

# Good and Bad Cops – How Do American and Swedish Police Officers Perceive Policing?

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## Abstract

*Police officers in various countries utilize a wide range of policing strategies, for example, some countries practice de-escalation strategies when encountering conflicts, while others use militarized approaches. This article aims to understand how police officers describe good and bad policing and how these descriptions can be linked to policing approaches and strategies. The data consists of 52 qualitative interviews with American and Swedish police officers. Findings indicate that officers describe good and bad policing in relation to the following three aspects of their occupation: how they manage their first encounter with civilians, how well they manage their and others' emotions, and their professionalism. Overall, American and Swedish officers describe similar characteristics of good and bad policing, both reflecting attributes which can be associated with de-escalating strategies.*

**Keywords:** police legitimacy, police conduct, American police, Swedish police, perceptions.

## 1 Introduction

There is a crisis of legitimacy in regard to the police in several countries. Police officers are often perceived as untrustworthy and either incapable or unwilling to aid citizens in need (Tankebe, 2013), which can ultimately impact the public's perceptions of the police's legitimacy (Lee et al., 2015). The ability or willingness to aid citizens in need can, among other factors, be linked to approaches to policing that impact how policing is implemented and practised in communities (Scott, 2010; Taylor et al., 2011). However, it can also be discussed in relation to what is considered "good" or "bad" policing, meaning a value-judgment of police procedures, practices and conduct. Although studies have explored the public's perceptions of effective policing and police, in general, less is known about how police officers perceive policing. More specifically, there is limited literature that contextualizes perceptions of good and bad policing in relation to varying approaches to policing in different countries.

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Michelle N. Eliasson

This article investigates what constitutes a good or a bad officer in the eyes of police officers. By exploring cross-national differences in the United States and Sweden, the study aims to understand more about police officers' perceptions of good and bad policing and whether these perceptions can be linked to variations in approaches to policing that can be identified in the two countries. Specifically, the research questions framing this article are as follows: 1) How do American and Swedish police officers describe good and bad officers and policing? 2) Do police officers link these perceptions to approaches to policing? I answer these questions by inductively analysing 52 semi-structured interviews with American and Swedish police officers.

The United States and Sweden offer compelling comparative examples to further examine policing for many reasons. For example, in 2020, 73% of the Swedish population reported that they had trust in the police, according to the survey *Förtroende Barometeren* (Media Akademin, 2021), while in the United States, only 48% reported that they trusted the police (Brenan, 2020). These numbers highlight the wide gap between Swedes' and Americans' levels of trust in the police. Many aspects can impact variations in trust in the police, which can ultimately influence perceptions of police legitimacy. Thus, it is important to understand more about the factors that can impact trust or perceptions of the police and cause cross-national variations.

Additionally, there are variations in how both countries approach policing, which can be exemplified through notions such as organizational structure, policing strategies and tactics. By understanding more about officers' perceptions of good and bad policing and possible links to policing approaches, we can learn more about whether there are cross-national differences and/or similarities in perceptions of policing and whether these descriptions can be linked to different policing approaches utilized in Sweden and the United States. The implications of learning more about how officers perceive good and bad policing and whether policing approaches may be linked to these perceptions tell us more about how police operate and their views of ideal and non-ideal ways to police and conduct themselves, which could lead to more knowledge on how to change conduct and improve police legitimacy. Previous empirical work (Chan et al., 2003; Eliasson, 2021; Fielding, 1984) has shown that officers perceive knowledge originating from other officers as an essential part of their learning and often value it higher than theoretical knowledge learned in the academy. Thus, the findings in this article could make substantial contributions to future learning materials for police since they are based on officers' perception of good and bad police conduct, which could mean that officers would be more perceptive of the information and use it to inform their professional conduct.

## 2 Background

Scholars have been extensively studying policing in a wide range of encounters since the 1960s. Prior research has, for example, examined police conduct (Björk, 2005; Delehanty et al., 2017), citizen encounters (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; Insler

et al., 2019; Schclarek & Keskinen, 2022), use of violence or force (Jones, 2017; Knutsson & Strype, 2003; Lawson, 2019; Obasogie & Newman, 2017), organizational structure, power hierarchies and training (Roberg et al., 2015) and misconduct (Gottschalk et al., 2012). However, during the last two decades, attention has been focused on understanding the efficiency of policing better (Torres, 2017; Zahnow et al., 2017) as well as police legitimacy (Lee et al., 2015; Peyton et al., 2019; Tankebe, 2013) in various cultural, social and geographic contexts. While attention has generally focused on understanding the public's perception of policing, only a few scholars have explored officers' perceptions of good and bad policing (Inzunza & Wikström, 2019; Muir, 1979; Storms et al., 1990). Thus, although the already extensive body of policing literature provides a robust discussion about the various aspects that impact how officers behave and how to assess the quality and efficiency of the policing strategies that are practised, it also exposes a knowledge gap. This study aims to fill this gap in three ways: first, by discussing the conceptualization of good and bad officers; second, by doing a cross-national analysis of these perceptions; and, third, by examining whether these perceptions are linked to different policing approaches and strategies. In what follows, I provide a limited discussion of current empirical and theoretical aspects of police officers' role, conduct and policing strategies to conceptualize the many aspects that influence different approaches to policing.

### *2.1 Police Officers' Role and Conduct*

To learn more about different approaches to policing, it is important to understand more clearly police officers' role in society and how this can impact their conduct. According to Ervin Goffman (1959), individuals act on the basis of roles in their everyday interactions. In these roles, individuals perform and behave in a specific manner to convey an image to others. They enact these roles "individually" or together with others who have common commitments to the performance or image conveyed. For police officers, this means that their occupational roles are both impacted by their perceptions of how they should conduct their work but also how colleagues behave.

Furthermore, Goffman argues that although individuals have certain roles they create, they also take on already established roles with pre-existing ideas of how they should act. Police officers enter pre-existing occupational roles when they assume their jobs. Their uniforms signal their profession as officers and a set of expectations determining how they are supposed to behave as officers. Most often, officers are viewed as agents of control who are supposed to practice procedural justice and help members of society. However, some officers have failed to fulfil the expectations and responsibilities of their roles as gatekeepers and representatives of the criminal justice system.

During the last few decades, scholars have found a decrease in the public's perceptions of police legitimacy (Tankebe, 2013). There can be many reasons for this decrease. For example, the United States has witnessed many violent encounters and reports of police brutality towards citizens, and scholars argue that positive interactions impact perceptions of police legitimacy positively and negative interactions impact perceptions negatively (Peyton et al., 2019). Thus,

Michelle N. Eliasson

approaches to policing exemplified through strategies that impact how officers interact with civilians can contribute to the public's perceptions of police and potentially decrease the legitimacy of police officers. Although many police officers act according to law and organizational guidelines, their performance is still impacted by social and organizational norms and the pre-existing roles created by these norms. Goffman's (1959) theoretical perspective is relevant to contextualizing the dynamic relationship between pre-existing roles associated with how officers behave and perceptions that individuals have of how officers should act in their occupational roles.

## 2.2 *Perceptions of Policing*

There are various ways to conceptualize the quality of policing (Fielding & Innes, 2006). Among them are crime reduction (Telep & Weisburd, 2012), proximity to violence (Zahnw et al., 2017), effectiveness (Kochel et al., 2013), public's perceptions of safety and trust and responsiveness (Torres, 2017) or complaints against officers (Henson et al., 2010). Most of these studies focus on either the public's perception of the police or the frequency of crimes, ignoring officers' views of policing. Among the few studies that specifically examine police officers' perceptions, Muir's (1979) case study is fundamental, in that it finds that a good officer must have an understanding of human suffering and morally manage how to reach just ends with coercive methods. Overall, most of the existing studies are quantitative and explain how officers conceptualize and measure successful or good qualities. For example, Storms, Penn and Tenzell found that American officers perceived that the "ideal police officer should be quite good, decisive, active, strong, fast, right, responsive, masculine, flexible, and considerate" (1990, p. 40). Another quantitative study conducted on perceptions of European police students found that the interaction between citizens and officers is one of the most important factors in assessing the quality of police officers. More specifically, police students from Sweden and Norway highlighted the importance of good relationships with citizens compared to police students in other countries (Inzunza & Wikström, 2019).

Hence, one problematic aspect of current scholarship is the absence of the officers' voices. Current studies lack the officers' perspectives of what good and bad policing are because none of them specifically ask officers to define good/successful qualities in a police officer. Owing to the quantitative approach of most of these studies, officers responded to predetermined close-ended responses. Because of the lack of inclusion of officers' definitions and perceptions, there is a lack of insight into how officers themselves describe and view successful and less successful characteristics of a police officer, and this article aims to fill this gap.

## 2.3 *Policing in the United States and Sweden*

There are many differences between the police in the United States and in Sweden. Firstly, the Swedish police have a centralized power and organizational model and only have one national police force that is linked to the state. This means that the Swedish police are not a private entity or organization and that all police officers in Sweden work for the state and adhere to the same laws and formal procedures

across the country. In the United States, on the other hand, numerous police departments work in different geographical areas and jurisdictions and adhere to varying laws (i.e. federal and state) across the country (Gaines & Kappeler, 2011).

Secondly, the training of officers varies between the two countries. In Sweden, the police academy is two-and-a-half years, that is two years of college-level courses and six months of practical training. Several universities host police academies across Sweden but adhere to standardized training guidelines (Eliasson, 2021). In the United States, the police academy can last between 2 and 6 months (Gaines & Kappeler, 2011) and does not use standardized guidelines to the same extent as Swedish police academies.

A third difference is the use of violence when interacting with citizens. According to the Police and Public Contact Survey conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 2% of the 9 million people who encountered the police in 2015 in the United States reported experiencing threats or use of force by the officer (BJS, 2018). During the last few decades, this violence has specifically been directed towards blacks and non-whites (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; Desmond et al., 2016; Knox & Mummolo, 2020; Obasogie & Newman, 2017). Empirical research on the use of violence by Swedish police is very limited; however a few studies exist (Knutsson & Strype, 2003). For example, Knutsson (2006) found that between 1985 and 2002, police fired between 19 and 35 shots per year. During the same period, there were generally seven incidents in which officers harmed the individuals they encountered after firing their guns. Between 0 and 3 individuals died because of an average of 1.1 shots per officer annually. Despite the scarce literature on Swedish police officers' use of violence, numerous studies that compare European countries with the United States have found violent encounters ending in lethal outcomes to be fewer in Europe (Jones, 2017). Although Sweden's encounters between police and citizens tend to be less violent than in other countries (Snortum, 1983), non-whites are often exposed to more differential treatments by the Swedish police than whites (Jones, 2017; Schclarek & Keskinen, 2022; Wästerfors et al., 2020; Östlund, 2013). Overall, these three aspects, among others, can impact the way policing is practised in Sweden and the United States. They can influence how decisions are made within the police department and the different approaches to policing, strategies, and tactics that are implemented and practised.

### 2.3.1 *Policing Approaches and Strategies*

Approaches to policing vary across continents, countries and even regions within a country. Different approaches to policing could, for example, be reflected in the various policing strategies used by police officers. Policing strategies reflect what police agencies or organizations do to decrease crime rates, help communities and increase safety within a geographical area; however, policing strategies also impact how officers interact with civilians (Scott, 2010).

The American police force is often described as having a militarized approach (Radil et al., 2017), compared with their counterparts in other countries such as Sweden. This manifests itself in several ways, such as specialized units (Stockley, 1988), weapons used, the organizational ranks, and how conflicts are resolved in

Michelle N. Eliasson

the field (Kraska, 1996; Insler et al., 2019). American police also utilize physically aggressive interventions such as chokeholds, strangleholds and other neck restraints. Empirical studies suggest that increased militarization of the police corresponds with an increase in suspects' death (Lawson, 2019) and that possessing more military equipment increases the number of civilians killed (Delehanty et al., 2017). In contrast, Swedish policing strategies have, for a long time, focused on de-escalation and the utilization of rhetoric to defuse conflict (Wahlström, 2007). Thus, Swedish police use strategies that avoid violent confrontations by utilizing verbal conflict resolution and de-escalation strategies (Wahlström, 2007), whereas American police often apply confrontational militarized strategies that highlight combat.

Scholars have thoroughly explored policing strategies (Bates et al., 2017; Braga et al., 2015; Krüsi et al., 2016; Roberg et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2011), assessing notions such as their efficiency, implications and implementation. The consensus is that militarized strategies often do not lead to less violence, less violent interactions between civilians and the police or higher perceptions of trust or legitimacy towards the police. Despite this robust contribution to policing scholarship, the existing scholarly literature has not explored the possible connection between police strategies and officers' perceptions of what a good officer should be like. I propose that American officers may have a different set of characteristics in mind for what makes a good officer compared with a Swedish officer because their policing strategies are different. By exploring how good and bad policing are perceived in both countries, we can better understand whether aspects such as policing strategies impact the way officers perceive good and bad policing. This is important since policing strategies vary across the world and are often discussed as one of the factors contributing to the use of force and violence (Delehanty et al., 2017; Lawson, 2019).

It is essential to highlight that policing strategies exist within an organizational, political and social context, and thus the way policing strategies are operationalized is impacted by a wide range of factors that officers on an individual level cannot impact. Furthermore, it is important to note that policing strategies should not be dichotomized into two binary categories that reflect violent and non-violent strategies. Thus, this article does not argue that American police utilize violent strategies while Swedish police do not, but rather highlights that the two countries have displayed different approaches and strategies that can promote different ways of handling de-escalation, use of force, and overall interactions with citizens.

### 3 Method

The study used an inductive qualitative approach to understand more clearly how police officers perceive good and bad policing. The data used here comes from a larger study, conducted in 2018, that examined Swedish and American officers' perceptions of their occupation, knowledge and victimization which has rendered other publications (Eliasson, 2020, 2021, 2022). The data consists of 52 semi-structured interviews with 27 Swedish officers and 25 American officers,

lasting between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours obtained through purposeful snowball sampling (Esterberg, 2002). Gatekeepers working for various local police stations were identified through a generic email sent to the administrative staff at the police stations. Officers who expressed interest in participating were then contacted and asked to send out a request for additional participants to their colleagues. The prerequisite for participants was that they had to be actively working as officers and operate in a geographically accessible area.

A qualitative inductive approach was used as part of the specific aim of understanding more about how officers themselves define and describe good and bad policing. Specifically semi-structured interviews were used because it renders successful tools to understand how and what language officers use when describing good and bad policing without confining them to specific questions or labels predetermined by the researcher (Esterberg, 2002). Some of the questions posed to the officers were as follows: How would you describe a good police officer? How would you describe a bad police officer? How did you learn to police the way you police today? Thus, the questions posed during the interviews were intentionally posed in a general manner with the aim of avoiding any suggestion of specific characteristics or of leading the participants to a specific answer. The informed consent was sought verbally, and the officers were asked if the interview could be recorded. They were also notified that they could at any time during the interview withdraw their consent. The interviews were conducted in private spaces such as in offices at local police stations and private residences.

### 3.1 *Swedish Sample*

Sweden has seven police districts, and all of the officers interviewed in this study worked in the southern district in both urban and suburban areas. The reason for placing the focus on the southern region was geographical feasibility and its representative range of urban and suburban settings. The Swedish interviews were collected between March and May 2018, and the sample consisted of 14 males and 13 females. The officers' ages ranged from 27 to 64 years, and their experience in the profession ranged from 2 to 40 years. Of the 27 officers, 13 worked as investigators, 2 as both patrol officers and investigators and 12 worked as patrol officers. In Sweden, civilian workers who did not attend the police academy are employed by the Swedish police most often to handle investigations. In this study, these individuals will be referred to as police employees to indicate that they do not have academy training but conduct tasks similar to police officers. The civilian employees were included in the study to reflect the true staffing set-up of the Swedish police.

There was no reference to race and ethnic adherence in view of local cultural and social norms during the Swedish interviews. In Sweden, asking about an individual's race can be interpreted as differential treatment or a sign of judgment on racial and ethnic adherence. However, based on the researcher's subjective observations, all the respondents could be argued as being "white-passing" (Piper, 1996). This is a limitation of the data, which will be discussed further in the discussion section of the article.

### 3.2 *American Sample*

The interviews with American officers were also collected during the summer of 2018. All the officers worked in the Greater Washington DC area and belonged to two agencies. This geographical region was chosen owing to geographical feasibility and the many policing agencies that exist across the United States. It is essential to understand that these officers represent only a fraction of the many officers that exist. The officers in the American sample work in an urban setting in a very small geographical area, which means that the statements made by these officers may not represent officers working in different other geographical settings in the USA. However, despite these constraints, the findings derived from these interviews could still provide insight into how some American officers think about good and bad policing.

Of the 25 officers in the American sample, 17 were males, and 8 were females. At the time of the interviews, the officers' age ranged from 27 to 50, with the mean age being 38.64. The years of experience ranged from 2 to 24, with the mean years of experience being 12.22 years. About 16 worked as investigators when they were interviewed, whereas 9 worked as patrol officers. Of the 25 officers, 21 identified themselves as "white" or "Caucasian", 2 as "black" or "African American", 1 identified as "Hispanics", and 1 as "Asian American". All officers were asked which race they identified with, and the labels they themselves used were adopted.

### 3.3 *Analytical Process*

All interview data was transcribed and coded using inductive line-by-line coding, with codes being created based on the officers' verbs and adjectives. The inductive line-by-line coding allows the researcher to highlight the officers' own words based on the codes and themes (Saldaña, 2016). Based on the analytical steps, approximately 30 codes emerged. Together with the phrases or lines quoted, three overarching themes covered 80% of the codes, and they are encounters, emotions and professionalism, which will be discussed in the result section.

The analytical process contained three major steps: the first consisted of an analysis of the Swedish sample using the Swedish transcripts. Swedish codes were developed based on the statements officers made and compiled in a codebook (Esterberg, 2002). The second step was an analysis conducted on the American sample on the English transcripts, which generated codes in English that were compiled in a code book. Thirdly, I, a native Swedish speaker, translated the Swedish transcripts into English and analysed both the Swedish and the American samples in English and coded them in English. In the fourth step, I reviewed the Swedish codes from the Swedish sample and created categories based on the codes, reviewed the American sample and created categories based on the English codes, and reviewed all the codes generated for the sample, including both English and American interviews and generated categories (Saldaña, 2016). Based on the categories, I then created themes within the Swedish sample, the American sample and the sample including both countries. This procedure was followed in order to ascertain whether there were overlaps between the categories and to ensure that the categories were consistent. Additionally, to avoid any language discrepancies the Swedish interviews were analysed in both Swedish and English.

## 4 Results

In this section, I will discuss the various aspects that were described by officers when discussing their perceptions of what good and bad policing is and what constitutes a good or bad police officer. Throughout the 52 interviews, three major themes emerged. Firstly, officers explained encounters with civilians; secondly, emotions; and, thirdly, officer's professionalism. I will later describe the similarities and differences in the Swedish and American officers' description of good and bad police officers. It is important to emphasize that the themes that were derived from the data overlap each other, this overlap reflecting the dynamic nature of the behaviours and characteristics that officers view as a part of good and bad policing.

### 4.1 Encounters

The first theme that emerged when officers recounted what good and bad policing was brought up when officers discussed citizen encounters. A majority of the American and Swedish respondents believed that a good officer is a person who helps others.

I think good police officers, you know ... I identify with trying to help the other person (47-year-old American male officer, 24 years of experience)

I think a good police officer is ... first of all, you have to have a good heart. You have to want to help people because that is what we do. Honestly, the number one thing is to want to help. You want to want to help people (38-year-old American male officer, 13 years of experience)

In these statements, the officers suggest that a good officer is someone who possesses the innate desire to help others. Helping is viewed as a function of a good officer and something that a good officer should want to do. Most American and Swedish officers agreed on this attribute. Helping others was mentioned early on in most interviews, suggesting that they potentially perceive helping as one of the main attributes of a good officer.

Both American and Swedish officers emphasized that a good officer should be unbiased and fair when helping people. American officers often used the word unbiased in their description, such as "someone unbiased" (38-year-old American male officer, 16 years of experience), "unbiased, you have to be unbiased" (39-year-old American female officer, 11 years of experience), and "someone fair" (38-year-old American female officer, 12 years of experience). In comparison, Swedish officers gave in-depth explanations of how officers should be unbiased by describing the actions or attitudes of good officers. For example:

A good police officer is also involved and thinks about his/her job, has empathy for people, can handle all kinds of people, understands that there are different classes in society, and can see all people as equal. If I am a rich director who sits in a 10-million-dollar villa or homeless and lives on the street, then as a police

Michelle N. Eliasson

officer, I should be able to talk to them the same way (51-year-old Swedish female police employee, 20 years of experience)

A good police officer for me is someone who is driven and committed, and someone that the public can trust. Someone who gives everyone an honest chance regardless of their background. (31-year-old Swedish male officer, 4 years of experience)

A good cop for me is someone who should listen and have compassion, not judge beforehand. They should not play over because they have the uniform on their own, but a victim is a victim, and it does not matter if it is a drug addict or an alcoholic. You should treat everyone equally from the beginning (44-year-old Swedish female police employee, 4 years of experience)

Swedish officers emphasize how essential it was for good officers to treat everyone equally regardless of their social class, circumstance, or background. One officer elaborated by stating that treating alcoholics or drug addicts the same as others was very important.

In addition, American officers emphasized being level-headed as highly essential. For example, an American officer stated:

You have to be level-headed as much as possible. There can be many times when you get in a situation, and things are evolving so fast. You have to be able to slow it down and take it one step at a time so and be able to prioritize things (39-year-old American female officer, 11 years of experience)

Swedish officers did not consider level-headedness essential for being a good officer but instead thought that being flexible in the situations they encounter in the field was more important:

A good police officer is for me...someone who has life experience and work experience who is stable in himself and who can both change the tempo and take command of a situation but also manage to show a softer side to someone who needs it (34-year-old Swedish female officer, 4 years of experience)

Thus, despite agreeing on being helpful and unbiased, American officers emphasized level-headedness, whereas Swedish officers emphasized flexibility as an essential characteristic of a good officer that is displayed when encountering civilians. This aligns with Storms et al.'s (1990) previous empirical findings.

#### 4.2 Emotions

A majority of the officers explained that good officers should not get personally invested in the encounters, which also contributed to being unbiased. When describing a good police officer, an American officer posited that "somebody that does not get, does not bring their emotions into it. Somebody that can be unbiased" (34-year-old American female officer, 2 years of experience). Many officers

associated emotions with being unable to attain an unbiased nature. However, all of the officers highlighted that only certain types of emotions should not be brought into the encounter. Thus, officers argued that not having certain types of emotions could be considered bad but also that having certain types of emotions could be considered bad. Two Swedish officers explained:

It is about empathy and knowing people that you know how to handle different people and learn to deal with people. Not to be involved too personally but still, show commitment to those you work with (37-year-old Swedish male officer, 11 years of experience)

You cannot shut yourself off, you have to show feelings and empathy for people who have trouble, so do not be a robot but find a good balance in themselves. To be able to give the best treatment in the situation required (39-year-old Swedish female officer, 13 years of experience)

According to many of the American and Swedish officers, emotions could potentially lead to treating individuals in biased ways: “Emotionally involved...Obviously, if they happen to have their own opinion and apply it to their job, whether it is racism or whatever it is, it gets in the way. So not objective” (33-year-old American male officer, 8 years of experience). Thus, the officer’s statements imply that emotions were related to discriminatory behaviour, in regard to how it could cause discriminatory behaviour and how officers handle interactions. Another American officer stated:

If somebody takes her emotions into a situation, somebody that can get heated quickly. They take things personally. If somebody is talking to them the way they do not like, they elevate themselves, it just elevates them, and then it just escalates from there. You cannot take it personally (34-year-old American female officer, 2 years of experience)

Almost all officers emphasized that display of emotions, such as anger, was viewed as a negative characteristic and a sign of bad policing. They explained this reasoning by arguing that displaying certain emotions was viewed as being personally involved in the encounter that officers associated with triggering negative reactions from the officers towards the civilian they were encountering. A majority of the officers frequently used the example of anger and being short-tempered when describing this aspect of bad policing.

Someone short-tempered. Yeah, I guess that would be the first thing that comes to mind as someone who has a short fuse. Just easily upset by situations that might escalate the call (38-year-old American male officer, 6 years of experience)

Someone who only thinks with their anger, or who is too scared to realize what they are doing (37-year-old American female officer, 12 years of experience)

Michelle N. Eliasson

Someone that gets angry straightaway and loud (50-year-old Swedish male officer, 29 years of experience)

Almost half of the officers used the example of anger and being short-tempered when describing emotions that were “bad” to have when conducting policing work. A third emotion mentioned in relation to a bad officer was apathy, mentioned by half of the officers. Swedish and American officers viewed poor policing characteristics as someone who does not care about the people they meet in the street or who is unable to differentiate between “good” and “bad” feelings, such as anger. They mentioned:

Somebody who does not care and comes to calls and, you know, has no sympathy or empathy for anybody (39-year-old American female officer, 8 years of experience)

Not caring about anything, just coming to work, and just caring about a paycheck. This police department is very good. I have not met many officers that I have met who care about coming here and getting a paycheck, and they care about themselves, which is not the kind of attitude you need to have in this kind of job (38-year-old American male officer, 1 year of experience)

I think a police officer is someone who may have joined the ranks because they want to wear the badge and walk in the glory, whatever that means, without having to do the hard work of putting your heart on the line...like actually caring for people. Because if you are just out there doing the work, you do not care about people, you will mismanage your emotions and mismanage the way you perform a job. I do not think there are many people out here because this job is very demanding. So, a lot of those folks get exhausted in it (31-year-old American female officer, 5 years of experience)

All officers emphasized that bad officers only care about their job and not about the people they meet. Officers who only care about getting a paycheck, who do not see the people they interact with from a caring perspective, or who view their job as tasks that need to be completed were often labelled bad officers by the respondents.

Overall, when speaking about emotions, officers argue that a good officer does not get personally involved but keeps a certain distance from their job. These officers still care about the individuals they interact with and do not view them merely as cases. This aligns with Muir’s (1979) findings of officers needing to understand human suffering and Storms et al.’s (1990) findings of good officers being considerate. Furthermore, officers are also not supposed to be short-tempered or show aggression towards the civilians they meet. Many officers insisted that anger and aggression can be avoided by not taking things personally on the job and not bringing their personal life into the job. Good officers show empathy and compassion, while bad officers cannot manage their emotions, especially anger, according to Swedish and American respondents. Altogether, the officers’

statements suggest that emotions are dynamic, in that they can be good in some respects and bad in others.

As for differences in how American officers and Swedish officers refer to emotions in good and bad policing, no major trend emerged. This does not mean that the two groups are homogeneous in their attitudes or beliefs but suggests that there are similarities in how some officers in Sweden and in the USA perceive certain emotions.

#### 4.3 Professionalism

The third overarching theme found among all respondents was their perceptions of professionalism. A majority of the American and Swedish officers associated professionalism with power, as something that could contribute to policing outcomes. When explaining what a bad officer is, an American officer stated: “Somebody that joined because they like the authority, like to, you know, take charge and micromanage people” (50-year-old American male officer, 20 years of experience). According to the officer, a sign of a bad officer was seeking power. This was often discussed using the uniform or badge as a symbol. Officers both in Sweden and in the USA noted that power and authority were symbolized through the uniform and that with this power comes responsibility. When officers used their authority just because they could, they were perceived as “using the uniform” for personal motives and gains. “Illegitimate” use of power and authority made an officer “bad” in the eyes of other officers.

Someone who doesn’t listen and exaggerated because they have the uniform on (44-year-old Swedish female police employee, 7 years of experience)

Bad ones are in it for power for the badge for the car. The uniform is what motivates them... (47-year-old American male officer, 24 years of experience)

Swedish and American officers frowned upon officers who misuse or take advantage of the authority granted to them through the position of law enforcement: “I guess one that abuses their authority to take advantage of other people ... given your position” (38-year-old American male officer, 16 years of experience) and “A bad police officer is someone who needs to assert himself and who is like that macho type” (34-year-old Swedish female officer, 4 years of experience).

Notably, interactions with civilians were very important determinants of good and bad police officers. Both American and Swedish officers explain that good and bad policing was also related to collegial relationships and conduct. For example, one American officer stated: “being lazy and inefficient. It is not one of those things where you can sit and just do nothing” (28-year-old American male officer, 4 years of experience). Laziness was perceived as a bad characteristic, especially when mentioned in relation to not being involved during calls or not being effective in performing tasks. An officer developed this further by stating that a bad officer is not only lazy but “one that does not have that proactive initiative” (46-year-old American male officer, 19 years of experience). Another Swedish officer, with multiple years in service, identified several reasons why lazy officers who did not do

Michelle N. Eliasson

their tasks were considered bad officers. Most of them were related to other co-workers, creating a bad relationship between them and more work for other officers.

A bad one ... a police officer who does not do his job, use threats, and commits crimes to put a person behind bars. Do not do what they should, which means that other colleagues may do the other police officers' tasks. I also think you should be involved in a good work environment. You should try to keep a good mood in your unit because we are all in the same situation. A bad police officer is also someone who does not take responsibility for their actions. You have to work in a way so that you can always stand for what you do (42-year-old Swedish male officer, 18 years of experience)

Altogether, a majority of the American and Swedish officers noted that good officers are not motivated by power or authority and do not take advantage of their "uniform". Thus, being authoritative towards civilians just because one can is a sign of being a bad officer. According to several of the officers, it was also important that good officers were not lazy but performed their tasks efficiently. This suggests that they cared about their job and were proactive because not caring about their work affects the entire team and causes friction. According to officers, the way officers conduct themselves towards civilians and their colleagues is an important factor in determining good and bad policing

American and Swedish officers diverged in highlighting the significance of professionalism in determining good and bad policing. American officers highlighted collegiality as an important factor, while Swedish officers stressed that doing things legally and correctly was important. According to a majority of the American officers interviewed, it was important that officers back up one another, are honest, and trust one another. Honesty was often one of the first words used to depict a good officer.

Well, honesty ... the most important thing ... somebody who lies or embellishes. If you are lying about a small case, you learn about a big case, you know, if you cannot trust somebody, maybe I do not trust him as a partner. If I know that they lie about stupid stuff around the station, can I trust them to be at a call when they say they will back me up or they are going to back me up ... (34-year-old American male officer, 4.5 years of experience)

So, it listens to radio responses and backs people up, and is not afraid to say, Ah, that was my mistake (50-year-old American male officer, 20 years of experience)

None of the Swedish officers mentioned collegiality in the context of honesty and trust as an aspect of good policing. Rather, it was more important to them that officers did things professionally, legally and correctly. More than half of the Swedish officers noted that professionalism was very important. "Professional is probably the most important...being representative, something like that"

(50-year-old Swedish male officer, 29 years of experience). Doing things legally was interpreted in two ways by the officers: Firstly, the officers needed to be knowledgeable in legal texts to apply the right law in situations they encountered in the streets. The second was that the officers themselves had to act legally. When describing legal knowledge, an officer stated:

It is a police officer who can practically interpret the law. I think there should be flow in what you do. You should not be too literal about interpretation because it can be a problem for us. (42-year-old Swedish male officer, 9 years of experience)

Further, a majority of Swedish officers explained that good officers always do things legally or in “the right way”. Officers explained: “Fast, fairly efficient, yet targeted, while the person is doing a good job ... not by cheating or committing crimes to come to a good result. The whole time professional and also legal” (42-year-old Swedish male officer, 18 years of experience) and “A bad officer is someone who does not stick to the law and rules and constantly trample outside what is both okay legal and moral perspective” (31-year-old Swedish male officer, 4 years of experience). More than half of the Swedish officers highlighted that legality is not the only requisite for being a good officer but suggested a dimension beyond legal, which they label as “correct” or “right”. This suggests that morality could be considered an important part of being a good police officer, as highlighted in previous empirical studies (Muir, 1979).

## 5 Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the similarities and differences in how American and Swedish officers view good and bad officers and to identify whether these perceptions could be related to different approaches to policing. Findings affirm some of the desired and undesired policing characteristics and behaviours explored in existing scholarship that for example highlight that officers should be responsive, active, and flexible literature (Storms et al., 1990), and be considerate as well as understand human suffering (Muir, 1979). This study finds that American and Swedish police officers, overall, have similar perceptions of characteristics of good and bad policing, highlighting, firstly, that good policing comes with the desire to help people and being unbiased when providing help to civilians. Secondly, good officers distance themselves from their profession while showing empathy towards individuals they encounter. Bad officers are individuals who are short-tempered and who express their anger during citizen encounters or are biased towards civilians. Thirdly, good officers are proactive and back up others in their unit by doing their job effectively and not displaying laziness. Bad officers, on the other hand, misuse their authoritative position and the power of the uniform and badge to promote themselves and devalue others.

Although many perceptions were similar between the two groups, there were some differences. American officers felt that good officers were level-headed and

Michelle N. Eliasson

backed other officers up. Swedish officers, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of being flexible, conducting their work in a morally and legally legitimate way and knowing how to apply the law correctly.

Overall, the Swedish and American officers' descriptions of good and bad policing are not, line by line, referring to any typical policing strategy. However, when examining the verbs and adjectives used by the officers to explain what good policing is, the two countries lean towards characteristics and behaviours that are more in line with de-escalation strategies and non-violent encounters. Respondents from both countries highlighted that a good officer wants to help people and should do so unbiasedly. These perceptions suggest that there should be more active participation on the officers' part in understanding the situation they are faced with to best solve it. Officers also highlighted that, to facilitate the best possible encounter, civilians should be met by officers with empathy and not short-temperedness or anger. Thus, crimes encountered by the officers should be handled "professionally". This is done, according to the officers, by disconnecting emotionally while practising empathy towards civilians they encounter. Officers emphasize that good officers are proactive and motivated beyond the sake of authority and power. Good officers should not be motivated by the status or power that comes with the badge and should not exercise their powers merely to display power differences in an interaction. This could be argued as an attempt to reinforce de-escalating strategies and reduce the combat situation when encountering civilians. Instead of emphasizing the difference between officers and civilians to enforce control, officers perceive good policing as solving conflicts by reducing differences in power positions.

Since officers from both countries explained good policing similarly, despite different cultural norms and policing strategies, this article argues that there are underlying perceptions of what is considered good policing, which are shared among the two countries, and possibly others. Some implications of these findings are that officers who work in an organization or department where more confrontational and militarized policing methods are used to de-escalate conflicts may not perceive that these strategies are what best reflect good policing. Furthermore, these same officers could potentially adopt de-escalation tactics or strategies that are focused on decreasing the occurrence of violence during the encounter while still adhering to their perceptions of what good policing is. These two implications could potentially bring insight to the fact that although some officers are using more aggressive and confrontational strategies because they are instructed to do so, they may be more open to changing their approaches in certain confrontations if it means their approach would be more in line with their personal beliefs of what good policing is. If officers' behaviour would change, making their encounters less violent, this would perhaps increase the legitimacy of the police again, more specifically in the United States. Police legitimacy is a highly relevant issue in several countries across the world. Perceptions of police legitimacy impact not only the perceptions of the police held by the public but can also influence the way police strategies are practised in various regions. For example, if there are low perceptions of police legitimacy in one region, citizens do not contact police when they are exposed to crime or are unwilling to assist police with information about

crime that occurs in their community. Thus, when the police aim to combat crime in those areas, they may be less successful owing to the lack of collaboration with the local community. Thus, by further exploring how officers themselves view good and bad policing, we can learn more about the different components of what informs police conduct and impacts both internal and external perceptions of legitimacy.

The findings in this article confirm some of the existing scholarship that examines officers' perceptions of the quality of policing (Inzunza & Wikström, 2019; Storms et al., 1990) by highlighting the importance of characteristics such as responsiveness, activeness, flexibility and considerateness. The findings, on the other hand, do not confirm the previous findings that emphasize masculinity and strength. The findings in this article contribute to the existing scholarship by highlighting that perceptions of good policing, although existing in different national contexts, are similar, which could argue that implementing less combative de-escalation strategies would only reinforce the existing idea of what good policing is, especially among American officers.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of socialization among officers, especially in relation to conduct (Chan et al., 2003; Fielding, 1984). The practical implications of these findings are that it could be beneficial for new officers or officers in training to reflect on their perceptions about what good and bad policing are in their eyes and develop tools for how they can actualize these perceptions through their conduct. Additionally, officers could be presented with workshops throughout their careers where they discuss desired and undesired policing habits and procedures and develop strategies for managing situations where the personal perceptions of policing may not align with the current organizational practices and guidelines.

It is important to state that the findings in this article represent the most commonly mentioned aspects discussed during the interviews. Not all of the topics discussed could be included in the article, and this represents one of the limitations of this study. Another limitation is that race, gender and age were not considered major aspects when analysing the depiction of good and bad policing. Thus, there was no attempt to look at variations in perceptions based on sex/gender or years of experience. Furthermore, all but three individuals in the sample were white; hence, these findings do not represent a broader variety of participants' racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition to this, the officers in the American sample are all from the same geographical area in the north-eastern part of the USA. The USA has a wide range of policing agencies that have different sets of strategies and tactics, and thus these findings have to be considered in the context of the geographical setting of the American sample.

In line with Goffman's (1959) theorization of individuals' role performance, this study reveals differences in their perceptions of good policing and policing strategies. Thus, the findings emphasize that the pre-existing role of an officer that is guided by local policing strategies can be in conflict with what police officers themselves perceive as good and bad policing.

Although the topic of desirable and undesirable attributes among officers has been studied previously by scholars, many avenues remain important for future

Michelle N. Eliasson

research in this area of policing. The recommendation for further research would be to continue exploring officers' perceptions of their occupational roles and to examine how these roles adhere to officers' perceptions of their occupational identity and their overall policing strategies. With the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been an increased focus on police officers' misconduct towards non-whites in the United States, with requests to reform or defund the police. By exploring officers' perceptions of good and bad policing, we can learn more about reforming the police to decrease any form's misconduct and perhaps begin to create legitimacy for police officers in communities that today have no positive relationships with them. Change will not happen merely by creating new rules but is rather something that has to be developed within the law enforcement organization. One step towards this may be to adopt less militarized strategies and adopt the Swedish police's de-escalation strategies. After all, the way American officers describe a good officer seems to reflect many of the attributes that could be viewed as favouring de-escalation and a less violent approach to solving conflicts.

The findings in this study do not suggest that American police should adopt the "Swedish" way of policing but rather that perceptions of good policing in the United States and Sweden are similar and describe behaviours or characteristics favouring de-escalation strategies that are less confrontational and combative. Policing approaches are greatly influenced by history, political development, societal norms and phenomena, and thus it is realistic to have different policing strategies in various countries. The operational context of the police in various countries in line with socioeconomic and cultural practices can also impact the development and utilization of policing strategies and should be taken into consideration when discussing cross-national comparisons.

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Michelle N. Eliasson

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