The Professional Identity of Police Officers

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Abstract

The research results presented in the article concern several aspects of the professional identity of police officers. The concept of professional identity includes such aspects as the mission, basic goals and values of a given organization and its organizational culture. The main objective was to identify the key elements of the identity of Polish police officers that contribute to the effectiveness of the organization. The article discusses the factors in the workplace that affect the formation of a police officer's professional identity. The authors assumed that a mere reflection on the professional identity of a police officer is enough to extract those elements or features that testify to its specificity and distinctiveness in relation to other professions. The research began in January 2021 and was completed in July 2021. The (anonymous) survey covered 1,054 police officers. The research confirmed that the competence of Polish police officers acquired during their service shapes their personal, relational and professional identity and that their interpersonal relations are focused primarily on the tasks assigned rather than on building their professional identity. Factors such as specific working conditions in the police (stress, pressure, changes) affect the formation of police officers' professional identity, both in individual and collective terms. The results are of supra-regional importance, as the indicated aspects concern most police services in Europe and in the world.

Introduction

One of the most important tasks of any modern state is to ensure the security of its citizens. This protective function, which is crucial for the existence of every state, is mainly performed by the institution of the police. The legal nature of the profession of a police officer is defined in jurisprudence as a relationship of an official character, determined by service to society—i.e., protecting people and property and maintaining security and public order. A police officer is a person of public trust. The hierarchical structure of the organization—i.e., relationships of subordination, and the occupational risk related to the work of police officers are also extremely important (Piwowarski 2012, 7).

The job of a police officer is also a mission. To fulfill this mission, policemen must be constantly aware that they serve society. This mission undoubtedly requires strong motivation from police

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officers, which should be based on the vocation to serve in the police structures. This means that a police officer is always ready to help other members of society in situations defined by the law[1].

Serving society is characteristic of many professions of public trust. In the case of the police, this service is based on the protection of goods, which is guaranteed by the law. Service to society has an impact not only on the legal status of police officers but also on defining their professional identity. Police officers are obliged to fully identify with the goals and the public mission of the institution to which they voluntarily belong.

The concept of identity has a long history, but it was not until the 1960s in the United States that the term was introduced to the social sciences and public discourse. Similarly to race, nation and ethnicity, identity is a category of social analysis, and it belongs to the sphere of practice or common consciousness. As a category belonging to the sphere of practice, this concept is often used by political leaders and the media, especially in the context of ethnic or national conflicts, as well as reactions to the ongoing process of globalization, and rarely in the context of professional identity. Many authors now use the term "identity," adopting specific rules regarding the essence and nature of the phenomenon, and often constructing their own conceptual categories. Therefore, the scope of the meaning of this concept is very diverse and unclear (Gierszewski and Pieczywok 2022, 14).

Professional identity includes specific attributes of the profession, such as the mission, basic goals and values of a given organization and its organizational culture. The authors assumed that a mere reflection on the professional identity of a police officer is enough to extract those elements or features that testify to its specificity and distinctiveness in relation to other professions. It is therefore possible to talk about the identity of a policeman by pointing to its essential components. Police officers are conscious people operating in a complex, socio-cultural environment. The processes of social categorization and stereotyping of the profession are not the only ones due to its historical perception. They enter the sphere of intersubjective experiences and sensations of individuals as members of specific communities ("I'm a policeman"). The "identity" thinking is supplemented by an individual point of view—i.e., beliefs and judgments about oneself as a police officer. This fact further complicates the imprecise meaning of the term "professional identity"—also in relation to other professions—which leads to many doubts and ambiguities related to what this term means.

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1. See: Obwieszczenie Marszałka Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 1 października 2021 r. w sprawie ogłoszenia jednolitego tekstu ustawy o Policji [Announcement of the Speaker of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of October 1, 2021 on the announcement of the uniform text of the Police Act]. DzU z 2021 r. poz. 1882; Ustawa z dnia 2 grudnia 2021 r. o szczególnych zasadach wynagradzania osób realizujących zadania z zakresu cyberbezpieczeństwa [Act of December 2, 2021 on special rules for remunerating persons performing cybersecurity tasks]. DzU z 2021 r. poz. 2333; Ustawa z dnia 17 grudnia 2021 r. o zmianie niektórych ustaw w związku z powołaniem Centralnego Biura Zwalczania Cyberprzestępczości [Act of December 17, 2021 amending certain acts in connection with the establishment of the Central Bureau for Combating Cybercrime]. DzU z 2021 r. poz. 2447; Ustawa z dnia 17 grudnia 2021 r. o ustanowieniu „Programu modernizacji Policji, Straży Granicznej, Państwowej Straży Pożarnej i Służby Ochrony Państwa w latach 2022–2025", o ustanowieniu „Programu modernizacji Służby Więziennej w latach 2022–2025" oraz o zmianie ustawy o Policji i niektórych innych ustaw [Act of December 17, 2021 on the establishment of the „Program for the modernization of the Police, Border Guard, State Fire Service and State Protection Service in the years 2022–2025", on the establishment of the „Program for the modernization of the Prison Service in the years 2022–2025" and on amending the Act on Police and certain other acts]. DzU z 2021 r. poz. 2448; Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 2022 r. o obronie Ojczyzny [Act of March 11, 2022 on the defense of the homeland]. DzU z 2022 r. poz. 655; Ustawa z dnia 12 maja 2022 r. o zmianie ustawy o zaopatrzeniu emerytalnym żołnierzy zawodowych oraz ich rodzin, ustawy o zaopatrzeniu emerytalnym funkcjonariuszy Policji, Agencji Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, Agencji Wywiadu, Służby Kontrwywiadu Wojskowego, Służby Wywiadu Wojskowego, Centralnego Biura Antykorupcyjnego, Straży Granicznej, Straży Marszałkowskiej, Służby Ochrony Państwa, Państwowej Straży Pożarnej, Służby Celno- -Skarbowej i Służby Więziennej oraz ich rodzin oraz niektórych innych ustaw [Act of May 12, 2022 amending the Act on the pension provision of professional soldiers and their families, the Act on the pension provision of Police officers, the Internal Security Agency, the Intelligence Agency, the Military Counterintelligence Service, the Military Intelligence Service, the Central Anticorruption Bureau, the Border Guard, the Guard Marshal's Office, State Protection Service, State Fire Service, Customs and Tax Service and Prison Service and their families and certain other acts]. DzU z 2022 r. poz. 1115; Ustawa z dnia 7 lipca 2022 r. o finansowaniu społecznościowym dla przedsięwzięć gospodarczych i pomocy kredytobiorcom [Act of July 7, 2022 on crowdfunding for business ventures and assistance to borrowers]. DzU z 2022 r. poz. 1488; Ustawa z dnia 5 sierpnia 2022 r. o zmianie ustawy — Kodeks karny wykonawczy oraz niektórych innych ustaw [Act of August 5, 2022 amending the Act—Executive Penal Code and certain other acts]. DzU z 2022 r. poz. 1855.

The specific type of the profession, which is service in police structures, is always related to the state's protective function ("As policemen, we protect public safety and order"). The work of a police officer is based on the protection of goods, which is guaranteed by the law. A police officer performing his duties is often the first interpreter and executor of legal provisions related to public safety and order. The subjective perception of oneself as a police officer is accompanied by the external perception — the social assessment of the actions of the police officer and the police as an institution.

Research conducted by Andrzej Dziedzic indicates that, according to the interviewed police officers, their job satisfaction was diminished mainly by bad relations with their superiors, having to perform too many duties, receiving disciplinary punishment on a regular basis, and being rushed into performing unexpected tasks. Other demotivators related to the work of a police officer include unclear rules of evaluation by superiors as well as a sense of uncertainty resulting from acting without proper information and a clearly defined goal (Dziedzic 2013).

Identity affects the operation of police officers and the police as an organization. It is assumed that the following factors are of key importance for professional identity: professional competence, interpersonal relations, working conditions and organizational culture.

1 Methodology

The subject of the research was the professional identity of Polish policemen. The choice of the topic was determined by research and practical considerations. A police officer is a specific profession. Policemen's professional role includes not only participation in social processes regarding public security but also shaping specific attitudes. Police officers should be characterized by a high degree of awareness of the processes in which they participate, and a high degree of self-awareness. One of the conditions for a good performance of the professional role is the achievement of both individual identity ("I'm a policeman"), and group identity ("we are policemen").

The main objective of the work was to identify the key elements of the Polish police officer's identity that contribute to the effectiveness of the organization. The research objective was to identify the factors in the workplace that affect the formation of a police officer's professional identity

The study makes use of secondary sources (the literature on the subject) and primary sources (data gathered in the authors' questionnaire based on the diagnostic survey method). Research began in January 2021 and was completed in July 2021. The (anonymous) survey covered 1,054 police officers. The selection of respondents was random. The sample was representative of the entire general population of Polish police officers. In 2021, there were 97,874 police officers employed in the police. The authors assumed a 95% confidence level, a maximum error of 5% and a fraction size of 0.5. The minimum sample was 383 people. The structure of the sample also corresponded to the general population. The collected data was analyzed using standard data analysis tools.

2 Results

2.1 Interpersonal relations

Interpersonal relations are an everyday element in the work of a police officer because it is a profession focused on working with people. There are various connections between policemen, which are expressed in their thoughts, feelings and views. These relationships are part of the organizational culture. Organizational culture has many definitions. It is considered to be a certain set of norms, behaviors and systems of values and meanings that are characteristic of a given institution and distinguish it from others (Gierszewski and Pieczywok 2020). The respondents were asked how they assessed the police culture. The answers obtained using the survey questionnaire are presented in table 1 (on next page).

A very large percentage of the respondents (52.14%) have no opinion on this aspect. This could be due to the lack of a specific cultural pattern of the police, which may be surprising. Organizational culture has many significant functions. It is of great importance in determining the identity

of police officers, because, among others, facilitating a better understanding of the goals and tasks set, it unifies methods and criteria for evaluating subordinates and integrates the environment. Organizational culture is a certain interpretive filter of professional identity. The higher the organizational culture, the higher the professional identity.

Table 1. The number and percentage of indications in the context of assessing the cultural pattern of the police

Assessment type	n	%
Not enough	49	4.65
Enough	204	19.37
No opinion	549	52.14
All right	225	21.37
Very good	26	2.47
Total	1,053	100.00

Interpersonal (i.e., horizontal), relationships are based on the trust of colleagues. Establishing relationships between police officers is an important element of identity formation. Interpersonal relationships can play a key role in shaping professional identity. The respondents were also asked how they assessed their attitude towards their colleagues. A summary of the answers is given in table 2. The vertical relationship most often concerns formal messages flowing between employees in order to achieve the assumed goals, transfer information and instructions, as well as signaling matters requiring special attention or solving a problem. The vast majority of the respondents (75.55%) positively assess their attitude towards each other in the structures of the police. Nearly 24.00% describe this ratio as neutral. Positive interpersonal relations between police officers have an impact on their commitment to their duties.

Table 2. Evaluation of police officers' interpersonal relations (horizontal)

Assessment type	n	%
Negative	6	0.57
Neutral	251	23.88
Positive	794	75.55
Total	1,051	100.00

The next question asked of the respondents was how they assessed their relationship to their supervisors. All the answers given are presented in table 3. Creating conditions for shaping identity is an entire sphere of the superiors' activities, consisting mainly of the proper organization of work, motivating the subordinates, and coordination and proper assignment of tasks. The data obtained by means of the survey questionnaire indicate that the vast majority of the respondents working in the structures of the police (i.e., 74.76%), positively assess the subordinate-superior relationship.

Table 3. Evaluation of relations between police officers and superiors (vertical)

Assessment type	n	%
Negative	13	1.23
Neutral	253	24.00
Positive	788	74.76
Total	1,054	100.00

Superiors are of fundamental importance for shaping the professional identity of a police officer. The decision-making system and professional identity are closely related. Formalized, politicized or bureaucratic decision-making processes hinder the formation of professional identity.

2.2 Evaluation of working conditions

The concept of a police officer's service in conditions that are particularly onerous or harmful to health has not been legally defined. The only legal act that lists the cases of the conditions of service in question is the regulation of the minister responsible for internal affairs. The profession of a police officer is a high-risk profession. In terms of risk and danger, it is among the leading stressful professions. In the study, the respondents were rated in the context of their answer to the question how they assessed the service in relation to exposure to stress. The answers are presented in table 4.

Exposing a police officer to a constant and high level of stress in the workplace has serious consequences, including a high rate of sickness absence, decrease in efficiency, difficulties in adapting, poor interpersonal relationships, and deterioration of mental and physical health. The consequences of professional stress of a police officer may manifest themselves in a weaker sense of professional identity. It is gratifying to see that for over 65.30% of the respondents stress is irrelevant in their professional work, and "only" for 12.36% it has a negative impact.

Table 4. Evaluation of the police service in relation to exposure to stress

Assessment type	n	%
Negative	130	12.36
Neutral	687	65.30
Positive	235	22.34
Total	1,052	100.00

A change in the police can be defined as a transition of the organization from its previous state to a different one. Changes in the police can be treated as forced (e.g., political) and mobilizing (e.g., strategic) changes. The respondents were asked how they assessed the changes that have taken place in the police over the last five years. A summary of the results is given in table 5.

For 66.26% of the surveyed officers, the assessment of the changes in the police that have taken place over the last five years is neutral. Only 28.35% of the respondents evaluate these changes positively. A well-managed organization should be dominated by developmental changes, the purpose of which is to significantly improve its structure and efficiency, rather than its political subordination, as suggested by some studies.

Hence the respondents were asked the question about the apolitical character of the Police. The results are presented in table 6. Analyzing the results obtained by means of the survey questionnaire regarding the changes that have taken place in the last five years in the context of apoliticism, it should be emphasized that a very large percentage of the police officers (27.62% of the responses) negatively assess these changes, and about 70.00% of the respondents have an indifferent attitude.

Table 5. Evaluation of changes taking place in the police

Assessment type	n	%
Negative	49	5.38
Neutral	603	66.26
Positive	258	28.35
Total	910	100.00

Table 6. Evaluation of changes taking place in the police—its apolitical character

Assessment type	n	%
Negative	250	27.62
Neutral	638	70.50
Positive	17	1.88
Total	905	100.00

Evaluation of the changes in terms of ideology rather than social service strongly limits a police officer's sense of professional identity. It is organizational, technological and personal changes that play a major role in the professional identity of policemen. As for political changes, most policemen treat them indifferently.

2.3 Evaluation of performed tasks

One of the manifestations of the changes taking place in the police and affecting the professional identity of a police officer are social expectations and requirements of superiors. The evaluation of police officers' performance takes into account their personal qualities, behavior, and above all, the tasks they perform.

The respondents were asked how they assessed their performance of the tasks and official activities assigned to them. The list of the answers is given in table 7. Police officers generally assess their job tasks as good (65.17% of the responses) and very good (8.49% of the responses). A high percentage of the respondents (21.95% of the responses) chose the answer "Hard to say." Job evaluation may be a basis for determining the professional identity of a police officer. "I'm a policeman, so I have to do my job well." Professional identity affects the evaluation of policemen's activities. At the same time, the level of task performance is important from the point of view of the established goals and mission of the police as an organization.

Table 7. Evaluation of police officers' own achievements in the context of the performance of the tasks and official activities assigned to them

Assessment type	n	%
Enough	46	4.39
Hard to say	230	21.95
All right	683	65.17
Very good	89	8.49
Total	1,048	100.00

The respondents were also asked how they assessed their independence and initiative in the implementation of official tasks and activities. The answers are given in table 8. Independent police officers are those who decide on their own how to carry out the task, take responsibility for themselves and, above all, are able to organize their work. A very high percentage of police officers assess their independence and initiative in the process aimed at performing official tasks and activities as good (62.96%) or very good (12.63%). 11.87% of the respondents declared a satisfactory assessment of their activities in the discussed context.

An engaged policeman who shows initiative is not only an effective employee but also has a strong sense of professional identity ("I am a policeman"). Committed policemen speak positively about their work, associate their professional future with it and are motivated to do more than specified in their brief.

Table 8. Assessment of individual independence and initiative in the context of tasks and official activities

Assessment type	n	%
Enough	125	11.87
Hard to say	132	12.54
All right	663	62.96
Very good	133	12.63
Total	1,053	100.00

The respondents were asked how they assessed their creativity and ability to cooperate in a team. The answers are given in table 9. Nearly 64.00% of the respondents declare that they assess their creativity and teamwork skills as good (48.76%) or very good (14.86%). This lower

rating, compared to the assessment of independent tasks, may be due to the fact that the police is dominated by hierarchical structures. Perhaps consideration should be given to replacing them with "self-managing" teams. This may result in an increased sense of professional identity ("We policemen feel part of the organization — i.e., the police").

Professional identity can be maintained through the possibility of creative action. The Public Relations Department should create a specific mirror in which police officers look at themselves and evaluate, confirm and recognize themselves as culturally distinct entities interested in creative implementation of the statutory tasks of the police.

Table 9. Individual assessment of creativity and teamwork skills

Assessment type	n	%
Enough	191	18.19
Hard to say	191	18.19
All right	512	48.76
Very good	156	14.86
Total	1,050	100.00

2.4 Assessment of professional identity

Professional identity is also related to the distinctive attributes of the organization, including its core values and, more broadly, its organizational culture and services or products. For police officers, identity may mean acceptance of the organization's distinctive features, including its status in comparison to other institutions. Often "media" events or political decisions may challenge the distinguishing features of the organization (apoliticalism, service to society), thus threatening the existing perception of professional identity.

The survey asked the respondents to what extent they identified with the police. ("We are policemen.") The list of the answers is given in table 10. A surprisingly small percentage of the police officers identify with their organization (nearly 55% chose the "rather yes" and "definitely yes" options). As many as 35.14% of the respondents chose the "no opinion" option. Strong identification with the police influences policemen's professional identity and thus proactive actions in the organization.

Table 10. Identification of the respondents with the police as an organization

Assessment type	n	%
Definitely not	4	0.38
I don't think so	102	9.69
No opinion	370	35.14
Rather yes	380	36.09
Definitely yes	197	18.71
Total	1,053	100.00

The respondents were asked how they assessed their professional identity. ("I am a police officer.") The list of the answers is given in table 11 (on next page). The identity perceived by the respondents concerns the characteristics of the organization that they consider to be the main ones, distinguishing the police from other organizations and being permanent. However, 46.06% of the respondents had difficulty in defining their individual professional identity, and only 47.39 defined it at a high level. In addition to the influence of professional identity on thinking about the goals of the organization in a strategic and offensive, rather than political and defensive, way, there is also the question of the choice of the profession.

The respondents were asked whether the choice of the profession of a police officer was a well-thought-out decision, a decision to continue family tradition, or an accidental decision for them.

Table 11. Assessment of policemen's professional identity awareness

Assessment type	n	%
Low	69	6.55
Hard to say	485	46.06
High	499	47.39
Total	1,053	100.00

The answers are given in table 12. Choosing the profession of a police officer means choosing a specific professional and social role. For 43.45% of the respondents it was a conscious choice, and for almost 41% it was accidental. The choice of the profession of a police officer should be part of a broader life project related to the projection of professional identity. Being based on this identity, it is a process of deliberately selecting and pursuing desirable and feasible goals in accordance with one's convictions and the principles of the organization.

Table 12. Reasons for choosing the profession of a police officer

Assessment type	n	%
No answer	2	0.19
At the suggestion of other people	189	17.93
Random	326	30.93
Conscious	458	43.45
Family tradition	79	7.50
Total	1054	100.00

The respondents were asked to rate their job satisfaction. Their answers are presented in table 13. More than 52% of the respondents are rather satisfied or very satisfied with their professional work. Only less than 10% of them are dissatisfied or rather dissatisfied. Nearly 38% have no opinion on this issue. The assessment of job satisfaction has not only an individual dimension (the satisfaction of a police officer), but, above all, a collective dimension (the social assessment of the police). Job satisfaction affects the quality and effectiveness of the tasks performed as well as the efficiency of the organization.

Table 13. Evaluation of job satisfaction

Assessment type	n	%
Dissatisfied	26	2.47
Rather dissatisfied	75	7.13
No opinion	399	37.93
Rather pleased	502	47.72
Very pleased	50	4.75
Total	1,052	100.00

3 Spearman correlation

In the context of the analysis of relationships between variables, the Spearman correlation was used. Due to editorial restrictions, detailed results are not included. The collected data allowed the authors to draw some conclusions. It should be pointed out that the vast majority of the analyzed correlations were statistically significant; the vast majority of them were positive—i.e., the higher the assessments of one's identity and task-orientedness, the higher the scores in the remaining variables. One of the exceptions was the last question, which was about considering changing the type of service. Here, the more the respondents identified with the profession of a police officer and the higher they assessed their task-oriented nature, the less they declared their intention to

change the service. The analysis of the collected data allows for the formulation of the thesis that the identity of police officers significantly affects the performance of their tasks, which are aimed at ensuring public safety and order. This performance depends primarily on competency requirements, interpersonal relations, specific working conditions, performance of tasks and business activities, creativity, identification with the professional group, satisfactory implementation of the professional path, and appropriate motivation.

Conclusion

Professional identity is an issue of great interest to both theoreticians and practitioners of management, sociology, psychology, and, recently, security sciences. The importance of professional identity and the factors determining it is particularly great in the case of professions with a social mission. The profession of a police officer is undoubtedly such a socially important profession. Satisfaction with the work of this dispositional group has not only an individual dimension (a policeman's identity), but above all, a collective dimension (organizational identity). Working in the police is associated with certain values. It defines the area of the social identification of an individual and an organization. A police officer is a person that defines his or her place in society. The ongoing changes and current conditions do not always enable policemen to correctly identify with the service they perform. Increasingly, the question "Who are you?" which is answered "I'm a policeman" is replaced by the question "What do you do?" the answer to which should be equally unequivocal: "I serve society." The professional identity of police officers can be understood as a set of goals, principles and operating strategies characteristic of the police as an organization and individual police officers, distinguishable from other institutions and professions.

The conducted research shows that the professional identity of a police officer affects the quality and effectiveness of the work performed. The study identified the factors that influence professional identity. According to the authors of the article, the factors that are particularly important in the case of police officers are those related to professional competence and interpersonal relations. This results, among others, from the fact that a police officer needs contact with other people for the proper performance of his or her tasks. A police officer interacts with other people ("clients," colleagues, superiors) on a daily basis. Therefore, it is not surprising that interpersonal relations at work, the motives for joining the police, the quality of task performance etc. are important for professional identity. The conducted research allows us to formulate the following conclusions:

- The competence acquired in connection with improving the knowledge and skills of police officers shapes their personal, relational and professional identity.
- The interpersonal relations of policemen are focused primarily on the implementation of assigned tasks rather than on building their professional identity.
- Specific working conditions in the police, such as stress, pressure, and changes, have a negative impact on building the professional identity of police officers.
- Professional achievements are important for the professional identity of police officers.
- Professional identification is related to satisfaction and the possibility of pursuing a chosen professional path.
- The choice of the profession of a police officer, as long as it is a well thought-out rather than an accidental decision, has an impact on shaping policemen's professional identity.

The authors came to the final conclusion that professional identity can be guided and managed. In this respect, great importance should be attached to the culture of the police as an organization and to leadership. Leaders are able to change police officers' perception of their professional identity in positive and negative ways. There is a connection between the professional identity of a police officer and the structure of the organization. The police is associated with a hierarchical formal structure of a mechanistic nature. The activities of superiors aimed at strengthening the professional identity of police officers should constitute an important element of personnel policy in the police. They affect the well-being of police officers as a dispositional group, and thus the implementation of the goals and tasks of this organization. The professional identity of a police officer is not a "closed" construct, so it is worth conducting further research on this concept.

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