



PROFESSIONAL SOCIALISATION AND LEGAL CULTURE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

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Abstract. *The development of legal literacy among law enforcement officers depends not only on formal legal education but also on the professional environment in which officers acquire values, behavioural standards and attitudes towards law. This paper examines professional socialisation and legal culture as important social-psychological factors in the professional development of law enforcement personnel. Particular attention is paid to the influence of colleagues, supervisors, group norms, professional identity and organisational culture. It is argued that interaction within the professional community contributes to the transformation of formal legal knowledge into stable professional attitudes and lawful behaviour.*

Keywords: *legal literacy, professional socialisation, legal culture, law enforcement officers, professional identity, group norms, ethical leadership.*

INTRODUCTION

Legal literacy is an essential component of professional activity in law enforcement. Officers need to know legal norms and understand how they should be applied in practical situations involving citizens, professional responsibilities and the exercise of official authority. However, knowledge of legislation alone does not guarantee legally appropriate professional behaviour. The practical implementation of legal knowledge is also influenced by professional values, attitudes, social expectations and behavioural patterns acquired within the occupational environment.

For this reason, the development of legal literacy should be considered not only as an educational process but also as a process of professional socialisation (Van Maanen, 1975). During professional socialisation, officers gradually acquire an understanding of what behaviour is expected from a representative of law enforcement, how professional responsibility should be interpreted and what place legality occupies within their professional identity.



MAIN PART

Professional socialisation occurs through continuous interaction with colleagues, supervisors and the organisational environment. Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasises that people acquire behavioural patterns not only through direct instruction but also through observation and interaction with others (Bandura, 1986). This mechanism is particularly important in law enforcement institutions, where younger or less experienced officers regularly observe how experienced colleagues respond to difficult situations, communicate with citizens, exercise professional authority and interpret institutional requirements. When respected and experienced officers consistently demonstrate lawful and professionally responsible behaviour, they become important models through which legal standards acquire practical meaning. Thus, legal literacy develops not only through the study of regulations but also through observation of how these regulations are incorporated into actual professional conduct.

The influence of professional groups is closely connected with the formation of group norms. Every professional community develops certain shared expectations regarding acceptable behaviour, professional responsibility, communication and relations with colleagues and citizens. These informal norms can strengthen formal legal standards when the two are consistent with each other. In such an environment, lawful behaviour is supported both institutionally and socially. However, difficulties may arise when informal professional practices differ from officially established requirements. An officer may formally know the relevant legal norm but experience pressure to follow habitual group practices (Tyler, Callahan & Frost, 2007). Consequently, one of the important conditions for developing legal literacy is the creation of a professional environment in which informal group expectations support rather than weaken formal legal standards.

Professional identity also plays an important role in this process. As officers become integrated into their profession, they gradually develop an understanding of what it means to be a competent and responsible law enforcement professional. If respect for law, impartiality, responsibility and protection of citizens' rights are incorporated into this professional identity, adherence to legal norms becomes more than compliance with external requirements. Legal behaviour begins to function as an internal professional standard. Research on police organisations has demonstrated relationships between group identification, organisational processes and officers' motivation to exercise authority in



procedurally appropriate ways (Bradford et al., 2014). This suggests that legal literacy can become more sustainable when legality is perceived as an essential characteristic of professional identity rather than merely a set of rules that must be followed under external supervision.

Leadership and organisational culture have an equally important influence on the formation of legal culture. Supervisors communicate professional values not only through instructions but also through their own decisions, responses to professional problems and treatment of employees. Brown and Treviño emphasise that ethical leadership involves both appropriate behaviour by leaders and the active communication and reinforcement of ethical standards (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In law enforcement institutions, supervisors who consistently emphasise legal justification, professional responsibility and fairness can contribute to an organisational environment in which legal standards have genuine practical significance. Conversely, inconsistency between formal requirements and managerial behaviour can weaken employees' confidence in organisational values and create uncertainty regarding expected professional conduct.

Mentoring and professional feedback can further strengthen this process. Experienced officers can help younger personnel understand how abstract legal requirements relate to complex professional situations. Effective mentoring should not consist merely of showing an employee what action to take; it should also explain why a particular decision is legally and professionally appropriate. Similarly, constructive feedback enables officers to analyse their decisions, identify possible errors and develop more systematic legal reasoning. Discussion of practical cases within professional groups may also be useful because it allows officers to compare different interpretations of the same situation and connect legal standards with real professional experience.

Continuous professional development is particularly important because legal literacy is not a competence acquired once and retained automatically throughout an entire career. Legislation, institutional requirements, social expectations and professional situations change over time. Officers therefore need opportunities to update their legal knowledge and reconsider established practices. Professional development can be more effective when legal instruction is combined with practical cases, mentoring, collective discussion and analysis of professional decisions. Such an approach allows formal knowledge to become integrated with professional experience and reduces the distance



between knowing a legal requirement and applying it appropriately in everyday activity.

CONCLUSION

The development of legal literacy among law enforcement officers is closely connected with professional socialisation and the formation of professional legal culture. Formal knowledge of legislation represents an essential foundation, but its practical implementation is influenced by group norms, professional identity, leadership, mentoring and organisational values. Positive professional role models and consistent organisational standards can contribute to the transformation of legal knowledge into stable professional behaviour.

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