Spring March 1, 2014

Book review: Policing and the poetics of everyday life.

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/rodger_broome/33/
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Policing and the Poetics of Everyday Life is a hermeneutical-aesthetic analysis within a human scientific approach of modern policing in the United States. It is an important study of police-citizen encounters informed by hermeneutical-aesthetic thought and the author's professional experience as a veteran with a Seattle area police department in Washington, USA. Wender's (2008) approach is counter to the empirical studies of police work, which draw their values and methods from the mainstream social science that are derived by the natural sciences. His approach is intended to avoid reductionism, objectification and depersonalization of the people in his analysis. Wender (2008) draws heavily upon Heidegger and other continental philosophers for his hermeneutic analysis while using works of art as illustrations and artifacts of humanity to formulate his interpretations. Wender's (2008) approach fits within the human sciences tradition of examining meaning-in-action in the lived-experiences of the police and their encounters with citizens of their communities (Giorgi, 1970; Polkinghorne, 1983; Ricoeur, 1998). This work draws from Wender's 20 years of experience and service as a city police officer to provide an "insider's" view to the police part of the police-citizen dyad under examination. Therefore, the unit of analysis for Wender (2008) is the call-for-service which is an encounter typically initiate by a citizen who called in a complaint or concern to the emergency dispatch center. At minimum, there is a police-citizen dyad in a police problem-solving encounter that makes up the focus of this inquiry.

Criminal justice systems are adversarial by design. They are structured in such a way that the police are charged with the duties to keep the peace and bring "wrong-doers" before a court for judgment and possible punishment. The citizens' relationship with its police largely depends upon police encounters. The kind of encounter, the reasons for it, and the degree of congruence between the co-experiencing dyad is a meaning-making process that may be elucidated through a hermeneutical-aesthetic approach. Inherent in many police-citizen encounters are the themes of right versus wrong, good versus evil, innocence versus guilt, etc. (Broomé, 2014). These come to fruition as arbitrated by a court to render a conclusion that exonerates or condemns the accused one. The adversarial relationship between the citizen and police officer is the ground upon which the police problematize people and people become problems (Wender, 2008).

The police narrative examples used in this book are the author's own experiences as a Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) and representing the municipal
police who are primarily and typically authorities within the local government. The accounts of police-citizen encounters provided in the book do not reflect the work of a national or federal level of law enforcement. For the international reader, I must explain that the decentralized US police agencies fall under local control at the level of city, county and state governments. Therefore, the federal law enforcement agencies (FBI, US Marshals, DEA, etc.) in the US do not function as peace keepers and problem solvers in everyday life like local police. In fact, it is customary to call federal LEOS agents while police officers, sheriffs, and highway patrol troopers are regarded as “the police.” Therefore, the reader should understand that Wender’s (2008) work is focused on the local police officer who likely even lives within the community he or she serves, or in a neighboring community, which means the officer him or herself is a member of the citizenry when off-duty.

Wender (2008) describes the bureaucratic praxis of police work in as analogous to the practice of the social science following the methods and values of the natural sciences. There is great emphasis on objectivity, demonstrable evidence, deductive reasoning, and the quantification of people and things (Romanyshyn & Whalen, 1989). He proposes that understanding the police-citizen encounter is enhanced by the qualitative approach of his hermeneutic-aesthetic approach. Because Wender takes such an approach, important and meaningful paradoxes are elucidated and explicated that provide an important perspective on various police-citizen encounters. For example, Wender describes and explains the paradox of civility that occurs in the dyadic relation between the officer and citizen regarding professional detachment. Professional detachment in medicine can help ease the intimacy between a doctor and patient when dealing with very personal issues. But when police take a posture of professional detachment, it can be received and interpreted by the citizen as cold-hearted indifference (Wender, 2008). The bureaucratic praxis of policing in the US is both a primary observation and primary critique employed in the book to uncover much about the police-citizen encounter.

Methodologically, the project blends an interpretive phenomenological and literary approach to data collected through a participant-observer mode akin to ethnographic research. Wender (2008) draws from hermeneutical-phenomenological philosophers like Heidegger and Gadamer for his interpretive attitude and comes at the data analysis from different interpretive lenses. The interpretations are informed by three different perspectives: bureaucratic praxis of police, interpretive phenomenology, and aesthetics. As such, Wender (2008) records his own account of street encounters with citizens in a participant-observer way for later interpretive analysis. As a police officer and social scientist, Wender (2008) recounts the “person-as-officer” subjective
perspective of the police work while being uniquely inspired as one trained in phenomenological thought. Being a phenomenologically inspired police officer is unique. On one hand, there is a very disciplined and pre-fashioned training for police officers that influences the way in which officers approach their work in society. On the other hand, phenomenology aims at going back-to-the-things-themselves (Husserl, 1983) regarding how one analyzes experiential data. In this sense, the ethnographic style of being a participant-observer to provide the data upon which the analysis will be performed seems to provide insights for law enforcement, at the same time, providing an interesting application of interpretive phenomenology. Importantly, Wender (2008) puts each vignette that he analyzes in the book so that the reader can actually see how they are composed. The third approach to the data comes in his aesthetic analysis. Wender (2008) selects an artistic or literary work from which to draw themes and illustrate kinds of social patterns. Using the vignette and art, he dialogues the themes and the expressive aspects together interpretively to draw some conclusions about the social meanings that unfold in the police-citizen event. In a sense, there is a convergent line of thematization by blending three streams of interpretation (criminal justice, hermeneutic-phenomenology and aesthetics) of an event. The salient social themes that emerge in the mix are the bases from which Wender draws his conclusions.

I want to provide a sketch of just one of Wender’s analyses of a domestic violence incident. There is not the room here to provide all of the details, but I will provide what I believe are the highlights. Wender investigates a fight between a man and woman who have a 3-year old child in common. The relationship had become estranged and the child had been with the father for visitation. Upon his delivery of his child back to the mother, the father and mother got into a dispute, which came to its climax with the man choking the woman to unconsciousness. He fled the scene and the woman called the police which summoned Sgt. Wender to her home. Wender found the woman standing barefooted in front of her residence holding her crying son.

Wender describes how he approached the situation from a practical stance to determine what the nature of the incident involved. The woman presented a paradoxical presence by continually asserting “it was my fault, I hit him first” while having called the police for assistance. There are two-sides to this woman for the police because she claims to have initiated the physical fight, but is a victim of the brutality of her estranged boyfriend. Wender finds that she has some minor injuries to her neck that are consistent with her account to having been thrown to the ground and choked unconscious. Wender coaxes her to allow him to drive her to her grandmother’s house for a ride see a doctor. At first she is resistant to do so, but accepts after some conversation. The woman
remains reluctant to assist the police in locating her boyfriend to arrest him for the assault. In this situation, the woman can be seen in different roles depending on the perspective taken. If she initiated the fight, she is an aggressor but not necessarily deserving of the degree of violence she suffered in return. Perhaps her aggression was the antecedent, but not necessarily the “cause” of the attack on her. Therefore, she is a victim of a felonious assault that could be construed as an attempt on her life. Yet in all of this, she becomes an accessory after the fact to her own attempted murder by being deceptive and uncooperative in helping the police as a “true” victim of a crime.

Wender uses the painting of Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, to make the illustration of different perspectives presented in human encounters. The painting shows a woman bartender standing at a bar with a large mirror behind her. The mirror shows a reflection of a busy barroom full of people, the rear-profile of the bartender, and a male customer standing at the bar facing her. Wender points to the mirror as being a perspective that shows the bartender’s view. The male customer represents the universal *other* who sees the bartender from the *customer at the counter* perspective, which is also the painting viewer’s position. In fact, the painting draws the viewer to see the woman as if he or she is approaching her and the well-stocked bar for a drink as “the universal other.” Therefore, the man in the mirror “is me,” when I look at the painting’s mirror behind the bartender.

When we look at things in the natural attitude, we tend to see what we expect to see and we understand things from our own experience. Wender (2008) shows us how our perception is in profiles in the manner in which Husserl (1983) describes it. He points out how the mirror however, provides us with a reflected profile of the room that the bartender faces. At first blush one might look through a mirror like this as “behind me” rather than “her viewpoint.” This would be the natural attitude. Wender (2008) shows how the painter wanted us to see the bartender’s point of view, which initiates some degree of empathy. When connected back to police work, it was Sgt. Wender who had to consider his domestic assault subject as a complexity of role-identities and contradictions. He concludes the analysis of this incident with describing how he filed the appropriate reports and cleared the call to go back in-service for the next (Wender, 2008).

Wender brings us back to the *bureaucratic praxis* in his conclusion of the call. On the other hand, his reflections and interpretations of his lived-experience were also aesthetically elucidated when intellectually brought into proximity with Manet’s painting. I think this is where the greatest value to Wender’s work lies—in the demonstration of his post hoc reflections and interpretations. People learn and gain wisdom through experience and police.
are no exception. Wender's book shows with numerous examples how police work is very complex, paradoxical, and life-impacting for the officers. The lived-experience is painted over with a bureaucratic veneer that presents the work as a tidy “good versus evil” theme that makes it look both heroic and sensible. The bureaucratic praxis that guides the work to maintain this veneer tends to hide the frustrations, disappointments and struggles that police officers experience in pursuit of justice. Wanting to do well and help others is the primary reason people become police officers in the first place. But over time and with such experiences being left understood in the natural attitude, officers can become apathetic, pessimistic and psychologically burned out. Wender shows how phenomenologically influenced reflections can lead officers and others to see these situations much deeper and richer than the natural attitude offers.

I believe that this book shows the possibilities of phenomenological thought being brought into police training for the betterment of police service and for their own good. Paton (2008) shows how posttraumatic growth is largely achieved by emergency workers making sense out of the hard realities and experiences of their work. Meaning-making and interpretive modes of reflecting on difficult experiences might aid the police in resisting posttraumatic stress and folding it into greater resiliency. Moreover, empathy training and education can be done for police in a very similar manner as it has been done in other organizations (Englander & Folkesson, 2013). Empathy training has been shown to help people, (1) who are dealing with emotionally distressed person(s), by (2) directing his or her lived presence to the other's meaning-expression, for better understanding, (3) which tends to initiate an emotional shift in the encounter to one more harmonious than beforehand. This facilitates a greater empathetic communication with the distressed person so that intersubjectivity can emerge (Englander & Folkesson, 2013). Wender intimates throughout his book how approaching distressed citizens and even dangerous people in this kind of attitude provides officers with an ability to defuse situations. Such empathetic approaches would not necessitate officers setting aside their officer's safety tactics, but might actually enhance their abilities to anticipate eruptive violent actions.

In conclusion, Wender's Policing and the Poetics of Everyday Life does not propose itself as “the way it is.” However, it does provide valuable insights to the lived-world of police officers in there encounters with a variety of different kinds of citizens. The aesthetic contributions seem to add a dimension of “normalcy” so that the interpersonal challenges, ambiguities and paradoxes of life are set in their proper light—they are all part of life. The book also uncovers how the tidy veneer of the bureaucratic structure and praxis of the police cannot really identify, define, and solve all problems. Wender provides
insights that could be useful for the police, their leaders, policy makers, and other interested parties to see how untidy and paradoxical the work can be. This could lead to more reasonable and practical expectations on the police by society. But also, the police themselves could find some solace in understanding that such a difficult job, even when done well, does not always achieve justice. Clinicians who work with police would be greatly served by the book. It provides a good “insiders interpretation” to the work while also being in dialog with the mainstream social scientific perspective. This is what Wender set out to accomplish and I think he does well to achieve it.

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References


