Police Research in Slovenia: Political and Cultural Obstacles

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Abstract

Appointed a Fulbright Scholar, the objective of my proposed Fulbright research was to examine the practice of community policing in Slovenia, to examine community policing within the broader context of the newly independent country’s transition to democratic law enforcement – a transition from its former Yugoslav political history. Anticipating the unforeseen obstacles inherent when conducting international research, the planned methodology was modest in nature with hopes of setting an initial framework for more complex research in the future. Predominantly qualitative, the methodology included field observation, interviews, and a random sample survey of officers from Slovenia’s eleven police directorates. Instead, the resulting research consisted of a Ministry of the Interior approved, five-question, attitudinal survey of a Ministry approved group of officers from one of Ljubljana’s two city police agencies. Highlighted in this paper are the political and cultural obstacles likely to be encountered when conducting police research in former socialist countries such as Slovenia. Although an independent country since its break from Yugoslavia, there existed a strong sense that the “old regime” still exists and shapes policing from beneath the surface. This socialist hold was evidenced to cause a degree of fear, confusion, and uneasiness in officers.

Background

While managing to maintain a fierce sense of national identity and cultural independence in spite of a history of political oppression (Benderly & Kraft, 1996), Slovenia is a young democratic nation, having achieved independence from Yugoslavia only eleven years ago. As such, Slovenian law enforcement finds itself in a state of transition moving toward an increasingly democratic model of policing in the midst of dealing with the myriad issues independence brings – such as a free market economy, changes in crime rates, types, and patterns, and increasing diversity due to immigrants arriving daily from war-torn neighboring regions. While academics sometimes tread softly, wondering how relevant American models of policing might be to newly democratic states (Friedmann, 1996), it is becoming increasingly evident that newly independent nations (democratic and non-democratic) are embracing Western police methods, especially that of community policing philosophy (Babovic, 2000; Simonovic & Adovanovic, 2003; Bánfi & Sárközi, 2003; Glinskiy, 203).
In Slovenia, this fact is directly evidenced by the Ministry of the Interior’s 1999 statement that “…Bringing the police closer to the public and developing partner relations with citizens is (sic) a primary goal of Slovenian law enforcement” (p. 48). This governmental declaration also happens to be a fundamental principal of the Trojanowicz Paradigm of community policing philosophy (per Ziembo-Vogl & Woods, 1996). Thus, it becomes morally incumbent for American experts to share their knowledge and expertise with our foreign counterparts in those countries bravely embracing democracy and seeking our assistance.

The history of American law enforcement is ripe with patterns of police practices that have failed. Examining the transitional state of Slovenian law enforcement and its practice of community policing in light of past patterns evidenced with the American model may prevent history from repeating itself. Sharing American expertise via teaching and research has been eagerly requested; it is only right to share what is known.

Research Objectives

The overall intent of the researcher’s Fulbright proposal was to examine the practice of community policing within the context of Slovene law enforcement. International community police practices are timely and extremely relevant as research topics.

There was a time when defining community policing, obstacles to its implementation, and evaluating its effectiveness were the hot topics in American law enforcement. In one sense, these topics are still hot…it depends on whether the police agency in question was part of the “first wave” of agencies (those implementing community policing philosophy prior to the Clinton Crime Control Act and its federal funding before 1994) or the “second wave” (those implementing community policing via federal funding after 1994). Now, these same topics along with the organizational shifts and patterns, subcultural changes, and mechanisms of officer resistance are being evidenced within the global community as emerging nations transition to democratic models of law enforcement. In
the midst of these transitions, the real problems are that valid research is scarce and the true needs of newly independent nations transitioning to democratic models such as community policing remain unknown. Due to these problems, the research objectives for this proposal were rather modest and were aimed at setting the stage for more complicated research to follow.

The first objective was to examine and understand the evolution of democratic law enforcement in Slovenia. This required an understanding of Slovenia's political history and the differences between the role of law enforcement pre-and post-independence (1991). It was via this broader, historical perspective that knowledge would emerge in terms of why Slovene law enforcement "looks the way it does" currently.

The second objective was to examine how community policing was being practiced within Slovenian law enforcement. This entailed comparing the Slovene model of community policing with the Trojanowicz Paradigm (prototype model) to determine how closely Slovenian law enforcement adhered to the "true" philosophy.

The third and final objective was to determine the needs and desires of the Slovenian government in terms of its police practices. An outside (non-Slovene) researcher cannot assume what Slovenia needs. Rather, the needs and desires must be made known to the researcher. In essence, the Fulbright research was exploratory and the first stage in a broader research process. Suggestions for future research and training assistance could only be realized after initial exploratory research. It was anticipated that certain needs would materialize quickly and clearly and that other, more subtle aspects, would emerge only after field observation of police practices, interviews with police officers, and survey research.
Proposed Methodology

As reflected above, the proposed research methodology was to be mixed yet predominantly qualitative in nature. A strong awareness existed of the need to keep the research manageable and in proportion to length of stay (three months), taking into consideration factors such as gaining entrée and making connections with Slovene police and government officials. It was anticipated that connections made during a previous visit to the country would assist with gaining entrée and facilitate the research process.

Field observation was proposed with two categories of officers – those identified as community police officers and those identified as "traditional" officers. It was hoped that both groups would include a cadre of female officers in order for gender differences to be observed and analyzed.

Given discussions with Slovene colleagues and from readings about Slovenian law enforcement, the number of female officers (as in America) is small and it was not until 1994, after an eleven year hiatus covering pre-and post independent time periods, that women were again admitted into the Slovenian police force (Pagon & Lobnikar, 1996).

During a previous visit, the researcher had been advised that female officers were not looked upon as “real” officers, a pattern similar to that evidenced prior to 1972 in the United States (Schulz, 1995). It is also interesting to note that in Slovenia community policing is thought of as “female” policing...thus, another reason to ferret out the existing gender-related subtleties.

Armed with rudimentary glimpses of Slovene police dynamics such as these, inductive and deductive perspectives were proposed for coding field notes as it was anticipated that many categories of police behaviors and practices would emerge from the field data.
A similar process (in terms of identified groups of officers) was also proposed for interviews. A protocol of questions was to be developed to further explore issues or problematic areas identified during initial field observations. Ideally and if possible, interviews were to be conducted with groups of male officers, female officers, and (ideally) mixed groups. This was to allow for the comparison of responses among the three groups with hopes of further understanding gender dynamics.

Finally, after field observation and interviews, a random sample survey of officers from across Slovenia's eleven police directorates was to be developed to validate and inform the qualitative findings. It was expected that translation of survey responses would occur in Slovenia and that analysis would be completed upon the researcher's return to the States.

**Resulting Methodology**

Due to the encountered research obstacles described in the following section, the resulting methodology consisted of a Ministry of the Interior approved, five-question, attitudinal survey of a Ministry approved group of officers from one of Ljubljana's two city police departments. After the survey was administered, one interview was conducted with a female officer selected by the Counsellor to the Director General of the Police, an officer selected for her ability to speak English.

**The Survey Procedure**

Surveys were administered at shift-break in what can be described as the “ready-room” on the second floor of the police department. The process was formal in its essence. After officers were greeted by the Chief of Police and the Counsellor, the chief left and the researcher was given the opportunity to address the officers. A cover letter (in Slovene) explaining the purpose of the survey and assuring anonymity was distributed to twenty-six officers (out of an estimated 250 in the Ljubljana Police Directorate) who filled out surveys (also in Slovene) in the presence of the researcher and the Counsellor.
It was observed that the more senior officers were seated at the first two rows of tables (including several female officers) and that younger officers were predominantly seated at tables toward the rear of the room. In spite of the obviously flawed methodological procedure, owing to the presence of the Counsellor and the researcher, the senior officers were observed to take the survey more seriously. The younger officers were observed to be snickering and joking with one another throughout the process. As officers completed their surveys, they handed them to the researcher and exited the ready-room.

_The Interview Procedure_

Immediately after concluding the survey process and knowing the researcher had expressed a desire to interview female officers, the Counsellor offered that there was a female officer in the group who spoke English and that an interview could be conducted with this officer. The researcher was shown to a conference room off the chief's office and the Counsellor went to fetch the female officer. After introductions were made, the Counsellor remained present while the researcher interviewed the female officer. It quickly became apparent that the officer was receiving visual approval cues from the Counsellor with regard the questions asked. Realizing that many of the questions she wished to ask were going to be “out-of-bounds,” the researcher simply engaged in a general and friendly conversation with the officer. Questions related to the original Fulbright proposal were left unasked.

_Research Obstacles & Adjustments_

A variety of research obstacles emerged throughout the researcher's stay in Slovenia. Encountered obstacles tainted and hindered the research process and required constant flexibility in terms of making adjustments. Some adjustments were relatively easy to make. At other times, the researcher simply went with the cultural and political flow in order to maintain diplomacy. Obstacles of a general or all-encompassing nature materialized and were steeped in the culture and politics of
Slovenia. More specific or finite obstacles, such as gaining entrée, language barriers, and gender barriers, were also intertwined with culture and politics.

*Cultural & Political Shadows*

Despite an earlier visit to the country, the amount of cultural and political literature consumed, and the degree of advanced preparation, the issue of conducting research within another cultural setting proved consistently challenging. Ever present was the knowledge that every minute aspect of the research process was experienced and evaluated through the researcher's personal cultural filters. As a result, second-guessing became *de rigueur*—was there a meaning associated with a behavior or process that, while odd to the researcher, might be standard operating procedure for Slovenes? If so, was this standard operating procedure actually prohibitive, in a political fashion, within the cultural setting? Such prohibitive or hindering behaviors, although seemingly cultural on the surface, were believed to be steeped in the political baggage of the country.

Slovenian culture appeared, in general and without doubt, still strongly influenced by the former socialist political regime. Unless one was speaking about culture in terms of traditions and customs, the researcher constantly sensed a strong lingering shadow of past politics. Even then, distinctions between culture and politics were not distinct, for some customs, such as “Grandpa Frosty” (Hemon, 2000), are Communist-created responses to the Christian tradition of celebrating St. Mikloš (St. Nicholas).

Conflicting messages were received, perhaps reflecting the underlying power of the former socialist regime, related to the willingness of various entities to interact with the researcher. While willing to allow a survey, Ministry of the Interior officials limited the number of questions and insisted on approving them. This approval process involved more than one authority level as the Counsellor (the government official in charge of the country's community policing initiative) could only approve
the community policing-related question; the remaining questions were sent higher up the bureaucratic ladder.

After review and approval by higher authority, the Ministry's interpreter translated the researcher's cover letter and survey tool as doing so was, at that point, considered "ministry work." Whether this was a courtesy to the researcher made by the Ministry – that resulted in considerable monetary savings – or a means of Ministry control over the research remains unknown.

Arrangements for conducting the survey were also made by the Ministry's Counsellor. The researcher was advised what day to appear at the Ministry of the Interior and was then escorted to the police department by the Counsellor.

Government officials, however, were more willing than academic colleagues to provide assistance. It should be noted that most of the academics are closely affiliated with the Ministry of the Interior. Unlike the University of Ljubljana, the College of Police and Security Studies is part and parcel of the Ministry. Police academics are paid by the Ministry and many have held or concurrently hold police-related positions within the Ministry.

The unwillingness to provide research assistance is believed to be the result of the contact host's influence over his colleagues. When this individual found he had no "authority" over the researcher and that his name would not appear on any resulting research product, it was strongly suspected he had asked others to refrain from providing any assistance, even when it came to something as innocuous as reviewing the survey to see if it would make sense to Slovene police. This power-play also hindered the entrée process.

Gaining Entrée & Making Contacts

Entrée to police was gained via previous networking (the year prior) with the Counsellor to the Director General of the Police. This contact proved fortuitous in a "you must know someone
who knows someone who knows someone” culture especially when the contact host disappeared and was unwilling to help once he deemed “there was nothing in it for him.”

This aspect of knowing was evidenced as one of the most distinct manifestations of the former political regime. Whether it was a police matter or trying to procure the equivalent of a building permit (which could take up to four years) progress was sorely hindered if the right people were not known. The academics, while in the know, displayed a certain degree of hesitation to act without the informal approval from someone else in the chain of knowing.

One of the most visible and dramatic displays of uneasiness (evidenced in the contact host) occurred when the researcher made a direct call to the Ministry's interpreter without going through him first. Two alternative explanations are possible for the host's distress. Either he feared the researcher was circumventing protocol or he feared the researcher would discover his insistence to go through him first was without warrant. Since the interpreter was happy and quite relieved to receive the researcher's phone call, one is left to assume a bit of smoke and mirrors on the part of the host. This instance was also indicative of the gender inequalities inherent in Slovene culture.

*Gender Issues*

Preparatory research related to socialist cultures failed to adequately prepare the researcher for the degree of male dominance within Slovenia. That females work is accepted and, indeed, expected. That males and females share child-rearing is standard fare. However, as alluded to earlier when referencing comments related to female involvement in the Slovene police force, Slovene females, in general, appeared to know their place.

In fairness, generational differences were observed. For example, female secretaries (aged 45-55) serve male academics coffee and cookies at eight each morning and at four each afternoon. Among this same age group were observed politically “connected” women who wielded a great degree of informal control. None of these women, however, were affiliated with the police college.
Female college students were observed to defer to their male counterparts in class while at the same time the general consensus was that females were academically outperforming the males. At the Faculty of Law in the University of Ljubljana the superior performance of female students was, on several occasions, expressed as a major concern for the Slovene judicial system. As one law professor (a male) clearly claimed, "How can females make fair judgments of male offenders without thinking of them as their boyfriends or husbands?"

Gender led to power-control issues for the researcher. According to a United States Embassy official, she was the first female Fulbrighter with expertise in policing (to visit Slovenia). This circumstance resulted in what can be described as double-domination. Attempts were made to minimize the researcher as a female (such as asking her to participate in the morning and afternoon coffee rituals) along with attempts to minimize her police expertise because she was female (such as when she was introduced as “Mrs.” as opposed to “Dr.” when making a public presentation to government officials and police officers from the country’s eleven police directorates.

It should also be noted that while the contact host engaged in constant and subtle undermining of the researcher’s work, those outside his field of influence were openly acceptable of a female “in the crowd.” Unlike the subtle and not so subtle facets related to gender, language was an obvious barrier to the original research proposal.

Language Barriers

Although it was estimated that nine of every ten younger generation Slovenes speak English (at least, to some extent) police officers, in general, did not speak English. Language barriers prohibited group interviews, individual interviewing, and field observation. As already discussed, language was also a factor related to the survey process.

By the time the police survey was administered it was gravely apparent to the researcher that to achieve any remaining semblance of validity she would have to procure translation assistance (for
survey responses) independent from either the Ministry or the College. The Counsellor had already expressed an official, Ministry interest in the results of the survey. To solve this language-related problem the researcher solicited the assistance of a university student who was in a program unrelated to the police college and who had no connections with the Ministry.

Together the researcher and the student worked to translate the survey responses, each armed with their English-Slovene dictionaries for accuracy checks. Having impressed upon the student the great need for accuracy and consistency, several translation “mysteries” surfaced. The most curious involved the use of the term “black crime” – a phrase that emerged repeatedly in survey responses. Finally, the researcher questioned this term and commented that there did not exist a black population in Slovenia, so how could there be black crime? This type of conundrum exhibited a language problem compounded by the researcher’s defining the term in keeping with her personal cultural filters. Black crime, in Slovenia, referred to corruption and forms of what, in the United States, is referred to as white-collar crime. Mystery solved.

Adjustments

Aside from adjustments already described, the researcher had to devise other mechanisms and supplemental methodologies to research the topic of community policing. When it became apparent that field observation and interviews were not going to be possible, she began a series of informal conversations with any and all police, academics, government officials, political dissidents, and citizens within her reach. Through connections made via work with the United States Embassy, the alternative opportunities to gain a broader perspective were enhanced. In fact, she found that most responded positively to her questioning and were more than happy to provide their views related to cultural, social, and political questions. However, if questioning became too pointed, a sense of uneasiness and fear was evidenced in the individuals.
Since these conversations were informal, any type of "field notes" had to be delayed. This adjustment could, by no means, substitute in a methodological sense for valid ethnographic practices, especially so when conversations were often extensive and many times viewpoints were conflicting. However, since all else had failed, the researcher engaged in what was attainable. At the least, such pseudo-field work allowed for cross validation (or invalidation) of assumptions, perspectives, and perceptions and set a colorful stage for future research.

Anxiety and tension (not to mention anger) resulting from the gender obstacle were constant elements during the researcher's tenure in Slovenia, especially so when gender led to power-control attempts by the contact host. Under a pledge of diplomacy, much of these gender-based elements had to be ignored. Not engaging in such "fights" actually proved the most effective response to the problem and seemed to diminish the control attempts.

In Retrospect

Twelve months removed from the research setting, a clearer perspective has been gained related to the limitations and obstacles encountered while conducting police research in the newly democratic country of Slovenia. This retrospective view is both informing and confounding.

For instance, had she known then what she knows now, the researcher wishes she would have taken advantage of her public presentation to solicit the assistance of police chiefs from each of the country's eleven police directorates. Perhaps a broader survey could have been realized. Perhaps not.

Language barriers left the researcher reliant upon the government. It appeared the translation of the English cover letter and survey were accurate. Greater certainty existed with the translated survey responses...at the least, if a translation mistake was made, it was made consistently across all surveys.
Most confounding is the lingering suspicion that survey questions were made known to police officers prior to their taking the survey. Responses, in many instances, seemed too similar to be coincidental. However, this may be a cultural factor simply related to the common language used by police. Whether officers were fed the questions and advised of desired responses will remain unknown. It is worth noting that informal conversations with individuals not connected to the police or Ministry strongly suggest the possibility of collusion.

Last, her current perspective leans toward accepting that the Ministry was attempting to assist, not hinder the researcher's work. The language barrier was a valid obstacle and no attempts were made to pressure the researcher when it came to translating the survey responses – albeit, if the desired responses had been suggested to the officers beforehand there would be no need to insist upon a Ministry translation after the fact.

All in all, a latent outcome of the research was the enhancement of previous connections with the Counsellor to the Director of the Police (and several other key figures). A relationship has developed to the extent that she would now feel comfortable, for instance, to request that the Counsellor and researcher step outside the ready-room while officers completed their surveys. At the time, such a comfort level did not exist. This bodes well for future research and is a lesson for others in similar research settings. Below are additional recommendations resulting from the experience at hand.

**Recommendations for Researchers in Similar Situations**

- Expect that research will take longer to perform than anticipated. Originally anticipated timelines were out of kilter with the researcher's original expectations due to the inherent "you must know someone who knows someone" culture.
• Steep yourself in the literature prior to conducting research in formerly socialist/communist countries. Enter the country with a thorough understanding of the interrelationships between culture and politics and then be observant for cultural, social, and political relationships not openly expressed or identified in the literature. Try to determine what might lie beneath the surface.

• Always be a sociologist – when obstacles emerge fallback and depend upon your basic research skills and instincts. Seek to understand the research setting (cultural, political, and social factors) “24/7.” Be a constant observer. Make mental field notes and elaborate in writing when privacy allows.

• Network and develop connections/friendships with a variety of individuals, not just those within your immediate discipline or interest area. These connections will prove valuable in terms of developing a broader understanding of the social and political culture. But, also be cautious not to cause anxiety via your questioning or validity-checking.

• Be extra vigilant with regard to your own cultural filters. Constantly question “what might this mean?” and do not be afraid to ask for alternative meanings from your network of connections.

• Provide yourself the luxury of retrospective analysis. Reanalyze your findings after you are out of the cultural setting. This guards against any “going native” perspectives you may have unknowingly developed while within the research venue.

• Expect obstacles to emerge and be flexible in dealing with obstacles. Even the best and most carefully planned methodologies can quickly dissolve in a foreign research setting. Do not allow yourself to become frustrated. Rather, seek and rely upon whatever alternative methods that may exist.
• Finally, remember that change takes time. Emergent democracies are oft-times overcoming years of repressive political culture. This is not always easy for an American researcher to understand.

Referenccs


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1 Such as Mesko who examines community policing efforts in Slovenia in his 1999 article, *Police and Crime Prevention - A Look From the Other Side*.
3 The exact number of overall officers and female officers, in particular, is difficult to determine as government documents clump the number of “jobs” from various police-related divisions (“administration, administrative internal affairs, common affairs, and the police-security college”) versus specifying the actual number of officers. Further complicating the issue is that the number of female employees in the uniformed police force is presented as “14.1% of the overall 16% of female employees (see Ministry of the Interior’s 1998 report) with no numbers provided in terms of what the percentages represent.
4 In fact, outright derogatory statements of a sexual nature were openly made.
5 Per commentary from “name withheld” for confidentiality purposes.
6 Per commentary from the Counsellor to the Director General of the Police and Head of Prevention Division – the subdivision of the Uniformed Police Directorate that oversees community policing.
7 Professor’s name withheld for confidentiality purposes.