian sensemaking to a unique organizational setting, policing, that has had little applied research related to sensemaking. Additionally, it has resulted in an extension of police narrative research through the identification of an emerging police story typology that, once integrated with the narrative exchange relational diagram, offers a police-specific Weickian sensemaking theoretical framework.

**Explicating the Police Story: From Typology to Theoretical Framework**

This research furthers the work of Smith et al. (2014) who summarized existing literature on varying story types to offer an initial theoretical framework of the Police Story. Drawing heavily on the work of Yanni (2000) for structure, their work advances the idea that stories generate and regenerate organizational knowledge through a cycle of information exchange. Their research taps key police narrative scholars such as Fletcher (1997, 1999) and van Hulst (2013) and synthesizes the different story types identified through their respective research into their theoretical framework. They acknowledge the cyclical nature of their proposed theoretical framework may not apply in practice and leave open the possibility of others more fully developing their work. While informative, Smith et al. (2014) conduct no participant interviews relying instead on the work of others.

Among the key findings of this research was the identification of a new theoretical framework describing the process of story-informed sensemaking in a policing context. Building upon the Weickian sensemaking theoretical framework, this study revealed a professionally specific process of sensemaking in policing that articulates a cognitive process that requires
nonlinear assessment of novel events; police officers must look to the past to adapt in the present and prepare for the future. What is also evident is this process occurs both in the moment during times of tactical need and through the social process of relationships in preparation for more long term or strategic sensemaking.

This study also identified organizationally specific story types that exist within the Southwest Police Department. These stories comprise the larger organizational narrative and are categorized within three separate categories—Organizational story type, Educational story type, and Social story type. There is linear connection between macro and micro story types that shows the flow of organizational narrative within the Department and helps to better understand how stories serve as important elements of sensemaking in a policing context.

This study identified narrative patterns derived from participant observations and interviews resulting in the description of a number of unique police specific story types. This process, and its results, was itself an act of sensemaking as it was an analytical process of qualitative data condensation that took unstructured source material and identified central themes and meanings within (Patton, 2002). Through induction, this process revealed a typology of police story types patterned linearly in a relational manner and leading to an emerging theoretical framework the offers insight into the process of story informed sensemaking in a policing context. Inductive reasoning is characterized as a method of analysis which allow findings to emerge from the frequently occurring, dominant, or significant themes found in collected data, offering the freedom to extrapolate meaning with less restraint (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013; Thomas, 2006).

Finally, this study identified a multi-layered, bidirectional process of organizational narrative exchange to describe how police officers share the stories of their organization. In
assessing how stories are created, collected, and shared this research describes a needs-based process that allows organizational members to draw from a bank of stories to make sense of their professional reality across different strata. Foundational needs are met very often pre-policing, setting the initial expectations for what is to come in the early police career. Informational needs are met once acclimated to the profession while foundational knowledge is fleshed out through on the job training and social relationships. And developmental needs are met through intentional mentor–mentee relationships and leadership delivery both formally and informally in a quasi-militaristic environment.

The combined results of these three findings illustrate the answer to the primary research question of “What role does storytelling play in a large, southwestern police department as its police officers strive to make sense of their environment” and identified among the participants a number of superordinate themes that serve as the lens through which the participants view themselves, their profession and their environment. These themes—Affiliation, Educational, Occupational, Coping, Mentoring, and Identity—synthesize the organizational narrative into manageable chunks of information more easily accessible than the whole of the organizational narrative history and serve as cognitive prompts for the participants to follow during times of environmental flux. Answers to the secondary research questions also identified a new police story typology and a process of organizational narrative exchange unique to the participants and their police department. Taken together the findings of this research shed new light on the process of story informed sensemaking in a large, urban police department and offers an enhanced understanding of the police and their story.

This leads to the development of a new theoretical framework describing the process of story informed sensemaking in a policing context. (see Figure 6)
As illustrated by this new theoretical framework changes in the environment significant enough to call in to question a police officer’s sense of stability prompt a need for recovery and activates a Weickian sensemaking process. Following the seven elements of Weickian sensemaking police officers identify a need for resources to help them mitigate change and risk and draw upon the collective experience of their organization. As an operational efficiency, the participants describe several superordinate themes, or lenses through which to assess the situation and direct them towards the proper source of organizational wisdom. This leads them to tap into the organizational narrative to seek either Organizational, Educational, or Social knowledge and draw from the library of sub stories the right one for the moment. These stories are then operationalized or put into practice to mitigate the change environment. As a result, a
new experience is had and meaning is ascribed through mutual discussion and agreement. Once completed this story is added to the larger organizational narrative adding to the library of organizational narrative available for later use.

**Implications for Practice**

As part of the scholar–practitioner tradition this research identifies implications for the practice of police leadership that, once understood and applied to police organizational leadership and management principles, may improve organizational success and individual satisfaction. Research undertaken without intention is simply an attempt at understanding without application. Intention is key to the scholar–practitioner as they bridge the gap between scholarship and practice uniting both so that a direct, applied value to the organization is realized (Mullen, 2005).

Police leaders universally recognize the importance of Weickian sensemaking to police officers even if they are unfamiliar with the academic lineage behind it. Police officers routinely impose order over chaos, adapt to rapidly changing conditions, and draw upon past experiences to help them respond to present realities. This research has identified important implications for police leaders and practitioners that offer improved organizational leadership practices and professional or cultural insight through better conceptions of organizational and individual meaning, enhanced understandings of organizational awareness, self-improving communities of practice, and enhanced police–community relationships.

The main finding of this research is stories are used as a vehicle for sensemaking among police officers and serve as the catalog from which they draw collective experience to assist with mitigating discontinuity during times of flux. This is a powerful abstract notion for police leaders—that an intangible organizational artifact such as narrative can be such an influential
piece of organizational life. When overlaying the seven elements of Weickian sensemaking with the six identified superordinate themes identified through participants responses in Chapter 4 it becomes clear the relationship between storytelling and sensemaking in a policing context is strong and provides to police leaders an insight into their departments, its members, and how they do and view their jobs. As discussed in Chapter 4 and illustrated below (Figure 7) participant responses that articulated the superordinate themes were aligned with the seven elements of Weickian sensemaking illustrating the importance of this social process of organizational narrative exchange to the practice of policing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Central to Self</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Educational</th>
<th>Occupational</th>
<th>Coping</th>
<th>Mentoring</th>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retrospective in Nature</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enact Environments Through Narrative Accounts</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Activity &amp; Shared Experience</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing Process of Adapting to Changing Conditions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing Plausibility over Accuracy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7. Applied Weickian Sensemaking*

As ethnography, a uniquely social research practice of the study and representation of a unique culture that involves "direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience" (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5), this research explores an
important aspect of police culture, its stories, and seeks to offer something of applied value to the Southwest Police Department and to policing more broadly. Through participant interviews and interactions, this research provides an increased and applicable understanding of a dynamic social process, story informed sensemaking in a large, urban police department, and extends existing theoretical frameworks to the process of organizational narrative exchange in a policing context. This research is an attempt to more fully grasp the meaning police officers assign to their experiences and how they put cognition into action through the Weickian sensemaking process (Van Maanen, 2011).

**Developing Organizational Capacity through Storytelling**

The first key implication of this research is that stories create, capture, and define the culture of the organization. As Geertz (1973) said culture is the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. In an era where the culture of police is often pointed to as a root cause of serious problems within the profession (Cordner, 2017; Ingram, Terrill, & Paoline, 2018) it behooves police leaders to have an in-depth understanding of the impact of the stories on their own organizational culture and the ways in which it influences service delivery. Several scholars have identified the connection between police culture and police performance (McCluskey, Terrill & Paoline, 2005; Paoline & Terrill, 2005, 2014; Terrill, Paoline & Manning, 2003) yet the research remains light on the distinction between individually driven cultures versus a more collective organizationally derivative culture. This research highlights how collective culture is developed and shared via the stories police officers tell each other.

Culture is the application of experiences, meanings, and practices co-created over time in an organizational setting and polished, massaged, challenged, accepted or rejected, perpetuated, and shared among individual members. Culture shapes the meanings and interpretations
members of an organization attach to experiences (Peterson & Smith, 2000) and influences the process of their sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliff & Obstfeld, 2005); it is the glue that holds organizations together (Schein, 2004). In discussions of police culture, much of it focuses on its negative aspects including how it serves as a barrier to necessary reform, fosters distrust with communities of color, or tacitly approves of excessive force or the well-known “thin blue line” of silence (Paoline, 2003; Reiner, 2010; Cockroft, 2013; Campeau, 2015). Less discussion is had on the positive aspects of police culture in which the culture binds members to the organization, furthers its objectives, and represents the foundation of the department and its members.

Loftus (2010) explored the notion of the historical, monolithic police culture arguing it remains described as such since the core function of policing has not changed over time. This idea has received parallel research support from Sklansky (2007) who says that contemporary research into police culture has resulted in a “cognitive burn in” (p. 20) in which previous templates articulating police culture, most notably Reiner’s (2010) early seminal work on the elements of police culture, diverts attention away from new conceptions and towards established dogma. The findings of this research, however, point to new conceptions of the influence of culture as captured and articulated by stories that are at once recognizable and actionable for police leaders.

**Leadership in Police Organizations**

Organizational scholar Edgar Schein (1985) said this of the intersection of culture and leadership:

A deeper understanding of cultural issues in organizations is necessary not only to decipher what goes on in them but, even more important, to identify what may be the priority issues for leaders and leadership……Culture and leadership, when one examines
them closely, are two sides of the same coin, and neither can really be understood by itself. In fact, there is a possibility—underemphasized in leadership research—that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture. (p. 2)

This is a key takeaway practitioner leaders can take from this research—that culture and leadership are inextricably linked and that culture is captured, defined, and operationalized through the stories of the organization.

Today’s complex police environment is characterized by increasing expectations, declining resources, and a level of community scrutiny not seen before in the profession. If, as Geertz (1973) says, culture is the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and culture is viewed by some as a barrier to organizational effectiveness and accountability for today’s police departments, then a leaders understanding of their unique organizational culture, as manifest by its stories, is a crucial component of effective organizational leadership. Organizations have, tell, and are stories, constituted by the words that give life to its history (May & Mumby, 2005: Parry & Hansen, 2007). This constitutive reality is subtle in the background of organizational life yet evident to the communities police departments serve.

Storytelling in policing has been used as a sensemaking device in a number of subjects such as police culture (Wilson, 2000), police parables (Ford, 2003), policing as a lived experience (Sutton, 2004), as oral history (Cockroft, 2005), and in police leadership (Rowe, 2006). This research extends this application to more contemporary ideas of police leadership recognizing the challenges facing policing and police leaders today require a deeper review of organizations than in the past. With the recognition that policing is a profession of sensemaking in practice, todays police leaders must recognize that stories are the main source of sensemaking
and that, with this knowledge, recognition of and appreciation for these stories must be woven into their decision making as another consideration when leading their organizations.

This speaks directly to matters of culture. Eric, in discussing his time as an LAPD officer during the violence that characterized the post-Rodney King riots, described the environment in which he learned policing. He said the violence that characterized 1994 Los Angeles, particularly the violence against police officers, had a unifying effect. While in the moment this was necessary to rally the police to do a difficult job in a difficult environment, it also became bred into the culture creating an “us vs. them” mentality in parts of the LAPD that would define police–community relationships for the next generation of policing. This is a powerful sentiment delivered twenty years after the fact when the impact to Eric is limited but more importantly the impact to other officers at that time has been lost.

Similarly, John said there is much in the organizational past of the Southwest Police Department that represents when it has performed exceptionally well; there are also times when it has not met its community obligations or organizational mission. Culture captures both the good and the bad of organizational life and it is reflected in the stories the organization tells about itself (Geertz, 1973). Sensemaking through a cultural lens recognizes the subtlety of culture as well as the enormity of its impact. Both statements point to the value of recognizing the past to understand contemporary culture and lead the organization to meet its potential through recognizing both the good and bad of its past.

**Meaning-making and Meaningful Work**

Another matter of importance to police leaders from a cultural standpoint is the meaning organization members ascribe to their experiences and their work. Meaning-making in this sense is the process by which organization members are successful at integrating challenging or
ambiguous events into a framework of personal meaning using past experiences overlain against contemporary realities (Park, 2010; Van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2013). This refers to the period post-sensemaking event which begins the process of combining personal meaning with storytelling to refresh the larger organizational narrative. This organizational narrative will later be used to meet future sensemaking requirements thereby perpetuating individual and organizational sensemaking.

Jay, an experienced, thirty-seven-year veteran said his Department creates a new story every day. The importance of this point lies in the organizational past. Jay continued newer officers frequently asked him what policing was like when he first started. His response always is that it is exactly the same. The “new” stories the Department creates are of the same typology as the stories of the past and this fact allows the storytellers, the listeners, and the organization to more quickly make sense of environmental change, discontinuity, and the novel experience. As a homicide detective who has investigated some of the worst cases his Department has ever seen, Jay sees value both in his own past experiences informing his current working decisions and in sharing these experiences with others to provide them with a bank of shared experience from which to draw during times of flux.

Meaning-making is closely correlated with purpose and the organization member’s ability to find meaning and satisfaction in their work (Van den Heuvel et al., 2009). Meaningful work is that which is purposeful and significant to the individual, satisfying in them a need for personal and professional satisfaction (Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Meaning-making precedes satisfaction and is built around notions of organizational identity requiring leaders to recognize they must devote more time and attention to fostering an environment of meaning for their employees (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). As evidenced by the
superordinate themes previously described, affiliation with the organization and identity connection to the profession are critical binding steps for the individual to the organization. The stories of the organization, used to make sense of an ever-changing environment, collect the meaning police officers assign to particular events or individuals.

Taken together, both conceptions of meaning evoke a strong connection between individual and organization. Lina, in her comments about returning to work following a critical incident said the experience changed the way she performed her duties. Her experiences taught her simply that despite the best of intentions or level of training bad things can happen to good police officers, that she was no different than anyone else, and that in spite of this she survived. The meaning she assigned to her experience through her story, especially impactful for other police officers, is despite the harsh realities and certain inevitabilities of policing one can survive and prosper with the right perspective and support.

Kent, a thirty-two-year veteran and father of a police officer in the same Department said he developed a deep connection with his profession and with his Department. Participating in something that is worthwhile and provides the individual with a measure of personal and professional satisfaction has a strong influence on positive police performance (Ercikti, Vito, Walsh, & Higgins, 2011; Ingram & Lee, 2015).

Meaning, whether personal or organizational, is part of what drives the organization forward and is one of another of the subtle nuances of police culture (Paoline, 2003; Ingram, Paoline & Terrill, 2013; Campeau, 2015). Returning to Schein (1985), leaders must be mindful of culture as it is manifest in stories, harbors individual meaning, and is necessary to effective leadership. The level of meaning officers assign to their work is also a cultural artifact well
within the purview of police leadership that, as held within personal and organizational narratives, reflect the state of the organization and its capacity to perform.

**Organizational Awareness**

Organizational awareness is a global sense of the organization, its members, its customers, its partners, and its mission. It is a critical factor in sharing knowledge and information within an organization, particularly one that is decentralized or has a complex function (Kim, Gibbs, & Scott, 2018). As an element of leadership, it seeks to define “who knows what, how they know it, and what they do with it” (Canary & McPhee, 2011, p. 1). Studies of organizational awareness appreciate the challenges of decentralized work environments over centralized ones and place a premium on developing collaborative work cultures that improves a leader’s awareness of and appreciation for the unique roles, tasks, and requirements of the organization and its members (Carroll, Neale, Isehour, Rosson, & McCrickard, 2003; Leonardi, 2015).

In policing, leadership is distributed throughout the organization along the lines of geographic areas of responsibility or administrative and investigative divisions of responsibility. Leaders are expected to be aware of what goes on in their area of responsibility and an awareness of the stories capturing squad, unit, precinct, bureau, or division experiences is an important way to do so. Miguel, a longtime patrol sergeant, described how his operational and leadership skills were improved through an increased awareness that came from sharing stories. He said in every assignment he held the experience of sharing stories with others was a learning experience. Through this narrative exchange, Miguel was able to capture the experiences of his peers on other shifts and in other parts of the precinct and use them both for his own and for his officer’s
benefits. This process compresses the time between event and learning opportunity such that experiences that result in a lesson are distributed more broadly.

Organizational awareness is a leadership competency closely connected to emotional intelligence that allows a leader to identify key relationships, emerging issues, and dynamics within the organization (Goleman, 1996; Goleman, Boyatzis, Druskat, Nevarez, & Pitagorsky, 2017). As narrative captures the culture of the organization, so too does it allow the police leader insight into the long terms needs of their department as opposed to the short term, reactions to changes in the environment (Goleman, 2014). Eric summarized the interconnectedness of culture, community, and policing by sharing the impact his LAPD training officer, Snoopy Smith, had on him as a young officer saying in a short amount of time, Officer Smith set him on a path for all of his future success, a path he continues on today. This realization is policing distilled to its most basic, service-oriented core and the direct path to better police leadership.

Communities of Practice

Stories are a form of native knowledge and collected experiences that hold value for the organization as educational devices to improve capacity, function, and service delivery. As an informal and implicit form of knowledge exchange, communities of practice are groups of people who work together to solve the same problems while sharing technical knowledge and expertise (Cordery et al., 2014; Pyrko, Dorfler, & Eden, 2016; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The most effective communities of practice are characterized by communal learning requiring a strong identity with the organizations social context and exist as “diffuse, informal, voluntary, organizationally non-aligned networks of people” (Pyrko et al., 2016) bound by common interests or purpose (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Because of the
inherent social nature of communities of practice, they are process driven; they must be
developed and nurtured to meet their objectives and cannot be intentionally created to meet a
specific need (Addicott, McGivern, & Ferlie, 2006; Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010).

Wenger (1998) identified three structural elements in communities of practice—mutual
engagement (how and what people do together), joint enterprise (problems and topics they care
about), and shared repertoire (the concepts and artifacts they co-create). These elements
coincide with the findings of this research. Mutual engagement aligns with conceptions of
purpose and identity found in the research, joint enterprise aligns with participant’s emphasis on
cultural, occupational, and organizational affiliation and shared repertoire aligns directly with
participants search for meaning in individual and organizational contexts.

Communities of practice in policing facilitate the process of “becoming” a police officer.
Hodkinson, Biesta, & James (2008) describe the process of “becoming” as an integrated process
of participation in a job role and social context through which learning occurs reinforcing the
habitus of the learner. Habitus, or a sense of one’s identity, incorporates both subjective
perspectives and collective ideas (Heslop, 2011) and is closely connected to the police
organizational context (Chan, 1997; Chan, Devery, & Doran, 2003). Stated more plainly,
communities of practice help cops become cops by learning from cops. John, a student of
policing in his Department, spoke at length about the value of learning from other officers saying
police officers necessarily collect a catalog of information throughout the course of their careers,
in part, because they have to be part historian to know what they are doing today.

The practice of policing within a distinct organization, is guided by the intersection of
these elements creating the conditions through which sensemaking can occur. Eric said
retrospection has been crucial to his success as a police officer in two major, urban police
departments. When confronted with challenging or unusual situations he recalls stories he’s heard in the past that are reminiscent of the current situation. This allows him to create some level of context and derive whatever meaning he can from this shared experience with the hope it will direct him towards a solution. Eric characterizes these stories, and their lessons, as a bank of collective experience from which he makes withdrawals as necessary. This illustrates the process in action. In this case, Eric learns what to do (mutual engagement) from another officer with a similar experience (joint enterprise) as captured by an organizationally specific narrative (shared repertoire) to accomplish an act of Weickian sensemaking.

**Police–Community Relationships**

For police leaders, an understanding of all of the above enhances their ability to better understand and better lead their police departments to develop and maintain more positive police/community relationships. Police–community relationships continue to be both a topic of discussion within the profession (Kringen & Kringen, 2017; President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015) and an important research subject (Corsaro, Frank, & Ozer, 2015; McCandless, 2018; Merkey, 2015; Meares, 2017). In addition to traditional notions of community policing (Community Oriented Policing Services Office, 2007; Kelling, Tate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974) police–community research and discussion has expanded into studies of effectively engaging with the mentally ill (Thompson, Kahn, McMahon, & O’Neil, 2016), LGBTQ communities (Israel et al., 2016), military veterans in crisis (Markowitz & Watson, 2015), persons with autism (Hepworth, 2017) and with homeless populations (Braga, 2010; Ivanich & Warner, 2018). Each of these communities make up the day-to-day contacts police have that develop and add to organizational and individual bases of experience that inform relations with the community. Understanding the meaning police officers take from these
encounters and the meaning their peers take from shared experiences is an important insight for police leaders to achieve as they navigate the interconnectedness of police and community.

Making sense of their professional reality is a core competency for police officers and fundamental to the process of sensemaking. Navigating external relationships is among the most important factors when making sense of community relations and follows a pattern of an environmental change requiring a police response, a response predicated on both the present change and past experiences, and a new reality that becomes experience for both police and community. This cyclical process is captured and shared later informing the interactions and subsequent status of police–community relationships. Knowing that this story informed process exists is an important realization for police leaders and something that should guide them towards an equally important realization that the stories of their police department describe the culture of the organization, reflects the character of its members, and is a predictor of the actions they will take when confronted with various situations.

**Implications for Future Research**

Police officers are storytellers by nature and by trade; they tell other people’s stories in incident reports, while testifying, and, perhaps most importantly, to each other while trying to understand the events of the previous shift. Aside from the stories of others, the police narrative is a rich source of material worthy of additional review. In addition to the importance of the police narrative to operational sensemaking, police stories also say much about the profession and its members. What is provided through this research is introductory, humbly offered and intended to be explored, challenged, or expanded.

This line of research could be furthered by increased sample size, the inclusion of distinct demographic groups by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. These groups
lend themselves towards a more purposive sampling process that allows scholars the opportunity to dig more deeply into unique social issues common to these groups and explore their unique experiences in the policing profession. Research into these specific groups would be best explored through an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995). The instrumental case study approach is most useful when context is closely scrutinized, the case itself is not considered to be a typical case and the intent is to gain greater insight into a particular phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

First, a further review of Weickian sensemaking applied to the police story may yet flesh out its application and develop additional insights for both practitioners and academics. Given the inherent limitations of this study, additional knowledge may be gained by surveying additional law enforcement agencies in different regions and of differing jurisdictions (i.e., sheriff’s office, state police, rural, large vs. small, federal agency, etc.). Additionally, a similar review of the public safety narrative could be undertaken in other professions prone to sudden environmental changes such as the fire service, emergency medical service, or emergency management service. Any extension of this application may have benefit to all applications.

Next, the opportunity exists to more deeply explore the police story type theoretical framework developed by this research. The typology identified through this research is uniquely suited to the Southwest Police Department and captures the history and experiences of its members. Additional research may find this typology to be generalizable to the profession and therefore contribute to the body of knowledge on the police, their culture, and their narrative. Future research may also serve as an extension of this and other research on the police narrative (Fletcher, 1991, 1996, 1999; Van Hulst, 2013; Smith et al., 2014). Finally, future research may
more fully flesh out the process by which a certain story is chosen at a certain time based upon need or suitability and how this process influences outcomes of police actions.

Finally, future research that expands the view of police stories to other, under-researched story types may add additional value as well. This research identified a number of distinct story types, each of which could be a research topic on its own. Other story types not specifically explored through this research include racial and ethnic story types specific to cultural experiences as a police officer, the effect of police stories in family dynamics, stories about the iconography of policing (i.e., thin blue line flag and representations of St. Michael), stories told about the increase in violence against police officers, stories about the counter-police or anti-police violence movement, and police stories shared via social media platforms and the implications of veracity, exaggeration, or falsity. And in connection to notions of sensemaking, each of these stories may serve to help police officers or their constituency make sense of the state of American policing and their role within it.

Conclusion

How police adapt to their environments determines their actions, their actions become their results, their results become their experiences, their experiences become part of the organizational narrative, and the organizational narrative informs their future adaptations. This research explored this process through the lens of the stories collected and shared by police officers in a large, urban police department in the southwest. What was discovered is that stories capture the experiences of police officers and create a bank of collective experience from which to draw when an officer is confronted with an environmental change for which they have no prior experience or context.
This research, undertaken from a scholar-practitioner paradigm, explores the author’s dual role as police officer and academic and intends to offer something of value to both communities. This dual identity as a scholar–practitioner was the foundation of this research and how the author interpreted and gave meaning to its results (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). The findings of this research add to the body of knowledge of policing with an offering of a new theoretical framework that helps one to understand this process through rigorous evidence-based research that collected data from which findings were extracted. It also informs practice by providing practical applications of this knowledge to leadership issues facing police leaders in today’s complex law enforcement environment.

In the most impactful statement of this research Jay said, “When the last person that worked with me has gone from here, I will cease to exist as far as the Southwest Police Department is concerned.” This research exists to challenge that self-deprecating notion, to illustrate to both scholars and practitioners alike that the stories police officers tell create the organization, capture its history, and honor their narrators all while helping police officers make sense of an ever-changing environment.
References


Department of Justice.

Grint, K., Jackson, B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (Eds.), The Sage Handbook of Leadership,
Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Sage.


Organizational Communication. Academy of Management annals, 3(1), 1-64.


(Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved from

Journal of Applied Sciences, 5(11), 1602-1604.

Balogun, J., & Johnson, G. (2004). Organizational restructuring and middle manager
sensemaking. Academy of management journal, 47(4), 523-549.


Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness, 16*(1), 103-121.


New York: Wiley.

New York: Free Press.

Chicago: Peacock.


https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133


