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Learning the (hidden) silence policy within the police

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ABSTRACT

Many organisations declare that the ability for employees to speak out about organisational matters is important for organisational development. However, recent literature reports a widespread fear of retaliation among employees if they express themselves – especially within the police. The point of departure of the present article is the tension and discrepancy between official policy and officers’ accounts of the conversational climate within the police. Through empirical examples from data consisting of field studies and 33 interviews with police officers in subordinate ranks, this article describes how employees learn and reproduce informal norms that condition the conversational and working climate within the organisation. In contrast to official guidelines within the police, employees learn the informal cultural norms of keeping a low profile and remaining silent through everyday talk. Theories that stress how discourses, storytelling, and noisy silences accomplish social action are used to explain why these informal norms are given such power within an institutional setting.

The freedom of speaking out in policy and practice

The right to express oneself, to comment on work, and to be able to criticise authorities are prerequisites for a democratic state. Many organisations declare that the ability for employees to speak out about organisational matters is important for organisational development and the working life environment. In Sweden, freedom of speech is part of the Constitution of Sweden (Law 1991:1469) and encompasses employees of public institutions. These employees also have the freedom to communicate information and are protected by the Whistleblowing Act (2016, 749), which includes a ban on seeking information about and taking action against whistleblowers. However, employees’ experiences in various settings (e.g. Bjørkelo et al. 2011, Morrison and Milliken 2000) suggest that there is a discrepancy between the official documents concerning the freedom to speak out and the perceived reality of conditions at the workplace – that is, a gap between policy and practice. Among these experiences is a reported fear of retaliation when expressing oneself – especially within the police. This discrepancy between policy and practice is neither a newly discovered phenomenon nor restricted solely to the police. It has been documented in many public institutions, especially in the educational...
context (e.g. Arfwedson 1985; Jackson 1968; Holte 2009). Jacksons’ (1968) early and influential theory of a hidden curriculum in school institutions describes discrepancies between the intentions, expectations, and outcomes of teaching and learning processes. A similar discrepancy between policy and practice is the point of departure for this article. A sharp contrast between claimed institutional intentions and the perceived reality emerges when officers describe their perceived working situation and the ability to speak within the organisation (deleted for anonymity). Instead of describing the ability of employees to affect their working situation and contribute to the organisation by discussing missions, goals, and priorities – as stated in the co-worker policy guidelines (National Police Board 2011, 6) – officers talked of sanctions, fear of retaliation, and bullying if they commented on organisational aspects.

Research into whistleblowing examines employees’ internal and external reporting of various wrongdoings. This article focuses on the reverse side of the coin – when and why employees choose not to report wrongdoing but remain silent instead. The purpose is to explore the discourse of silence among police employees by drawing on and developing an analysis of a study of police employees’ opportunities and barriers to speaking out within the organisation. I will do this by 1) identifying and describing the microprocesses of everyday institutional discourse, and 2) demonstrating why and how informal norms are reproduced and given power within a specific institutional setting (the police). The article aims to contribute to an understanding of how the reproduction of the discourse of silence can be understood as part of a learning process of local working conditions.

**Whistleblowing and the police**

As is the case with research into whistleblowing in other institutions, there has been a major focus on organisational and managerial aspects, leadership and ethics, group relations, and employee differences within the police – often from a quantitative approach through various surveys (for reviews on whistleblowing, see Brown et al. 2014; Lewis and Vandekerckhove 2011). Many studies have focused on the willingness to report wrongdoings within the police, and some have tried to predict who will blow the whistle by focusing on general so-called whistleblowing personality traits (Park and Blenkinsopp 2009; Rothwell and Baldwin 2006, 2007). Research reports the existence of an informal blue code of silence, a concept that suggests that officers are less likely to report wrongdoings than civilians (Skolnick 2002; Westmarland 2005). The strong group relations and the solidarity within the police have been found to be influential in the low rate of whistleblowing in the police, partly due to the fear of negative outcomes, such as various forms of retaliation from peers (Gonzales 2010; Krinsky 2016; Seaton 2007; Skolnick 2002; Westmarland 2005). The fear of retaliation has been reported also in the Swedish Police (deleted for anonymity), and the Swedish Police Union disclosed in 2012 that 57% of 1127 officers stated that they did not express work-related criticism (or ideas) due to the risk of retaliation (Police Union 2012). But research shows differences in willingness to report, depending on the type and the perceived seriousness of the misconduct (Gottschalk and Holgersson 2011; Westmarland 2005), and it shows various degrees of willingness to report wrongdoings in different police employee groups (Loyens 2013), such as supervisors (Rothwell and Baldwin 2006, 2007). Rothwell and Baldwin (2006, 2007) have concluded, for example, that police are less likely than civilian employees to
maintain a code of silence. These results point towards the variances in the (non)reporting of wrongdoings within the police. In fact, some of these findings have made researchers question whether the code of silence is restricted to the police, and if it is a simplistic concept that neglects different motives for not blowing the whistle (Krinsky 2016; Loyens 2013). Most of these studies have focused on reporting on peers, and have not included organisational wrongdoings. Many have also focused on quantitative measures of the intent or willingness to report on peers, rather than on actual reporting. This article is based on interviews with officers who explain their motives for refraining from speaking out based on their own and colleagues’ experiences on speaking out at the workplace. These also concern issues of organisational wrongdoings. Thus, the article seeks to understand and conceptualise employee silence from the perspective of the employees.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This study focuses on the everyday talk within institutions in order to understand employee silence. The article combines theories that stress the performative aspects of talk, that is, what talk and utterances do (rather than what is true), and how this shapes our understanding of, and our actions in, the world.

Formal and informal norms

In everyday talk at work, people discuss, negotiate, and deal with the various aspects of the organisation and their working life; consequently, everyday conversations are central to the construction and reproduction of institutional norms and values (Alvesson 2016; Ekman 1999). It has been argued that the socialisation of new officers into the organisation’s cultural norms is especially strong within the Swedish police (e.g. Ekman 1999; Granér 2004; Stenmark 2005). These norms are characterised as strong esprit de corps, collegial solidarity, trust, loyalty, and a code of silence being highly valued. Length of service, practical policing, autonomy, and discretion within the rank and file are other valued norms (ibid.).

However, these norms are not always in line with the official policies, and a wide discrepancy between formal/official and informal/unofficial guidelines and a lack of consistency between different working groups and hierarchical levels have been reported in the police. The division between management and the rank and file, which involves a perceived top-down approach to leadership and contempt for management, has, in particular, been reported (e.g. Ekman 1999; Stenmark 2005; deleted for anonymity). Although many of these characteristics are similar to police occupational cultures in other countries (e.g. Loftus 2009; Reiner 2010; Reuss-Ianni and Ianni 2005), I stress the local context as highly relevant to understanding the varieties and subcultural norms that are the result of geographic, economic, political, and social contextual variations in police organisation and practices. The question remains; how are we to understand the relationship between the formal and informal norms and how the informal norms are reproduced and given power within various organisational settings such as the police?

Many authors have shown how a hidden curriculum can be used as a broad category in order to explain a range of informal knowledge processes, and how these knowledge processes can be understood as learning processes in various institutional contexts. This concerns also the informal (or hidden) learning of silence in relation to work-related criticism
A common feature of these studies of informal learning is that they show that these learning processes are influenced by various structures and contexts, including the system of the organisation and the values related to this, the external (socio-economic and geographical) context, the internal context of the history of the specific institution – with its rules and expectations – as well as the everyday life of the institution and the media (Arfwedson 1985; Holte 2009).

Drawing on Jackson’s (1968) theory of the hidden curriculum, Holte (2009) has developed a theory of how policy in practice can be understood and interpreted. Although the ambition is for policies to shape practice, similar to the situation in educational and other institutional contexts, the intentions of policies are often overstated, and potential resistance is underestimated. Holte (2009, 2014) labels this phenomenon as hidden policy (or *curriculum silentium*); a policy that exists parallel to the formal policy, counteracts the official goals and guidelines, and leads to employees remaining silent about unethical situations. The prerequisite for Holte’s (2009) analysis is the gap between intention and practice. This also corresponds to the point of departure for this article, namely, that a discursive gap between the official/formal and the unofficial/informal norms of the conversational climate within the Swedish police has been found (deleted for anonymity).

**The performativity of everyday talk**

Norms are not understood as residing within people’s heads, but rather ‘between them’ because they are expressed and used in conversations between people (Alvesson 2016). It is the everyday activities and experiences, acquired on a day-to-day basis and through social interaction with others in a specific social context, that form people’s understanding of that context (Gherardi, Nicolini, and Odella 1998). This view of the significance of shared knowledge in and of a specific setting stresses how learning takes place through social interaction and is thus seen as a relational activity. From this perspective, learning refers to all the formal and informal learning opportunities offered in the day-to-day activities of an organisation when individuals pursue their careers, and this text will focus on how individuals form their understanding of an institutional working context and not on the learning of skills acquired for a specific profession. In these learning processes, where learning is regarded as a social activity, language plays a fundamental role (Gherardi, Nicolini, and Odella 1998, 15). Moreover, knowledge is not only shared in the day-to-day talk in a social context, but also shapes the world, since it brings particular versions of reality into being. When dominating patterns of talk, or discourses, are taken for granted, they serve as truths upon which people base their choices and actions. Thus, discourses regulate individuals’ thoughts, acts, and communicative opportunities. This performative view of everyday talk is derived from discursive psychology, in which discourses are understood not only as constructed but also as constructive in terms of how we understand things in various contexts and at different times (Wetherell and Potter 1988, 1992). The focus of this approach is ‘not why people use language, but what happens when they do’ (Wiggins 2017, 234).

**Reproducing norms through institutional storytelling**

Studies of narrative sense-making in organisations have shown the significance of storytelling both when new members are being socialised into institutional norms and when
these institutional norms are being reproduced. This article focuses on retold stories within an institution\(^\text{1}\) that function as resources for what Linde (2009) labels ‘institutional memory’. Institutional memory is not only about storing and stockpiling memories but also involves the transmission of memory through, for example, verbal anecdotes. She writes: ‘retold narratives […] form an important part of the way that institutions remember their past and use that remembering to create current identities for both the institution and its members’ (2009, 73). The retold tales are often known by all and retold by many over a long period of time. These tales are told not only by the original protagonists but also by other individuals. Linde also introduces the concept of noisy silences – of stories not told – and defines them as ‘silences in one situation about matters spoken loudly or in whispers in other situations […] matters of contested concern, matters that officially may not be spoken of’ (2009, 197). According to Linde, institutional silences are often retold outside an institution, and contact with these silences inside the institution may take some time to appear. I will use this concept to label the counter-stories, told by and among the police officers on a subordinate level on a regular basis. These counter-stories express and reproduce the unofficial and informal norms of the institution’s conversational climate. In this sense, they are not so silent, but they are rather noisy and form the institutional memory of the rank and file as they shape the subordinates’ shared sense of institutional conditions. However, the counter-stories are silent in the sense that they are suppressed in the presence of managerial personnel and in official documents. The noisy silences are restricted to what I label ‘safe spaces’, discursive spaces where subordinates feel comfortable enough to utter statements that challenge official guidelines or values (cf. Loftus 2009).

Although Linde stresses the memory aspect in this narrative theory, I use this theory and the concept of noisy silences to shed light on, and explain, the power of reproduction and the performative aspect of norms and conditions within an institution – norms and conditions that are transmitted through collegial storytelling. These retold stories are significant to understanding an institution since they circulate in a setting and, as such, both locate and reproduce that setting in the structures that are transmitted in the stories. The stories and the remembering occur when they are used in interaction with people. The usage of these stories is important when interacting with peers or with me as an interviewer. My interest is in what is accomplished with these stories.

**Analysis**

Critical discursive psychology is a useful theory and method for understanding and analysing how microprocesses of social interaction are both constructed and constructive for the understanding of the conversational climate within a specific social context. In the analysis, I use the analytical tool ‘interpretative repertoire’, which is derived from discursive psychology, to identify dominant patterns and norms of interaction that occur and are considered common sense in a specific setting (Wetherell and Potter 1988, 1992. For a fuller description of how this analysis is applied to data, see Edley 2001; Potter and Wetherell 2001). This kind of discourse analysis acknowledges interaction as being contextual and situated and, therefore, analyses how interaction is located within a particular social, cultural, and historical setting. In this present study, this means that I identify the discourse of the conversational climate within the police by focusing on officers’ accounts.
and the repertoires they draw on to legitimize their claims. This includes an analysis of the discursive resources (both linguistic and cultural) that are used to construe various accounts as being common sense. In addition, I also draw on ethnographic data to explore these institutional discourses and how these discursive practices work in a specific organizational context. Rather than using a discursive psychology approach at a micro-level (such as in discursive psychology or CA), this meso-analytical approach enables me to both relate details of discourse to the local context and take these into consideration along with broader cultural issues (for a review, see e.g. Wiggins 2017; Wetherell and Potter 1992).

In line with the interpretative repertoire, the analysis focuses on a set of retold stories that steer attention to the what (content) of an institution or organisation (Linde 2009, 110). What characterises the working conditions according to the employees, and what kind of knowledge about the institution is provided in the stories? Moreover, it is also of interest to examine when and why these stories are told. The excerpts analysed were selected on the basis of 1) the definition of a retold story, or 2) because they contain accounts of the speaker’s change towards becoming silent, and are as such, part of a learning process of the local working conditions.

**Research setting and data**

In December 2015, anonymous whistleblowers alerted the media to professional misconduct in the police through internal leaks (Uebel 2015). An inquiry into the wider internal conversational climate was ordered by the district chief. The aim was to investigate how police employees perceived opportunities for and barriers to expressing themselves within the organisation (deleted for anonymity). In contrast to official statements and policies (National Police Board 2011; Polisen 2012), officers with a subordinate rank described a culture of silence and retaliation within the organisation.

The empirical data from the inquiry are analysed in this article and consist of a four-month field study in a police district. I took part in the day-to-day work and workplace meetings of patrol officers at three police stations. The field studies include approximately 104 hours of participant observation, handwritten field notes, and memos from field conversations with over 100 officers. In addition, as my office was located in one station for seven months, I took part in the everyday talk and informal conversations of several police units, which provided extensive ethnographic data.

The primary material used in the analysis consists of 33 individual semi-structured interviews, 24 of them with officers and nine with officers at a first-line managerial level. Thus, a large proportion of the material presented comes from interviews with officers and, as such, not from interaction between colleagues in naturalistic settings. However, many of the stories – and similar ones – were retold during my field studies by officers when I accompanied them on patrol in the car, or during lunch or coffee breaks. In many interviews, retold stories of interaction between officers were brought up in order to highlight the speaker’s perspective on the institution’s conversational climate.

The in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with laughter and pauses, and lasted from 43 to 137 minutes, with an average length of 91 minutes. The interview guide included topics such as workplace communication, institutional norms
and rules, conflicts in the workplace, conversational climate at various institutional levels, and barriers to and opportunities for speaking out in different settings and to various members of the organisation. Although the empirical data were collected during an inquiry, I obtained consent to use the data for future research from the police chief who initiated the investigation and all participants. As a temporary employee of the Swedish Police Authority, I complied with the Swedish Personal Data Act (1998:204) and the Swedish Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act (2009:400), in addition to the ethical regulations of the Swedish Research Council (2011), while undertaking this project. In line with these ethical procedures, some details from quotes have been left out in order to conceal the participants’ identities. All patrol officers in the district were informed (in writing and orally) about the study, and officers interested in participating were asked to contact me for individual interviews. Consequently, in contrast to informal field conversations, the interview sample was not randomly selected. The excerpts presented are from three different stations, but they have been anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

Findings: noisy silences with a low ceiling

Stories about colleagues being subjected to retaliation as a result of speaking out were many and widespread. Officers in one station had heard of and retold stories about colleagues at other stations in the district. As a researcher, I heard these accounts during lunch breaks, during interviews, and in the patrol cars. From day one of my field studies, when officers heard about the purpose of my presence (to evaluate internal communication), I was briefed about the situation as officers came forward to set the stories straight. However, these retold and widespread stories were not told everywhere, or in front of everyone. They were restricted to safe spaces – spaces without the presence of higher managerial personnel or potential critics – that provided the opportunity for officers to utter statements that were normally self-censored. The report from the inquiry into officers’ conversational climate was renamed ‘the bomb’ by subordinates at the stations, a term that highlighted the discursive gap between official rhetoric about the authority’s guidelines and the subordinates’ experience of the same. In this sense – as stories that conflict with declared and official institutional stories – these stories were noisy silences.

Many stories with one message

Two dominant repertoires emerged in the analysis of the officers’ talk about the perceived conversational climate within the police. These repertoires were also used by the employees as sarcastic expressions in everyday interaction. The repertoire ‘a high ceiling but close to the door’ suggests that sanctions will follow if employees voice their opinions. The other repertoire, ‘a high ceiling if you lay down’, conveys a message that one’s behaviour must be adjusted in order for the ceiling to be high, by, for example, keeping your criticism at a low level or remaining silent. There are many stories about officers adjusting their behaviour or being sanctioned after commenting on work, organisational situations, or leadership, and the subjects of these stories range from new to experienced officers at several hierarchical levels within the police. These stories, widely known by the majority of the employees, are
not only retold to new members but also shape a common understanding of the norms and values of organisational and professional working conditions. They are part of the police force’s institutional stories, or memories, to use Linde’s (2009) vocabulary. These are norms that are formed, retained, passed on, and used to influence both individuals and the institution – as examples to be followed. Whether or not the sanctions are experienced by all, they are part of and form the institutional memory, and employees learn that these are the terms and conditions for their internal careers.

A high ceiling but close to the door

Many officers motivated their participation in interviews with statements like ‘I will quit my employment so I can talk’, ‘I will not apply for a managerial position so I can talk’, and ‘I can talk if I can be anonymous’. Other recurring words or metaphors used to describe the conversational climate were ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘to end up in the freezer’ – a metaphor describing an employee who is not considered for promotion or other positions for a very long time (years). The ideal employee was said to be a yea-sayer, not a naysayer. The fact that employees use the same words and metaphors suggests that these are regular topics of conversation in the setting. In the following interview excerpt, one officer uses several of these recurring words:

[Excerpt 1]

Officer: It’s my understanding that it’s the same with the chiefs - you’re not supposed to be a naysayer; you’re expected to be a ‘yes man’ and say yes to everything. No one dares to come forward and confess: ‘Oops, that didn’t go so well, we’d better do something about it.’ I don’t think they even dare, because if they start to criticize or say no - because they’re still just like those of us in the rank and file - then you get ostracized, frozen out, you get reassigned, get removed. That’s just the way it works (,) and everyone knows it. And every day you talk to someone who ended up getting frozen out, and you notice that they’re not allowed to participate in training courses: ‘Aw, man, we missed you at training today!’ or ‘Well, of course someone has to stay here and hold down the fort, so you can’t come.’ Or maybe you’ll see someone who’s been stuck in the same post for years and years. I mean, you just can’t do that. It’s bullying, plain and simple - the way the force freezes people out. I think it’s really awful.

As in the excerpt above, the stories and working situation were often accompanied with phrases such as ‘everyone knows it’, ‘I know many examples of’, and ‘it happens all the time’. Within discursive psychology these linguistic resources (‘no one’, ‘everybody’ or ‘we all’, ‘all the time’) are referred to as extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986). It is argued that these normalise and give legitimacy to a statement since they make the claim of a routinised experience. Moreover, arguing that ‘everyone knows’ something makes the person who does not know into someone who is excluded and not a ‘regular’ member of the community, and this can also be a way of informing the novice about a regular matter. It is also difficult to challenge such a statement since such a challenge would be framed as a lack of experience. This empirical evidence device (Jonsson 2009) is another resource that is used regularly in the setting. Although not everyone had experienced retaliation, no one said they wanted to risk the ‘fact’, a fact based on the experiences of other members of the institution.

Many of the self-reported experiences of retaliation were told to me in confidence during interviews, and I never heard them being retold to colleagues. In contrast,
Stories about other colleagues (someone else's experience) were retold on several occasions, including the stories behind what was referred to as the media 'scandals' in late 2015. These were the stories about colleagues who, sometimes many years back, had commented on or criticised supervisors or work-related topics and, after that, had been subject to retaliation such as being redeployed to a lower, unattractive, or more isolated position. Some retold stories were about individuals who had been so severely bullied that they eventually quit and applied for a posting in a district far away. These examples illustrate how a story about an individual can become an institutional story, and as Linde (2009, 195) suggests: 'one's story is not only one's own'. In the following excerpt, one officer illustrates how these stories were shared between colleagues:

[Excerpt 2]

Current supervisor: A lot of this stuff you hear about second-hand. Still, you hear it a lot: 'So-and-so did something stupid and went against management or made a fool of himself somehow, and ended up on the [unit] in [city]'. A dead end. It was protocol for a while [retells a story about a colleague showing a caricature giving the finger to the management]. And then you learned just how low their tolerance was, then and there, anyway. Some kind of punishment.

Linguistic resources such as 'hear about second-hand', 'you hear it a lot', and the use of the word 'protocol' describe the circumstance (retaliation) as being a regular consequence. These linguistic ways of reinforcing statements construe retaliation as being common sense and a widely perceived working condition.

Another officer also retells the story of an experienced officer who criticised higher management personnel in a workplace meeting and was redeployed as a punitive sanction. Besides retelling the story, the officer also stressed the lesson learned:

[Excerpt 3]

Officer: He had drawn two pictures; one was with applauding hands, and the other was giving the middle finger. Like: 'This is how I wish it was, but here's how it feels to me'. And so he drew this picture with the 'fuck you' finger. And then one of the chiefs went through the roof. I can’t remember how it played out, if he even wrote a report about the insult or something like that. It was made into a huge deal. And the whole point of the pictures had been to show that people were feeling put upon - that they didn’t get the help that they wanted from the chiefs. And it ended up with this guy getting relocated, and he ended up on the [unit] in [city] - for at least six months, I think. So he was long gone. [...] And so that sent a message to us, like: 'If you don’t like it, just shut up and bite your tongue'. So that was, of course, a crystal-clear example of how things can go.

In these narratives, officers describe how they interpret the experiences of others and stress that these serve as a guide for adjusting their own behaviour – moderating their outspokenness and being more silent – in other words, adjusting one’s behaviour to fit the unofficial institutional norms.

A high ceiling if you lay down

Stories of retaliation and individual silence are intertwined – the risk of retaliation makes people silent. One officer describes in several ways how she has silenced herself due to previous experiences within the organisation. She retells a story about a situation in which the employees were asked by their closest supervisor to hand in an anonymous questionnaire
with open answers about the working environment. But after she had finished writing – having disguised her handwriting in order not to be recognised – she says she did not dare to hand in the sheet. The reason was that she was too critical of the current situation. She also describes how she received a lower wage from her closest supervisor with the justification that she ‘had too many opinions’. In her story, as shown in the excerpt below, she relates her silence to the retaliation she has herself experienced:

[Excerpt 4]

Officer: I say maybe 80% less than what I really want to. And we should have a staff representative in the union – something I think I would be interested in, actually. But even when it comes to that, I know – No, I’ll get so much shit for it. Sometimes you just want to feel like you’re appreciated, instead of being, like, knocked down – because that’s what happens if you have opinions that maybe don’t quite fit with (.) how it’s supposed to be. […] Like, it’s been like this for so many years. There are so many examples and so much stuff has happened that is totally sick, in my opinion. So that (.) at least in my case, I don’t say much anymore. […] So that means we have no staff representative, because there’s no one else who wants the job – or maybe even dares to try to do it, either.

This officer’s account describes individual change towards becoming silent (she says 80% less than she really wants to). An institutional culture of ‘get so much shit’ and ‘being, like, knocked down’ when one expresses opinions emerges in the interview, and this is made routine by extreme case formulations such as ‘been like this for so many years’, ‘there are so many examples’, ‘so much stuff’, and ‘totally sick’. The officer also explains how this aspect of the culture has consequences for organisational development and working conditions because the working group has no trade union representative. This officer values this task as important but refuses to take it on due to the risk of retaliation.

The institutional norm of not speaking out is anchored to the past by subordinates’ voices (‘it’s been this way since I joined’, ‘for a good while before then, too’), but it is also anchored as a significant feature of the organisation’s working life (‘always been that way’, ‘I understood early’, ‘you’ve got to be’):

[Excerpt 5]

Officer: It’s been this way since I joined the force [six years ago], and for a good while before then, too. It’s always been that way. I understood early on that you’ve got to be a ‘yes man’ and not a naysayer.

Officers stress how previous experiences and retold tales about others are significant factors in explaining why they have adjusted their behaviour and outspokenness. This can be described in terms of a learning process that is also influenced by hierarchical positions within the police force, as will be further illustrated in the following section.

Hierarchical positions – hierarchical knowledge

Both experienced colleagues and new officers describe how the culture of retaliation is taught ‘as a lesson of experience’ to new employees. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a trainee supervisor.

[Excerpt 6]
Officer: I advise all [my cadets] that you should never say what you think. It won’t serve them well. ‘Don’t make the same mistake I did. […] Otherwise you’ll be pushed away’. It’s tragic that we have to give that kind of advice. But for their sake, I do. Because as just one individual, you can’t change anything anyway. […] Was I myself dumb enough to think I could, once upon a time? [sigh] You bet.

The knowledge retold to the trainees is based on the supervisor’s own experiences and is told in confidence and in relation to their close professional relationship as supervisor and trainee. The supervisor gives the story legitimacy by using experience-based knowledge.

The next excerpt illustrates how a new police officer is taught the informal silence policy through notions of caring. The police officer retells an incident involving a highly experienced colleague:

[Excerpt 7]

Officer: As I’ve said, I remember when they came from the old Swedish National Police Agency and told us very clearly: ‘If you don’t like it, there’s the door’. And of course there are examples of chiefs who have been clear about that: ‘You should probably think about what you say if you want this or that posting’, so you’ll get frozen out a bit, if you aren’t careful.

I: Have you heard about colleagues who’ve been in those kinds of situations?

Officer: Yes, absolutely. When I was a cadet [recently] I went on a few rounds with a colleague who was close to retiring who told me: ‘You’re new, so you have to think very carefully about what you do and what you say. Me, I don’t have to worry, because the worst thing that can happen to me is that they force me into early retirement, and that wouldn’t bother me much’, and then he laughed. “But you’ve just got way more to lose”. He wanted to send me that message, as a new cadet – that it’s important to understand that this is the way it works. And it certainly doesn’t bode well when the first thing you get when you’re starting out at your new job is a warning like that.

I: How did it affect you?

Officer: Well (heh), sometimes I just try to keep my big mouth shut.

Officers who have been on the force for a few years describe how they are informed during their training and probationary service as officers to keep their opinions to themselves. What almost all the stories that were retold in the interviews share is that they are never questioned; rather they are considered and reproduced as the truth. And because the consequences of expressing potential criticism or opinions about the organisation are said to have an impact on the individual in many ways, for example, slower career advancement, bullying, or other forms of retaliation, many officers talk about strategies used to manage this. One common phrase is ‘I choose my battles’. Officers state that when they were new to the organisation, they remained silent due to the risk of not being accepted into the fellowship:

[Excerpt 8]

I: Have you ever kept quiet about what you thought about something?

Officer: The only time was when I was pretty new as a civil servant, and I didn’t know the police officers. Tactically, I felt that it was wrong to withhold it, but I knew: If I open my mouth now, it’s all over. Then I won’t be welcome here anymore. So I chose to stay silent.
To position oneself as new vis-à-vis experienced is made relevant in terms of professional behaviour.

Within the police force, experienced (and often older) colleagues are generally perceived as having greater legitimacy and greater professional skills (cf. Stenmark 2005). Policing is something you learn by experience, and the more experience you have, the higher the status you acquire. Experience is related to ‘real’ policing and hierarchical status, in contrast to other internal groups that are perceived as having rather low status and informal legitimacy, for example, civilians and senior management. There are also structural factors that support and reinforce hierarchical status and knowledge transference. One structural aspect is length of service according to the Swedish Police Ordinance (2014:1104 7§), which regulates order and command. Another is the apprentice system used in training, in which institutional discourses are transmitted from older and more experienced officers to new police officers. It is relevant to take these structural factors into analytical consideration when not only young and new officers, but even their more experienced colleagues, describe how they adopt and reproduce the discourse of silence.

Officers also draw upon structural and cultural factors within the organisation when reasoning about the conversational climate. Besides the hierarchical aspects of the organisation and collegial experiences, a common cultural feature that, it is claimed, reproduces organisational silence is the nurturing of good relations with your supervisors. These power relations are mentioned in relation to promotion and the individual setting of wage rates.

[Excerpt 9]

Former deputy manager (now officer): Do you dare to say what you think? You mean, do I say to my YB [closest supervisor]: ‘Dammit, I don’t think this [assessment] is right, I think this is (.)’? No, maybe I’ll keep quiet because wage negotiations are coming up, and if I’m easy to get along with, I might do better when it comes to getting a raise.

I: You really think that’s the way it is?

Former deputy manager: No, I know that’s the way it is. Yeah. Yeah, I’d say that I know that’s the way it is. You don’t want to (.) well, your only chance of getting those extra SEK 2-300 in your pay check is to show that you’re a bit better than the rest, and the ones that rock the boat don’t fall into that category. Just the opposite – it’s the ones who shut up and do their job.

The repertoires of the conversational climate do not differ between the interviewed officers and first-level supervisors. In the excerpt above, an officer who was formerly a supervisor (who worked closely with the team’s supervisor) uses his experiences to gain knowledge of the relationship between silence and wage increases. The officer also draws on an organisational document that is used to rate and evaluate individual employees’ performance in relation to specific requirements, a document used as the basis for wage negotiations.

Constituting a truth

What is accomplished with these stories? A final excerpt is presented to highlight how the discourse of a low ceiling within the police works performatively; it constitutes a truth, or
common sense, for officers to act upon. It is a perceived plausible truth that none (or few) dare to question or challenge due to potential consequences:

[Excerpt 10]

Officer: you have to feel like you won’t be penalized for voicing your opinions. And it will certainly take a very long time to build that kind of trust. It’s pretty deeply ingrained – that you don’t say certain things for whatever reason, even if it may well be that it maybe isn’t like that anymore. Except that people believe it to be that way because there’s no evidence to the contrary. Although it may be moving in the right direction. But the belief is still there that you can’t go against the way things are, or speak up against anything, because then (.) And trust me, just recently our temporary supervisor was excluded from an interview – and we heard that, like, the ones who were responsible for the interview made sure that this person didn’t get to participate in the interviews because he had said this and that. And of course you know that it’s just word of mouth, but still, you’ve heard it, that word’s going around, like, rumours: ‘He brought this up’ – and he was also critical of the TR [tactical resource – a special operations force within the police], and you learn that after he said so, the higher-ups said that he would never get any posting, ever, because of it. It doesn’t matter how much truth there is to it. If someone says it, it becomes the truth.

Even if the discourse of a low ceiling is often constructed on the basis of rumours, and feelings of being punished rather than factual evidence, the excerpts show how this is of minor significance to the rank and file. Since it has become a truth, and one’s own promotion and future might depend on these features, it regulates not only thoughts and voices but also behaviour and emotions within the police.

**Discussion**

**Whose voice?**

The article shows how members of an institution both sustain and challenge organisational structures and processes, and how subordinates give voice to supressed perspectives through counter-stories. The use of storytelling acknowledges and focuses on talk as action. Officers learn informal institutional norms of a low ceiling within the police through re-telling and reproducing dominant repertoires amongst each other. This is described as the informal learning processes of an unofficial silence policy that officers construct and refer to in their day-to-day interaction with each other and me as an interviewer. Officers justify why and describe how they adjust their behaviour to fit the informal norms at the workplace by referring to the stories told in the day-to-day interaction between members in the same institutional setting, and how they silence themselves in order not to become the target of retaliation. By linguistically reinforcing retaliation as a recurring outcome with a long history, retaliation is normalised and made ‘protocol’ at the workplace. These stories are passed on to other colleagues, as lessons of experience. This performative aspect also reveals that reproducing stories of sanctions and retaliation in the police constitutes the lived reality for employees. This becomes even more significant in working cultures with a strong *esprit de corps* and in relation to potentially dangerous and violent work tasks where collegial trust is highly valued as a safety concern (officers need to know that they have each other’s back). I argue that a strong *esprit de corps*, with the reproduced norms of trust and collegial solidarity, constitutes the
importance of ‘friction-free venues’. These venues, I argue, are significant to the sustain-
ment of a culture of silence within the police. The norms of silence are also sustained by
other organisational structures on the bureaucratic and hierarchical levels – together with
the length of service according to the Swedish Police Ordinance (2014:1104, §7) – as institu-
tionally valued norms. The retold tales that form the repertoires of ‘a high ceiling if you
lay down’ and ‘a high ceiling but close to the door’ not only reinforce the content of inform-
al norms (do not speak out or if you do, you will be subject to either career-based or
social reprisals), but also risk constituting and legitimising the use of sanctions. Individuals
may perceive it to be easier to use, or even to legitimise the use of, reprimands because
reprimands are perceived as both a widespread truth and a method that is used by
others – and thus, they become part of the informal culture. The sanctions sustain and
uphold control of organisational work and create the idea of an effective and smooth oper-
ation/agency.

The article also highlights how knowledge is mediated from older to new colleagues and
how hierarchical structures in the police reinforce the restriction of interpretative prer-
rogatives on certain subjects. In retold tales, other peoples’ experiences are used as refer-
ces. The experiences of colleagues (rather than policies) are turned into cultural and
institutional working conditions that affect the perception of opportunities and barriers
for all. The power and performativity of a discourse that is reproduced on a regular
basis not only create what is deemed common sense but they also uphold the legitimacy
of the discourse and restrict people’s freedom of action; few make the effort to challenge
structures that are perceived to be rigid and immovable.

**Hidden or informal policy?**

Previous research has used the concepts ‘hidden curriculum’ and ‘hidden policy’ in order
to explain how informal knowledge processes can be understood as learning processes in
institutional contexts (e.g. Holte 2009). Holte’s (2009, 142) use of ‘hidden’ in her concept
‘hidden policy’ refers to a hidden or subconscious force because it is claimed that people
are seldom aware of their own involvement in processes that constitute the *curriculum
silentium*. In contrast to Holte, I label these processes as ‘informal (and unofficial)
policy’ for four reasons. Firstly, ‘hidden’ alludes to an organisational and a top-down per-
pective, and neglects the perspectives of the employees. Secondly, ‘hidden’ does not cor-
respond with the empirical findings in this study, which, in contrast, show that the norms
of silence are ‘everywhere’ – i.e. noisy. Thirdly, the theoretical framework of this article
locates culture (here as institutional norms and values) in everyday talk and interaction
– rather than what is not said (or ‘hidden’) – i.e. why ‘informal policy’ constitutes a
more adequate term with which to understand the reproduction of unofficial institutional
norms. Fourthly, and finally, Holte’s terminology precludes the rank-and-file officers’
actorhood, while this article argues that the way members of an institution talk about
its conditions is significant to the construction of the culture of silence.

Accordingly, I argue that the hidden policy is not hidden at all – not among peers. But
placing the concept at the institutional level, it becomes clear that the officers’ stories point
towards a perceived institutional informal policy; although official policies and laws
govern employees’ rights to comment on their work, there is the perception that insti-
tutional actors at a managerial level will sanction and punish employees when they do
so. This, in turn, creates employee and institutional silence. Silence is taught and learned through everyday interaction and through storytelling about crucial events.

**Practical implications and limitations**

The article contributes to the field of workplace learning by showing how informal knowledge is reproduced within an institution. It also highlights the significance of hierarchical structures in relation to professional learning. The results are of interest to policy makers and other professions.

The results are based on subordinates’ voices (and first–level supervisors) within an institutional setting, and research into the voices of higher managerial personnel is needed. Although the results can be seen as overwhelmingly negative for the organisation studied, one can also argue that the results imply how the *esprit de corps* is strengthened and reproduced through accounts of sanctions from supervisors. The stories of retaliation serve as a resource for maintaining solidarity among subordinate peers.

**Conclusion**

This article explored officers’ talk about the conversational climate within the police. By combining theories that stress how discourses, storytelling, and noisy silences accomplish social action, the article contributes to an understanding of how employees’ discourses on the ability to express oneself about organisational matters constitute norms and values of silence at the work place.

It was found that discourses – narratively communicated in everyday working life – were significant to the constitution of institutional values and norms. In contrast to the officially declared norm of a high ceiling, the discourse of a low ceiling was shared among the rank and file through the repertoires ‘a high ceiling but close to the door’ and ‘a high ceiling if you lay down’. These were the stories that should not be mentioned, stories that the authority rejected, and stories that were suppressed in the presence of higher managerial personnel and, thus, restricted to ‘safe spaces’. Retold inside the institution, these stories functioned as critical incidents of learning. They served as examples of informal norms and values, and of a suppressed conversational climate with potential retaliations within the institution. The stories disclosed what could happen if the norms are challenged. Rather than referring to policies concerning the ability to speak out on organisational matters, officers referred to colleagues’ experiences, and acted upon them as institutional working conditions. These working conditions affected the perception of possibilities and hindrances not only for those who had experienced retaliation, but for all. Officers described how they silenced themselves due to potential retaliation after speaking out. By focusing on the performative aspects of talk, talk as *social action*, the article has shown how the silence policy is both reproduced and sustained as a truth in the organisation.

**Notes**

1. Like Linde (2009, 7–8) I distinguish between ‘organisation’ and ‘institution’. In many disciplines, these overlap and can be used by different researchers to describe the same
phenomenon. According to Linde, ‘institution’ is a broader category and can include both formal and informal groupings of people and practices. A working group, an ‘organisation’, and a family can form an institution, while an organisation ‘is a subtype of an institution which includes formal and legal structures’ and where ‘a corporation is both an institution and an organisation’ (7).

2. Cultural resources are also discursive, but the term ‘cultural’, in this context, refers to a specific situated practice or condition within the police, whereas the term ‘discursive resources’ refers to more general linguistic phrases that can be used in many contexts, such as ‘everybody’.

3. Apart from a situation with the local special unit, other events and pictures were leaked to the newsroom, but these were not published in the press.

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