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Irish Policing

Culture, Challenges, and Change
in An Garda Síochána

Courtney Marsh

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Palgrave's Critical Policing Studies

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1

Into the Unknown

One of the most amazing police organizations in the world, the Garda of Ireland, are little known and rarely studied. (Manning)

Cited in his review of O'Brien-Olinger's, (2016) book, Manning perfectly encompassed the essence of Irish policing: unique, yet much is unknown. Some years later, the landscape of Irish policing research has changed very little. Enter: *Irish Policing: Culture, Challenges, and Change in An Garda Síochána*. This book contains a more nuanced understanding of the culture of the Irish police, An Garda Síochána,¹ than previously offered. Whilst the title of this book broadly encompasses the research, culture, challenges, and change, more specifically, the focus is to what extent the organisation's culture(s) can be identified in An Garda Síochána through an exploration of recent tribunals/reports of inquiry and how these organisational features affect their policing practices. Notwithstanding, whilst it is important to note that policing does not necessarily equate to the police (Jones & Newburn, 1998), this

¹ The organisation will henceforth be referred to as the Garda, whilst the individual(s) will be referred to as Gardaí.

research will use the term *policing* to refer to activities carried out by the police.

Whilst the reasoning for what organisational culture, specifically police culture, is and why it is essential to understand will be given, it is also important to outline how this research more generally came to be. Curiosity around the Garda's culture began with a casual observation of the Gardaí when I moved to the country before the start of this research, which then turned into curiosity; what makes these people behave the way they do, and why, above all, do they not carry weapons?² I suppose the long-term journey to this research was more inherent than previously considered because from this curiosity came a want to find research. However, a cursory review of Irish policing is very deceptive; what first seems like an overwhelming amount of research is quickly whittled down to very little when our friends from the North and historic Irish policing are taken out of the search parameters. Though understandable that Northern Ireland would come up when searching Ireland, as this country's history was and continues to be very important to Ireland's being, the two policing organisations are very different in structure and practice, and the research on Northern Ireland would not suffice for the Republic of Ireland. Interestingly, Ireland is often left out even in comparative analyses of English-speaking countries.³ In one particular example from Newburn (1999), covering a strategic review of literature, the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia are all covered, but not Ireland. Thus, the idea for this research area was presented to me. Fill the gap that I am interested in knowing; what guides the behaviour of the Gardaí and how they perform these, perhaps unspoken, rules that govern what they do. From here, I ventured into the unknown.

Irish Policing

Although the international literature used throughout this book is but a selection, the Irish literature used is more comprehensive, though

² I was born in the United States—Florida—and so this question was very natural for me.

³ Canada also gets left out, but not as often.

not exhaustive, of what Ireland has in the field of modern police organisational culture. However, the keywords before are modern and organisational culture, as research on the Garda with these parameters is narrow. Of those studies covered, an inordinately large number discuss misconduct, transparency, and accountability in some way. The whistle-blower phenomena that, in some instances, can contribute to the discovery of misconduct is something that will be discussed, as part of the larger spectrum of organisational culture, in this book, and the fore mentioned literature will provide a basic groundwork from which to situate these findings.

When looking at research on the Garda, many take a historical and/or secondary approach; only a few have included the organisation in a capacity that directly involves the Gardaí (Barry, 2014; Brown, 2000; Charman & Corcoran, 2015; Conway, 2014; Geraghty, 2017; Marsh, 2017, 2019; Nally, 2009; O'Brien-Olinger, 2016; Sheridan, 2009; Williams, 2016). Of the researchers identified, very few did not identify as part of the organisation at the time of the study (Brown, O'Brien-Olinger, Marsh, Williams, Geraghty, Conway); however, these implications will be discussed further, where relevant, throughout this book. Even fewer of these academic works have specifically researched police organisational culture within the Irish context (Charman & Corcoran, 2015; Conway, 2010; Marsh, 2017; Nally, 2009; Williams, 2016). Further, of the studies identified, many have been conducted by Gardaí actively in the organisation pursuing a master's level qualification, limiting the time available to do the research and thus, the scope⁴ of the research able to be conducted.

Charman and Corcoran's (2015) study, which stems from Corcoran's (2012) doctoral thesis, into Garda organisational culture consisted of qualitative interviews conducted by Corcoran, a Gardaí, with street-level Gardaí from the Dublin North Central area. Upon this researcher's meeting with him, being part of the organisation hindered some depth in questions due to the interviewed Gardaí's awareness of his position (as could be supposed for the other studies where the Gardaí took on the

⁴ Scope in this instance references the substantive depth, geographic reach, and limited member rank.

researcher's role). Nonetheless, this study is one of the biggest stepping-stones into research on organisational culture in the Garda and is where this research began.

In the first and only to-date study of its kind, O'Brien-Olinger (2016) created a dynamic ethnographic account of what day-to-day policing is like within the Garda. Although O'Brien-Olinger's (2016) research focuses on how the Gardaí are coping with an increasingly internationally diverse community, his work is the only research to date that provides insight into the everyday life of the ordinary member of the Garda. As such, his work is tremendously important in evaluating the theoretical and empirical findings ascertained from historical and/or interview-based research against how Gardaí actually act in the field. The in-depth studies of the Garda and the overall purpose of this research are intended to be the cornerstones of future publicised⁵ research on the organisation.

Though this is a limited overview of the background of the Irish policing research, the findings will be integrated into the chapters where they are best situated. However, it is important here to outline the structure of the organisation and the numbers at any given rank for context. As of March 31, 2022, there are 14,333 Gardaí⁶ and those numbers are set out by rank/demographics in Figs. 1.1 and 1.2.

Organisational Culture

An organisation's culture provides the guidelines from which members learn the required behaviour to thrive and survive in an organisation. As such, understanding an organisation's culture is paramount to understanding why the members of any such organisation behave in the ways they do. Further, when evaluating organisational culture, Schein (1984) asserted that if the group has to face challenging circumstances together, their sense of culture will be very strong. As will be discussed more in detail throughout this book, policing organisations set themselves

⁵ The organisation has conducted other research by its own research unit, but will not release these documents to the public.

⁶ This is strictly trained members of the organisation, this does not include civilian personal or Garda Reserve numbers.

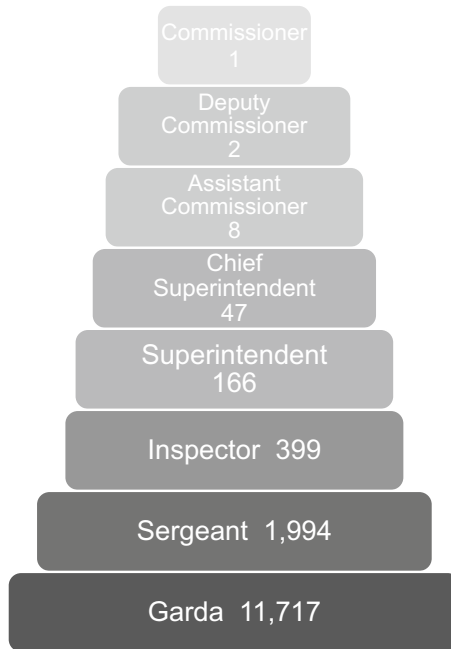


Fig. 1.1 Overview of Garda positions as of March 2022 (Source Garda.ie)

apart from more traditional organisations because of the conditions in which they work. Facing challenging circumstances, such as responding to dangerous situations or more precarious and sensitive mental health scenarios, happens very often in police organisations. Taking on risks is very much part of the job. From this understanding, and interpreted by Schein's (1984) fore-mentioned assertion, it would then be expected that police organisations have a strong culture.

In part, the culture set and adhered to by employees is thought to have come about because of external pressures; the resulting culture was then considered valid enough to be taught to future employees (Schein, 1984). To this end, culture becomes so embedded in the organisation that no one questions it (Schein, 1984); in policing organisations, in particular, officers are taught not only not to question it but to have trust in it (Fry & Berkes, 1983). Organisational culture operates as a commanding structure created to offset any individual attributes of members in the

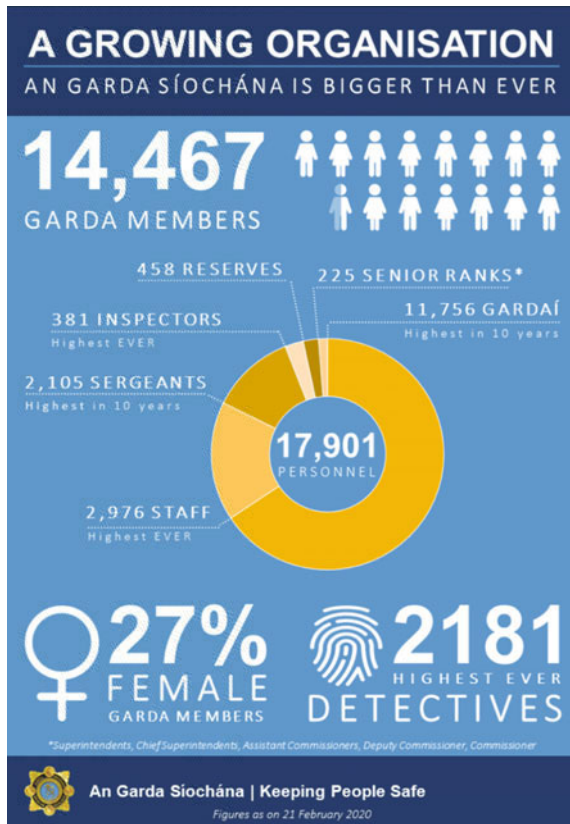


Fig. 1.2 Overview of Garda positions as of February 2020 (Source Garda.ie)

organisation that may take away from the collective mission of the whole (Scott, 1961). Further, the dominating culture serves as a measure to limit the decisions an individual can make to increase predictability, something that allows organisations to be stable over time (Scott, 1961). Additionally, “shared perceptions of daily practices [are] the core of an organization’s culture” (Herbert, 1998, p. 311).

The overarching goal of institutionalising something and creating a culture around any such thing is to instil value in it (Scott, 1987). This shared set of meanings amongst members of the organisation distinguishes one organisation from another (Manetje & Martins, 2009).

Culture includes the beliefs of any given organisation as well as the actions that substantiate those beliefs (Jermier et al., 1991). Further, culture can “enable and prevent behaviour”, which is the essence of what an organisation is and does (Nugent, 2007, p. 8). This reasoning is why understanding Garda culture is so important.

The literature was collected by a strategic review of research identifying prominent studies about police organisational culture. Upon reading, recurrent themes were identified, and additional studies were sought regarding this level of specificity. From there, equivalent research was sought in an Irish context; that considered, any relevant literature identified containing research on the Garda was evaluated, with particular regard for the more recent studies involving the Gardaí directly. A reverse search was then conducted to find equivalent international research to critically assess if there was a parallel to the data stemming from the Irish policing context. Those findings are located throughout this book.

This chapter has been constructed to set out the basis for the need for specific research into Irish police organisational culture, namely due to the lack of research with a narrowed focus on organisational culture within the Garda conducted thus far. What is presented sets the stage for the gap in the literature this research intends to address as well as the initial justification for why this research was conducted the way it was. However, first, it is important to understand the guiding theoretical frameworks this research was approached from.

A Note on Theory

This section intends to lay the groundwork for what theories contribute to the research on police organisational culture and how they function within policing organisations and their culture. Below are some of the theories that have traditionally been used, as ascertained from the literature, in helping to understand police culture. As such, the social theories (Social Identity Theory, Socialisation, Social Learning Theory, and Social Exclusion) and Rotten Apple Theory will be examined in their relevance to the criminological field of policing organisations.

The theoretical contributions in this research are novel to Ireland but not necessarily to the international field of police organisational culture. The theories chosen have all been used to understand police organisational culture, and they were selected for this research based on this applicability. Still, they have not necessarily been used in conjunction with each other previously, as research in this area often tends to choose one theory and move forward with it as the sole guiding theoretical lens. Nor have they been linked to more traditional organisational culture theoretical positions, as was the case with police culture and performance theory in this research. Particularly in Ireland, there has been a gap in understanding Garda culture from a theoretical viewpoint; how the culture has formed and been transmitted over time was underexplored in the few published studies that have looked at the Garda's organisational culture. Of course, the empirical contributions have led to an understanding of Garda culture, but the theoretical contribution, as outlined in more detail below, has developed this understanding further.

As Ingram et al. (2018) have posited, culture cannot be understood on an individual level but only from the collective group. Indeed sharing the culture amongst the group is an essential component of the culture (Ingram et al., 2018). Accordingly, as will be argued in this chapter, culture is collective, and the various theories presented can help explain why and how this has and continues to happen. Much of the behaviour transmission can be explained from the interaction of perspectives of the above theories. In so doing, they may then be explored in the following chapters in a more specific context amongst the various elements of police organisational culture internationally and in Ireland. Indicative of the choice in using these theories and their relevance to police culture research, the theories laid out in this chapter can be applied to behaviour transmission and organisational behaviour in any one of the individual facets of police organisational culture presented. However, they have been integrated into the chapters where they naturally fit in terms of comprehension and natural flow rather than isolated relevance.

Whilst there was no emphasis on one theory throughout this research, the social theories (social learning, social identity, socialisation, social exclusion) were viewed as the crux of behaviour transmission throughout. In the literature discussed further below, these social theories are

attributed as the reason police culture can be singularised as being just one representative culture transmitted over time. This transmission of behaviour through the social theory mechanisms was also present in the Garda. The historical context of the Garda presented in chapter two not only serves to better understand the organisations that preceded, but it also provides an understanding of the current structure of the Garda, which is largely because of the theoretical associations of the social theories.

Put articulately by O'Brien-Olinger (2016), culture gives us the rules by which we govern our lives and act upon. Culture is how we understand our place in the world, how we make decisions, and how we defend our actions. With this, it is necessary to understand how an individual learns and further embodies the organisation's culture. Social Identity Theory links a person's self to their organisation; by this reasoning and supported by the evaluated literature regarding the pervasiveness of organisational culture, it would stand to reason that the organisation's culture would therefore shape any person in an organisation because of this social identification with the organisation (Campbell & Göritz, 2014). Further, an individual can have multiple social identities from different groups and/or organisations they have been part of; what makes someone an individual is how these different social identities work together (Charman, 2017). However, social identity is relational and contextual; members will therefore emphasise the behaviours they perceive as important to the group (Charman, 2017). Individuals join organisations to be accepted and, as such, will observe the expected behaviour and often take on that personality to embody the organisation's culture (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). Therefore, although each individual will have their own identity, the emphasis on what is viewed as important contributes to an overall collective identity that contributes to a broad organisational culture. Because of this theoretical lens of behaviour transmission, we can look at culture collectively.

Socialisation produces social reproduction, the driving factor in what accounts for continuity over time (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Theoretically, our personal backgrounds influence how we interact with others (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). However, this ideology is in direct conflict

with the controlling nature of police culture and speaks to the strength organisational culture has in dominating individuals' lives. If we as humans are indeed socialised from birth and have no say in how we interact in later life, then the influencing nature of police organisations would seem unrealistic, yet there is a body of literature that supports the very concept (Herbert, 1998; Loftus, 2010; Van Maanen, 1975). Although there are different stages of socialisation, one being the de-socialisation from being a civilian (Charman, 2017), in this research understanding the individual stages is not as important as the overall effect on police culture.

Socialisation, as fitted within Social Learning Theory, has several core components. Although initially contextualised in a criminological framework, the components are also relational to organisational culture learning. Behaviour is learned, behaviour is learned through interactions and communications with other people, learning happens within intimate groups, and the learned behaviour is relational to the frequency and reinforcement of the behaviour (Akers & Jennings, 2016; Sutherland, 1947). Although these were initially in a deviant and delinquent behaviour context, they are all highly conducive to how learning is done in policing organisations; perhaps the resemblance to deviancy is even indicative of the culture.

Under the framework that socialisation is not deterministic but requires active participation instead of passive recipients (Charman, 2017), we can then analyse how socialisation fits into police culture. Organisational socialisation is how members learn the required behaviours to 'survive' in the organisation; further, early organisational learning is the most influential determinant of later behaviour (Hale et al., 2013; Harris, 2016; Van Maanen, 1975). By the sixth month on the job, Van Maanen (1975) observed that officers had adopted most of the culture in the rest of the department. This adoption was vital in being accepted by the group and overall job satisfaction.

If socialisation were truly deterministic, it would be unlikely that changing behaviour learned and cemented in from birth could happen in a relatively short time. Further to this, if this framework that individual's personal backgrounds determine social interactions is used as a guiding theory, police culture would not be able to be grouped in such

a way that is collectivist to the organisation rather than individualistic to each member of the organisation. Indeed, the influential powers the organisation has on individual personality are strong enough to supersede any other personality trait (Loftus, 2010; Van Maanen, 1975). If an officer has a distinct personality type, it would be a result of the inherited organisational culture of the department rather than their own individual characteristics (Jermier & Berkes, 1979). Theoretically, the organisation is a more significant determinant in shaping behaviour and ideology than the officer's personality (Jermier & Berkes, 1979). The dominant nature of the organisation's culture is particularly interesting considering the culture has to overtake already established personal values that are generally formed around the age of 10 (Herbert, 1998).

An additional determining factor of officer personality related to how long they had been in service (Paoline, 2003). Typically the longer an officer has served on the job, the lower their organisational commitment (Charman, 2017). As the older officers would be the ones who train the incoming officers and therefore also socialise them into the organisation, this lower level of commitment may impact the new officer. Although official aspects of the job, such as legal rights of power, are learned in the classroom, much of the practical information is learned during the initial socialisation that new members of the organisation undergo. Loftus (2010) found that police officers in England did not feel the official classroom training they received prepared them for the reality of the job. Accordingly, the officers Paoline (2003) interviewed in the US felt that much of the job is learned in the field from more experienced officers, a sentiment Van Maanen (1975) echoed in his own US ethnographic research. The Canadian study also indicates that training emphasises reactive situations, situations that are not as easily learned in a classroom (Campeau, 2015).

The socialisation members receive even in the initial training phases is what cements the culture into being in an organisation. Socialisation is an essential aspect of officer integration and sets the tone for how members will behave in future. Social Learning Theory would suggest that members are socialised into a group and will reflect the values they view as most important to the group. However, as was seen in the data, the influx of Garda recruits and the lack of supervisors to

socialise the recruits into the organisation led to a deficit in the practical knowledge of how to operate within the organisation. From this, low standards are allowed to flourish. At the current period in the organisation (as of February 2020), the Garda have continued to recruit at an unprecedented rate. They have recruited and promoted members at the highest rates the organisation has seen in 10 years, if not ever, at the Inspector, Sergeant, and Gardaí levels. Whilst this influx after the hiring freeze was necessary, the strain on socialisation and training seen in the data will only be exacerbated, and with it, a compounding of the issues surrounding this overstretched capacity as suggested in the data.

Though this research was initially pinned on the fore mentioned social theories, Rotten Apple Theory (see Harris, 2016; Punch, 2000, 2003) came about organically. Upon familiarisation with the data, patterns became apparent that many of the issues found in the data were not individualistic, nor were they going to be solved by removing one person, the rotten apple, from the organisation. That considered, the application of Rotten Apple Theory could also not work in isolation in any way that would satisfactorily explain the behaviour that is representative of the Garda culture. Rotten apples are but one piece of understanding organisational culture in a policing context. For this to provide a complete understanding, the social theories needed to be used in conjunction. As understood from the literature, rotten apples are not created in isolation; they stem from a rotten orchard. This rotten orchard is created by systemic mechanisms dictated by the organisation's culture and cemented in social learning and socialisation processes. What was found represented broader systemic issues that had long since been explained away on an organisational level as individual issues, the avoidance of responsibility being a vital facet of the Garda's culture. Upon this finding, the established place of Rotten Apple Theory in policing literature was sought and found, and its application to the Garda particularly became even more evident.

Per Rotten Apple Theory, a large number of officers do not have to display such behaviour for the issues to be systemic, and this is still the approach taken when understanding the Irish data and how the observed behaviour of relatively few Gardaí (considering there are 14,000 + Gardaí) still reflects a broader systemic culture that values and allows

this behaviour to continue. If it genuinely were down to a few single individuals being the catalyst for this behaviour, cases of police misconduct would be eradicated from every policing organisation in every country by simply removing a single officer. Accordingly, if this were the case in the Garda, you would not expect there to be a need for additional tribunals of inquiry after the first one. Yet, more than one tribunal was used for the data analysis, and there are more that have preceded the observation period and one that is ongoing. As the data over the 30-year period has shown, even though there were often few Gardaí held accountable for their actions, though indeed this very notion is also part of the perpetuation of the problem as it instils this behaviour in the culture further, removal of one problem individual has not solved the problem. It was questioned throughout this book how this behaviour has continued for so long, and the contribution of this theory does provide adequate reasoning for that. You cannot solve a problem if you do not address the actual problem.

Performance Theory relied heavily on the findings and implications from the Hawthorne Studies (see Carey, 1967; Sonnenfeld, 1985; Wickström & Bendix, 2000). Though it was documented that there were criticisms of this study, most notably for policing organisations was the importance of supervisory–employee relationships. More specifically, a relationship whereby organisational members were valued at an organisational level. Workers feeling that a superior level member cared enough about them that they would not only listen to but also implement organisational changes they requested was a key finding and was also linked to increased productivity. In a policing context, the literature evaluated indicated that officers who felt their organisation valued them would exhibit more positive work-related behaviours. In contrast, those who thought they were undervalued would engage in more self-protective behaviours. Accordingly, the Gardaí were found to both feel undervalued by the organisation and engage in self-protective behaviour.

Outlined thus far have been how this research has contributed to the theoretical development of policing literature in Ireland; however, there is also a unique contribution to the broader scope of police organisational culture literature. As stated previously, the theories used in and of themselves are not new to the field of police organisational culture,

but their contribution lies in their use together. Though this is not to say that all the preceding research is any less impactful, there is room to argue that in using the theories together, a more robust explanation for culture transmission can be achieved.

Rather than looking at organisational culture from top–bottom or vice versa, the concept needs to be reimagined in a cyclical fashion whereby there is no beginning or end, just a recurring concept.⁷ The organisation's members are socialised into a group; in essence, they must learn what behaviour is necessary to become part of, and identify with, the organisation, or else they face social exclusion. Further, it can be understood that behaviour is moderated by performance theory and how members' actions are received within the organisation. This then contributes to the understanding of why the rotten apple explanation is not valid. Because of the patterns of behaviour transmission through the social theories, behaviour being attributed to just one member, or rotten apple, does not make sense as this must stem from the organisation's culture that is perpetually transmitted circularly. To make it in the organisation, members must learn the behaviour; these members are then promoted, thus reinforcing the behaviour from the type whilst it is still being transmitted from the bottom ranks. With the methodological, empirical, and theoretical contributions considered, it is now possible to position Ireland in the larger spectrum of police organisational culture research internationally.

As one final note before delving into the fundamental ideas represented by the term police culture, Kingshott et al. (2004) have asserted that research on policing organisations needs to be current because organisational culture is a changing concept that is defined by society and as such changes relatively frequently. Whilst this is important to consider, and although more recent research will be incorporated, the use of dated research is justified because, as will be discussed later in this chapter, in addition to the social theories of behaviour transmission, police culture is resistant to change and has remained essentially unchanged over time (Hale et al., 2013; Loftus, 2010). To further strengthen this argument,

⁷ Similar to the age old question, what came first, the chicken or the egg? Or alternatively, “a circle has no beginning” (Rowling, 2014).

what was found in the literature did not alter the perception of police organisational culture when taken from differing time periods except in a few circumstances, which were explicitly noted in the text. With this long-term lack of change found in the literature, it can be generally concluded that policing organisations are at least partially⁸ resistant to change. What follows are the basic tenets of what police culture consists of as derived from the literature from an international perspective.

The International Police Culture Landscape

When looking at the research on police organisational culture conducted since the mid-twentieth century, a general reckoning of what this police culture is has been observed at an international level. From an initial reading, general characteristics included: masculinity, discrimination, exclusion, suspicion, isolation, solidarity/loyalty, moral and political conservatism, pragmatism, cynicism, aggression, negative views of supervision, selective enforcement of the law, and a prioritisation of the crime fighter role over service-oriented role (Bittner, 1970; Brown, 2000; Charman, 2017, 2019; Demirkol & Nalla, 2019; Goldsmith, 1990; Ingram et al., 2018; Manning, 1977; Miller, 2019; Paesen, Maesschalck, & Loyens, 2019; Punch, 1985; Reiner, 1992; Reuss-Ianni, 1983; Rubinstein, 1973; Skolnick, 1966; Van Maanen, 1975; Waddington, 1999; Westley, 1970; Worden, 1995). Even the informal rules passed on to new officers adhere to the general typology of the culture presented, namely, lay low, value the team, and make the law work (Charman, 2017).

Whilst not each of these will be discussed explicitly by the above terms, they interconnect into broader themes. These themes were idealised and formed based on an interaction with the literature upon secondary readings and are referred to throughout this book. Broadly the themes explored encompassed the culture vs sub-culture paradigm, which explores many of the nuances between official and unofficial

⁸ At the very least, police organisations have been characterised as resistant to change in the literature evaluated.

rules found in police culture; styles of policing, which inform police styling, and thus, culture; loyalty and solidarity, this point was a typology taken directly from the literature, but was considered so paramount to what police culture is in its many facets that it should be directly translated into a broader theme; organisational support, which included the emotional labours required of the job as well as how the organisation facilitates its members seeking help; managing change; and blame culture.⁹ This last theme was not one that initially came up upon first readings of the literature but was informed by the findings of this research and later found in the literature in a way that was not as blatant as the label may suggest.

What is presented throughout this book is a systematic review as a representative sample of the international research on the overarching aspects of police organisational culture that provides a robust understanding of what police culture has come to be known internationally and how these findings have been theoretically contextualised. Indicative of sheer size, many policing studies are done in the US; therefore, a similar proportion of the literature reviewed consists of US-based research. However, because of this, there was an intentional limit to the number of US studies used, and therefore a conscious choice of using non-US-based research so as not to have an over-representation of what police culture is in just one country. This research intends to understand where Ireland fits into a larger base of police organisational culture research, not just where Ireland is situated in relation to the US. Additional international literature outside of the US was identified based on representativeness and inclusivity; however, the (other) international literature was, for the most part, supportive of the research stemming from the US. Because of this similarity, though there are instances of the particular country a study was conducted in being referenced, the international literature was not divided into further sub-categories of US and non-US. The overall conformity of the US and non-US police organisational literature provides a unified comparison to the Irish policing

⁹ It should be noted that certain aspects of what are typically included in the police organisational culture remit (i.e. gender and diversity) were not included because of their lack of presence in the data.