Criminal Justice Cultures in the United States:
A Context for Understanding Aspects of Organizational Change

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Introduction:

Crime in the United States is different from crime in Hungary. In the U.S., in the year 2000, for every 100,000 inhabitants, over 4 thousand crimes were committed. Of these 4,124 crimes, 506 were violent and 5.5 of them were homicides. In Hungary, in the same year, somewhat more – almost 4 and a half thousand - crimes were committed for 100,000 inhabitants. However, the number of violent crimes was significantly lower than in the U.S.: in Hungary, of the 4,487 crimes, only 290 were violent and only 3.6 of them were homicides.

As you can see, violent crime is more prevalent in the US than in Hungary. Consequently, U.S. law enforcement, and a wide range of criminal justice agencies, are seen as an important part of government. These agencies embody characteristics that make them similar to and different from their counterparts in other areas of government. The research reported on here unveils some of these characteristics as it looks at interactions among criminal justice agencies in their efforts to develop structures within which to share and integrate information across organizational boundaries in order to reduce crimes.

U.S. criminal justice agencies have been deeply affected by the attacks of September 11th 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The justice enterprise is giving the utmost importance to integration of criminal justice information as it is one of the most critical assets in preventing future terrorist acts and other crimes. In the past, ineffectiveness in sharing information, through, for example, incompatible systems or lack of data standards, has lead law enforcement agencies to miss opportunities to prevent crime. The increase in attention to national and local security has lead to changes in priorities that shape leadership, resources, and the ways in which agency representatives perceive and approach each other. The September 11th attacks have required criminal justice agencies to reevaluate their taken for granted assumptions and raised an awareness of the need for changes in their organizational cultures in order to overcome barriers to successfully integrating information.

The Research Study

What we have to tell you about criminal justice agencies in one state is part of a much larger research project involving 3 other state-level case studies of efforts to integrate justice information and 4 case studies focused on integrating public health information. This multi-stage, multi-method, and multi-disciplinary project is supported by a grant from the U.S. National Science Foundation and is still ongoing. After collecting the data related to the 8 case studies, we will be bringing the participants together for a two day reflection workshop in mid June, to share our preliminary analysis and the models of interorganizational integration processes which we are developing, and to ask for their feedback. We will then develop an online survey for participants in a large number of interorganizational information integration initiatives across the United States. The findings of this research will be disseminated to

academic and practitioner audiences through presentations, like this one, and through publications.

The Case Description:

The criminal justice case study we will talk about here involved a state-level criminal justice IT group which existed before they worked on the project that formed the base for this case study. The group included representatives from each of the primary criminal justice agencies: police, criminal justice services, correctional services, parole, probation and correctional alternatives, domestic violence prevention, court administration, and crime victims issues. The agencies vary in size, with four being significantly larger than the others, and they differ also in power and resources. Most of the representatives were high level technical and program staff involved with information technology.

The group was charged by the state's Director of Criminal Justice to provide recommendations for a governance structure which would make decisions about priorities and resources related to integrating justice information across agency boundaries. Integrating justice information in this state has been an ongoing effort for some time. However, the urgency behind this project came not only from the Director's deadline but from the need to replace the police agency's legacy system and to advance the nascent justice information interactive Website into a shared inter-agency application as soon as possible.

In order to help the group complete this work within a tight timeframe, our research center, CTG, facilitated the meetings and shaped necessary tasks. CTG used an action research framework to provide the context for both the work with the group and the collection and analysis of data.

Over a period of 8 months, the group met with CTG facilitators to develop the required policy recommendations. During this time, participants raised various reasons as to why this was not the right group to develop these recommendations and why this was not the most pressing work for the group to be doing. Their resistance to move beyond information exchange to truly collaborate in integrating information across agencies came from their organizational cultures and their previous experiences of joint projects. The efforts of the CTG facilitators were central not only to keeping the project on track but also to helping the participants to see and experience the value of working collaboratively to develop recommendations from which they could all benefit.

The Significance of Culture in Organizational Studies

As Schein (1996) points out, organizational psychology has "slowly" evolved from an individualistic point of view toward an integrated, inter-disciplinary approach based on social-psychology, sociology and anthropology. During this evolutionary process, key concepts of these fields have been adopted, such as role, norm, and network. However, the significance of culture has not been sufficiently understood and integrated.

The lack of a universally accepted definition of culture may reflect this understanding deficit. Most authors agree, though, on some of the main characteristics of the phenomenon. According

to this common understanding, culture is holistic, historically determined, socially constructed, and last but not least, difficult to change (Hofstede et al.,1990).

While Schein (1996) focuses on the characteristics of culture emerging in occupational communities, Hofstede (1990, 1991) studies the effects of the national cultures on organizational behavior. However, both Hofstede's concept of culture as the "software of the mind" and Shein's organizational psychological approach consider culture as "a social force that is invisible yet very powerful" (Schein, 1996, p 239).

Law Enforcement Culture

The criminal justice agencies in our study have different organizational cultures due to their different work environments, functions and experiences. We can categorize the major agencies in our study as correctional, law enforcement and service organizations.

The culture of police stems from their interaction with various distinctive work environments (Crank 1998); occupational factors such as danger and the entitlement to use coercive tactics, as well as organizational factors such as role ambiguity and supervisor scrutiny, lead to stress and anxiety. In order to cope with these environmental factors, police officers develop some coping mechanisms which, in turn, shape many of the cultural traits of the police (Paoline 2003). Police culture studies have generally focused on the cultural traits of street level police officers. The cultural traits noted in such studies are suspiciousness, mistrust, cynicism, secretiveness, solidarity, social isolation, masculinity, and the crime fighter image (Crank 1998, Paoline 2003, Herbert 1998). Some studies also account for the existence of multiple cultures within a police

force; Reuss-Ianni (1983) makes a distinction between street cop culture and management cop culture, whereas Farkas and Manning (1997) suggest three tiers within police culture as top command, middle management and lower participants.

Of the three types of organizations in our case study, the service organization is the largest. It is a bureaucratic organization with significant political and economic power compared to other agencies, with strong relationships with state and local law enforcement agencies. The corrections organizations are smaller bureaucratic agencies. Common cultural elements in bureaucratic agencies, such as turf protection and mistrust, were evident in previous information sharing efforts of these agencies. This history of mistrust lead participants to be cynical about the new effort to integrate criminal justice integration.

Culture as a barrier to integration

The criminal justice organizations in our study have different work environments, perform different functions, and embody different organizational cultures. Culture plays an important role in the everyday functioning of criminal justice agencies. It not only affects agencies' interactions with citizens but also impacts interactions among the agencies themselves. Cultural differences among organizations may hinder information sharing among organizations. Pardo et al. (2001) assert that "To the extent that communities of practice vary in these (organizational) cultural characteristics, we would expect knowledge sharing among them to be less effective." Culture shapes assumptions about which knowledge is important (DeLong and Fahey 2000). Particular activities or types of knowledge may be central to the mission of one agency but may be much less important for another. Even in the same agency, people at different hierarchical levels or in

different units may have different subcultures, which may create an additional barrier to information sharing.

Previous studies point out that police see themselves as distinct from the general population and this breeds mistrust and suspicion of the public among officers (Herbert 1998). In our study, the police consider the service organization as an outsider, whose members do not understand the peculiarities of "real" police work and do not appreciate the importance of their mission. In other words, with a "crime fighter image" shaping their mindset, the law enforcement representatives view themselves as distinct from other agency representatives. This "we/they" mentality undermines efforts to develop trust and generates suspiciousness in the same way it shapes police-public relations. The participants in the meetings needed to view each other as peers to create a successful collaboration. Mistrust, conflict and competition for limited resources can prevent agencies from coming together in collaborative ways.

Creating a shared vision for integration of criminal justice information is a slow but necessary process. Participants bring up different ideas and concerns in facilitated interorganizational meetings. As one of our interviewee pointed out, law enforcement culture is "very action-oriented and it's about getting things done." In consequence, it can be difficult for law enforcement agencies to accommodate to the slow pace of vision creation.

It would be misleading to portray culture only as a barrier to information integration because, despite the quasi-military structure of the police and the difference in rank among agency representatives, there was frank and open information exchange and discussion in the meetings.

The cultural norms of the participants seemed to allow, and even encourage, such communication, and that is vital to knowledge sharing (DeLong and Fahey 2000), and the development of a shared vision and trust. The facilitators and the agency representatives made their best efforts to ensure that discussions took place on a level playing field. However, despite the appearance of equity, such as smaller agencies being listened to and a group agreement to give only one vote to each agency, our data seems to indicate the subtle maintenance of the hierarchical power structure among agencies.

The mistrust and turf protecting issues continued to be major obstacles to moving the project forward. As Waugh and Sylves (2002) point out, the top-down, command-and-control approach to the war on terrorism, represented by the Department of Homeland Security, may be undermined by existing federal interagency competition and conflicts, and by the combined differences in organizational cultures. Some scholars recommend the "network approach" based on intensive inter-agency information sharing and cooperation, in order to meet the challenges of "complex, unstructured, and rapidly changing problems" (Wise, 2002, p. 141) generated by terrorist threats. Transformational organizational change requires cultural change, and that is seldom possible without the presence of either a real or perceived threat to the organization. Even three years after the September 11th attacks, organizational cultures still seem to be a major obstacle to organizing for effective homeland security in the United States.

Crisis and Cultural Change

One of our participants told us, "Nobody could have predicted the necessity for us to cooperate before 9/11. It changed everybody's world. It made us talk to each other."

Crisis can be defined by five dimensions: high magnitude, require immediate attention, an

element of surprise, the need for taking action and a threat to the organization's viability

(Pearson and Mitroff 1993, cited in Burns-Nurse 2003). By these standards, the September 11th

attacks were unquestionably a big crisis for security agencies, as well as for the public in the U.S.

Today, that disaster may seem too far in the past to create a crisis now. Nevertheless, it has

created different types of crises for government agencies, especially in organizations related with

security. After the initial crisis, criminal justice organizations came under scrutiny from the

public, the media, and the politicians, who questioned their preparedness and their prevention

capabilities.

One of the main criticisms arising from this scrutiny points to the insufficiency of information

sharing and information integration among criminal justice agencies. Freedberg (2001) illustrates

the fatal series of information integration shortcomings:

> To get an idea of the number of federal agencies potentially involved in
>
> counterterror efforts, just trace what the terrorists were doing in the days before
>
> the attack of September 11. As they set out for America months before the
>
> attacks, the CIA presumably was trying to recruit some of their Al Qaeda
>
> comrades as informants; the State Department, to persuade Arab governments to
>
> arrest them; the Treasury, to freeze their bank accounts; the military, to plan a raid
>
> on their Afghan training camps. As they came into the country, Customs checked
>
> their baggage; Immigration checked their names against a watch list. As they
>
> lived among us, the FBI tried to track them down. As they boarded their chosen

planes, the Federal Aviation Administration was trying to keep airport and airline

security up to date on the latest threats. They still got through. (para 3-4)

The initial shock of the event has passed but the pressure it created on criminal justice organizations still exists. A massive reorganization of government was put in motion. The Homeland Security Department was created to streamline the efforts of criminal justice agencies and to improve information sharing. The deepening fears about national security, expressed with metaphors like "war on terror" and with an actual war in Iraq, lead to further pressure on criminal justice agencies to realize an effective way to share information. The urgent need for information integration is widely accepted and is now considered a basic responsibility of government.

Schein (1992) holds that crisis provides a critical time to uncover deeper elements of the organizational culture which may otherwise remain latent. "Responses to crises provide opportunities for culture building and reveal aspects of the culture that have already been built, surviving in and adapting to external environments". The September 11th crisis revealed cultural assumptions to criminal justice *practitioners* themselves as well as to researchers, and provided an impetus and an opportunity for cultural change. Existing cultural knowledge is being questioned after the crisis. In some of our case study's meetings and interviews, the participants talked about the need for cultural change for the success of the integration project. They emphasized the importance of increasing dialogue between organizations and of adjusting their perceptions of their own relationships with other agencies in order to focus on working as a justice enterprise. The norms and practices of each criminal justice organization did not

previously promote collaboration. Now, however, there is a move towards a culture of trust and dialogue between criminal justice organizations. In addition to the pressure created by the crisis, CTG facilitation helped the representatives of criminal justice agencies to recognize the need for cultural change to build trust and develop collaborative relationships in everyone's best interests.

Conclusion

In summary, culture, as the software of each person's mind, influences the behavior of criminal justice agency representatives participating in inter-agency meetings. The historically turf-protecting cultures of criminal justice organizations create barriers to integrating information across agency boundaries. It is necessary to take into account these barriers and implement substantive cultural change in order to increase trust and collaboration, on which information integration has to be based. The September 11th crisis revealed deeper elements of different organizational cultures in the criminal justice enterprise, and both management and lower level officials became aware of the importance of organizational cultures as well as the need for cultural change. Only by changing their cultural environment will participants be able to consider criminal justice as an enterprise and work in more collaborative ways. Changing organizational culture is a complex, difficult task, which requires high levels of stakeholder motivation and commitment. The September 11th crisis seems to have provided a powerful impetus that may lead to long-term cultural changes in the American criminal justice sector of government.

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