

# **Social Conflicts in the Eyes of Police: The Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Bill Movement**

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**Abstract:** This research explores the perceptions Hong Kong police officers had of the anti-extradition bill movement in 2019-2020. A series of protests led to direct confrontations between protestors and officers. Hong Kong police at that time were deemed reprehensible for their violent acts by many Hong Kong people. Scrutiny and criticism brought by the public altered the Hong Kong police's public image and social status in society.

In this paper, I examine how police in Hong Kong conceive of their moral and legal legitimacy, aiming to understand how they configure their identity in a highly politicised society. This paper draws on police officers' explanation of their motivations, lawful duties, and mental struggles to understand social conflicts in the past two years. Reconstructing their views on the social movements, I illustrate a different side of the story of the anti-extradition bill movement than that which Hong Kong protesters (myself included) have held.

During the protest, officers carried out their responsibilities and duties as law enforcers.

While some of their actions to disperse protestors were considered cold and inhuman, the public seldom looked beyond the masks that officers wore to understand their human side. In the face of adversity, how did officers stand their ground in society?

Through conducting in-depth interviews with 15 interviewees, I probed questions I had for officers. This project served as an opportunity to get a glimpse of their personal thoughts and emotions which were often shielded away from the public's gaze. Unravelling the officers' views on social conflicts, I hope to begin a discourse for a wider representation of the anti-extradition bill movement by incorporating police officers' point of view.

## **Introduction**

Two years have passed since the Hong Kong anti-extradition bill movement, and much has changed since then. There have been no large-scale protests since mid-2020, no public transportation disturbance due to protests and no political graffiti visible to the public's eye. It is safe to say that Hong Kong's political atmosphere had changed drastically, especially after the *National Security Law* was passed in June 2020. However, some legacies remain as the remnant of the movement, one of which is the torn police-community relationship.

My research project began with the question: How could police persist in their work when they were disliked by so many protestors (which numbered a million of more at different points in the protests)? Through this project, I seek to piece together the picture that officers had of the anti-extradition bill movement, especially since their imaginations of the movement were shaped by their roles and engagements in the conflict. Involved in the process of a search for meaning as law enforcers was a reinterpretation of the interactions they had with protestors and the events they participated in. The torn police-community relationship marked the beginning of my quest into the human side of these police officers.

During the initial protests, Hong Kong Police played a vital role in security during face-to-face conflicts. Their use of force and violence were seriously criticized, which created an unfriendly environment for officers to work in. After two months of the protests, protestors sought a commission of inquiry into police brutality as one of five demands to be met by the government.

Apart from the declarations from the protestors that clearly illustrated the deteriorating police-community relationship, some of the most highlighted conflicts during 2019 and 2020

were occurrences witnessed by the public. Civilians including children and the elderly suffered from bombs of tear gas near residential neighbourhoods and public transport stations. Some of the most significant incidents that demonstrated people's distrust towards police were the 721 Yuen Long Attack<sup>1</sup> and the 831 Prince Edward Station Attack<sup>2</sup>.

My aim in mentioning these events is to indicate how their occurrence had enduring influences on citizens' impressions of the police. As one local piece of academic research concluded, "... the public have consistently viewed the police as...violent and abusive." (Lee, 2019) Hong Kong police were considered abusive of their power by around 70% of the Hong Kong public at that time (Lee, 2019). This was a drastic change in the attitudes of Hong Kong people towards the police. With one of the lowest crime rates in the world before the movement, many citizens rarely encountered police in their daily life. Especially for those who were not involved in the 2014 Occupy Movement,<sup>3</sup> this would be the first time they confronted the police force. In the confrontations, police were seen to be violent, engaging in the constant use of force. Consequently, many citizens found the police untrustworthy.

The tense social atmosphere constructed a social context where officers' personal lives and their occupations became highly intertwined. The police identity was a sensitive one, since the meaning of their occupation had become highly politicalized. With their social status very much at stake, many policemen confronted sudden and harsh changes in their social position

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<sup>1</sup> The 721 Yuen Long Attack, also known as the 721 Incident, refers to a mob attack that occurred in Yuen Long, Hong Kong. On 21 July, an armed mob of suspected triad members indiscriminately attacked MTR passengers, including elderly, children, passengers and journalists, as well as protesters, with steel rods and rattan canes in Yuen Long station.

<sup>2</sup> The 831 Prince Edward Station Attack, also known as the 831 incident took place on 31 August 2019, after a protest was held that day, Hong Kong police indiscriminately attacked passengers while arresting protesters who were returning home via Prince Edward station.

<sup>3</sup> The 2014 Occupy Movement was organised to be a civil disobedience movement. It was planned as a three-day sit-in but it ended up spanning 79 days. In total, officers fired 87 canisters of tear gas to disperse protesters, which was the first time the weapon was used since the city's return to Chinese rule. Batons and pepper spray were used in clearance actions (Arranz and Lam, 2019).

as protestors turned them into a target of attack, not just physical attack but reputational attack as well. When their occupation came into conflict not only with the protestors but with their very close friends and families, the meaning of being a policeman came into question. To be placed at the scene of conflicts (as a policeman), in the justice system (as a gatekeeper) and in the society (as a family member and friend) were experiences that were salient and particular to policemen involved in suppressing the 2019 movement. Due to the scale of the movement, officers who were not at the frontlines were also disrupted in their lives and reputations, as were even traffic officers.

This paper explores Hong Kong policemen's views of the 2019 protest movement. In this research, I explore how officers find meaning in their jobs, and how their interpretation of being a policeman contributed to their response to civil conflict. I explore four main research questions.

1. What were the motivations behind officers continuing their work even when they faced so much backlash from the public?
2. Did officers find compassion for the protestors?
3. What was the relationship between officers, the law and the government?
4. How did their families perceive them?

### **My position as a researcher**

I myself took part in the protests. I conduct this research out of curiosity as I failed to understand policemen on an individual level. For many people, the police were a distant group, which was most characterized by their group behaviour. That was how I perceived them before I engaged with them when I got arrested.

12 June 2020 marked the first anniversary of the first large-scale public disorder. I was standing among a crowd of protestors when a group of police suddenly circled us. Shocked by the sudden actions of the police, my first instinct was to run. All I could feel, however, was the full strength that had pulled me to the ground. The officer had grabbed my backpack, which I had luckily fallen on.

“Don’t fucking move!” he said, pointing his finger to my face, while he held me at my shoulder. Later, I learned his name was Jim. These were the very first words he said to me. After a minute or two, I was led to stand up against the wall. He said again, “Don’t move.”

“Can I have some water?”

“Fuck no! You are not allowed to fucking move!” Jim shouted to my face. That was how I learnt to shut up for most of my time as a detainee. Despite the very rude initial contact, most police were quite nice to me. Jim even later apologised for using excessive force: “I am sorry. I did not know you were a girl.” The most indelible memory from this experience, however, was a conversation I had with a middle-aged officer who took me to the hospital since I had been injured when I was tackled. Situated in a more personal space in the hospital, he began some small talk. “Are you a student? So do you have to go to school now?” “Yes.” “Do you guys go to campus now or is it online?” “Yeah. Zoom meetings.” “Zoom? What’s that?” “You know, the online application we use to have lectures. Don’t your kids talk to you about it?”

“No, my kids and I don’t talk anymore.” His response took me by surprise because I never expected him to confess his deteriorating relationship with his children to me, a handcuffed

detainee, who very likely had held the same political views as his children. Sensing a slight sorrow in his tone, I found the long-lost empathy I had for police at that moment.

Encountering the vulnerable and fragile side of police officers allowed me to get a peek at officers as human, not only as police. The curiosity that was sparked eventually led me to the research and writing of this paper.

This paper is not a defence of why officers or protestors acted the way they did. It is an investigation that began with curiosity. While my intention was not to justify or explain the occurrence of conflicts, I sought to find the answer to the many questions I have about the police. I saw this research as an opportunity to approach the police, a group of people who rarely came to the public's eye without the masks they wore at work. This paper illustrates the answers officers found in explaining their choices in conducting their duties. Drawing on multiple contexts that they were put in, this paper also described their underlying emotional thoughts and political opinions.

### **Literature Review**

The proposal of the extradition bill law was the flashpoint that made Hong Kong people protest, as they believed the bill would remove the legal firewall between Hong Kong and mainland China, which meant that their freedoms and identity as Hongkongers would be taken away (Lam & Ibrahim, 2020). The identity of being a Hongkonger for young people and protestors might very likely be a civic one rather than an ethnic one, which led to a rejection of mainland Chinese (Mathews, 2020). Some scholars had addressed that targeting symbols of mainland influence could be understood as the defence of the local Hong Kong identity, values, and culture (Scott et al., 2021).

As the movement continued, protestors' discontent towards the police progressively grew. "The spread of the protests and more proactive stance of the police interacted to expose police illegitimacy to a wider population" (Scott et al., 2021:832). Many protestors demanded punishment of the police for their perceived wrongdoings.

According to Beetham, there are three criteria of legitimacy. They are legal validity, shared beliefs for justifying laws, and consent to be ruled (Beetham, 1991). From supporting an independent commission of inquiry to investigating police misconduct to organizational efforts to attack the police (Purbrick, 2019), various actions in the 2019 Hong Kong society showed that all three criteria of legitimacy were at stake to different degrees. In a survey of the Hong Kong public conducted in May 2020, Hong Kong Police received a score of 36.8 points out of 100 marks. The force's net satisfaction rate among the public stood at a staggering negative 25 percentage points. (Ho, 2020). This shows how the Hong Kong Police had moved from being a 'legitimate authority' to a 'de facto authority', as defined by Raz. (Raz, 2009), no longer securing support and recognition by the public they were supposed to serve.

As the police-community relationship took a turn for the worse, the sense of self-legitimacy among officers would likely be reduced as well, reducing officers' motivation (Nix and Wolfe, 2017). Self-legitimacy of the powerholders is a crucial enabling factor when it comes to police work: "A loss of internal legitimacy often leads to disorganization of behaviour and an inability to perform an assigned role" (Boulding, 1967:299). In the case of Hong Kong Police, despite feeling unappreciated by most people, officers must go beyond their emotional, personal feelings, and act according to logical, impersonal reasons in their professional work to establish a sense of legitimacy and authority internally. This endeavour



can be reflected in Max Weber's claim that authority always "attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy." (Weber, 1978) For police officers, a belief in their moral rightness allows them to justify their claims as powerholders, thus, developing their internal legitimacy into audience legitimacy:

"In a criminal justice context, the development of power-holder legitimacy is therefore best understood as the cultivation of self-confidence in the moral rightness of power-holders' authority, within a framework of both official laws and regulations, and societal normative expectations."

— (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012:154)

To name a few of the many dilemmas that the police officers I interviewed struggled with, how did they find moral value in their work when their work was despised by the majority of Hongkongers? While their moral values would affect their perception of society and protestors, the interaction they have with them would also shape their values such as empathy. Rather than a simple dichotomy of police versus protestors, I would also like to capture the interactive framework they engage within.

Corresponding with Blumer's symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), the identity of policemen in the 2019 movement in Hong Kong was constantly being re-examined and redefined, not only by the public's changing attitudes towards police as a response to various incidents but also by the officers themselves interpreting their experiences and intentions in these incidents as a response to the public's sentiments.

According to the Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder (Waddington et al. 1989), there are six levels of interdependent analysis, one of which is interactional. For example, a particularly violent act targeting an officer might be understood by the police themselves as an expression from the protestors that there was no accommodation left with the policeman. (Waddington, 2010) Applicable to the case of 2019 Hong Kong, it would be important to investigate both officers' personal reflections and their side of the story about the events that they had experienced during 2019 and 2020, which could help us grasp and understand why they behaved as they did.

Unlike police-related research that offers explanations of how police actions contribute to the escalation of public disorder (King and Waddington, 2006; Body-Gendrot, 2013; Fassin, 2013; Newburn et al, 2018) I would like to explore the ethical and emotional rationale underlying the police's actions. Having said that, as an anthropology student, I hope to be an insider while presenting and analysing as an outsider. While I will offer objective analysis, I also like to draw attention to the meaningful interaction I had with these policemen, revealing their human side. However, my interactions with policemen had their limitations. When asked about their personal opinions, many of my interviewees discounted their own views; most of the time during the interview, they were clear that they spoke as representatives of their organization. Their presentations of selves correspond with what Goffman regarded as 'situated roles, and interviewees' responses were 'framed' by the interview context (Goffman, 1974) Recognizing the nature of the interview and my identity as a former protestor, many officers I interviewed held back on personal opinions and emotions, attempting to remain neutral by staying close to the 'facts'. In this sense, lessons learned from our interviews might be taken with a grain of salt.

## **Methodology**

There were two main target groups of informants. First, there were the policeman themselves, which included full-time officers, auxiliary officers, and retired officers. I also put applicants who aspired to be police officers into this category. Second, there were family members of policemen. They provided another more personal and intimate account of interacting with police officers, which enabled them to see a side of officers that was more private.

Due to the sensitivity of their identity, finding informants was not an easy task. Many officers and their family members rejected my invitation. Some changed their minds after agreeing to be interviewed. Some said they were not allowed to talk about the 2019 movement. In the end, I was lucky to have interviewed fifteen people, ten of whom were policeman, with the other five people family members of policeman.

Conducting in-depth interviews, I found myself sometimes transcribing recordings more than three hours long. Apart from minor emotional outbursts, the conversations were delightful and insightful, as all interviewees were friendly and willing to talk with me.

However, it should be noted that this sample can only represent a group of policemen who are more willing to communicate. From the conversations that I have had with some of the family members, I realized that there exist a group of policemen that I could hardly meet because of their relatively extreme views. It should come as no surprise as this was also a typical treatment of the protestors, refusing to talk with any police. Sometimes it stemmed from pure hatred, sometimes it came from the belief that communication only leads to more conflict because their views were so different. Thus, while my interviewees tended to be communicative and informative, I believe it did not represent the majority in the police force.

Yet, I found significance in interviewing this group of officers: officers who were willing to talk to a protestor.

### **Motivations - Why work?**

“Why would they not quit? Aren’t they afraid?” some of my friends asked me when they learnt about my project on police. “Well, obviously, it is because of the money,” another friend answered. It is common knowledge that Hong Kong police as civil servants earn high salaries, given the relatively low academic requirement of their position<sup>4</sup>. Like my friends, many people assumed policeman’s high income motivated their work. After all, who would volunteer to be at the centre of public opinion at the time of protests? To be constantly scrutinized, gazed upon, and intervened in their job was obviously no easy task.

### The situation police faced

“I am being watched all the time. Even as simple as dealing with street obstruction (unrelated to social movements), people would crowd me and started to make a fuss about it. In the past, it was not like this.” Daniel who had been working for the police force for more than 30 years emphasised the particularly intense social atmosphere that he had experienced during 2019, which was a work environment that he had rarely experienced in his career. “It was almost like whatever we policemen did, we would always be wrong. Even if you were trying to catch a jaywalker, people would crowd me and ask, ‘Why are you making things difficult for us?’ Whatever we did, we were wrong. That was the social atmosphere.”

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<sup>4</sup> The minimum academic requirements of a police constable are Level 2 or equivalent in five subjects in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSEE) or equivalent. (Hong Kong Police Force, n.d.), a quite low score. The starting point salary of a police constable is HK\$26190, compared to an average of HK\$16700 for fresh university graduates in Hong Kong. (JobsDB, 2019)

More than one policeman spoke similarly to me in drawing attention to the tense atmosphere in 2019 and 2020. “Even when there were more urgent cases, we could not handle them, like calling the ambulance or dealing with robbery. These were the crimes that we were eager to seize but we could not,” said Nick, a young officer working during the time of protests. It became worse when their professional roles interrupted their personal life. Multiple officers shared their personal experiences of being doxed, with their personal information leaked online. They felt that their privacy had been invaded. Their worst feeling, however, might have resulted from their being shunned by their friends because of their profession. While many young officers had friends who supported their career choice, they had also encountered some strong objections, which played out in the form of social isolation or heated debates. “We know that we are supporting each other because others won’t,” Kevin, a student who had applied to be an officer wryly said, referring to a group of friends he had met when they volunteered for the police force. These forms of peer pressure were most powerful among young officers who had worked for the force for only two years or less, with their earlier social circle centred on their school life.

Conversely, middle-aged officers had an established a network of friends within their occupation. Not only had some of them been living in police family quarters, the vast variety of recreational clubs and volunteering work<sup>5</sup> that was accessible for police helped create cohesion within their community. While older officers had a more solid social circle centred on their work-life, their segregation from the other social circles was still potent. Among my police-officer informants: one was no longer welcomed by his church; another had chosen to cut off his siblings from his life after learning about their political views; and one father was despised and ignored by his children. The officer that I encountered during my detainment

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<sup>5</sup> Police Volunteer Services Corps, Police Athletics Club, Police Adventure Club, Police Orienteering Club etc.

was no exceptional case, as I learned from my interviews. Many officers during 2019 and 2020 had deteriorating relationships with their families and friends and social circles. Two years have now passed since then. Some relationships have been restored as the social tension was reduced, but other relationships were never the same again.

By drawing upon the above examples, I illustrate the degree of stress experienced by officers, which stemmed from both their work and their social lives. Naturally, anyone who was put in the same circumstance might choose to remove themselves from such difficult social positions. Government statistics showed that there was an increase of 38.5 per cent of unexpected resignations of Hong Kong Police from 2019 to 2020, compared to the previous year (Leung, 2020). From talking with my informants, I learnt that there were indeed officers they knew who had resigned because of social pressure.

### Personal ethics

My informants, as officers who stayed in their job, were afraid, angry, and disappointed by how they were treated by others, but felt that they had no choice but to remain. It boiled down to one phrase I often heard: “You got to do what you got to do.” “Were you not scared?” I asked officers who recounted to me the scenes of direct conflicts that they were involved in. “I had no choice. I couldn’t be frightened.” They all gave the same answers, but their narratives of why they remained on the police usually involved two kinds of reasons.

First, officers felt that there were no other alternatives other than continuing their job. One reason was the salary they get and the implications behind it. “My family is dependent on me, on my salary. I carry this responsibility with me.” Daniel, a middle-aged officer with two children said. “Most of the officers just wanted to earn their salaries. It’s just a job. When

they were at work, they would talk about their plans on buying properties, getting married, finances,” Manson, a retired officer told me. However, if officers’ reason to work was just like many other occupations, which could be mostly reduced to money, it would not have been so difficult for them, particularly in terms of the moral condemnation many experienced. The second and main reason that most of them mentioned to counter such moral condemnation was to justify their actions. Often citing the rule that ‘Police officers must obey lawful orders’ in the Police Force Ordinance<sup>6</sup>, officers recounted how they must obey their superiors. This was intrinsic and fundamental to a disciplined service. Officers found meaning and significance in following orders to create organisational effort. “Can you imagine a society with a police force where officers do not listen to their superiors? There would be no peace at all. What about the guns and weapons? Officers would just use them as they wish. It would be horrible,” Manson, an officer asked me rhetorically. This echoes what scholars have written about police:

“The violence committed by the police is personal by our definition, yet they are called into action by expectations deeply rooted in the structure - there is no need to assume the intervening variable of intention. They simply do their job”

(Galtung, 1969:179-180)

Yet, following orders was only one narrow dimension of their duties. It took more than just obeying orders to do their job as most of the time they would not be supervised closely at work. Galtung suggested ‘the structure’ as constitutive of officers’ expectations to how they should act, but what constitutes this structure?

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<sup>6</sup> “Police officers shall obey lawful orders: Every police officer shall obey all lawful orders of his superior officers whether given verbally or in writing and shall obey and conform to police regulations and orders made under this Ordinance.” (Police Force Ordinance, 2021)

“It is about self-discipline. I would have this sense to perform my duties. This is professional ethics. You can think of it this way: If either way, I would be receiving the salary, why would I chase after a crime even when no one is watching?” said Daniel. “Our duty is protecting the citizens, but it is up to us not to slack off...The essence lies in personal ethics,” said Eric, a middle-aged policeman. When Eric was illustrating the importance of personal virtues, he stressed the large amount of effort and good work that the police had done in the past two years. Like most of my informants, he had a strong belief that most of his colleagues preserved these ethical qualities in their conduct in their job.

Their answers suggested that personal ethics were part of the structure, alongside commands and orders, constructing expectations of themselves regarding their actions and behaviour at work. However, if the sense of necessary responsibility and self-discipline were derived from officers’ own moral meters alone, it would be problematic because each person would have a different judgment on how serious an offence was. While officers also suggested other factors, such as the difference between criminal and civil laws, the training in the academy, and socialization into the police culture such as hands-on experience with colleagues and practical teaching from senior officers as ways to structurally establish a standardized moral meter among police officers, these were contingent and insufficient reasons in explaining the overall in-sync professional practice of the police.

This gap between personal practice and organizational standards seemed to close once officers appealed to the law as the ultimate guide. All my informants, without fail, highlighted their roles as mere law enforcers when I asked them about their motivations. Simply put, officers felt that their hands were tied because they felt a sense of responsibility that was derived from legality, which required them to obey commands and perform their



duties. “The situation back then was simply that one group was breaking the law and so another group was enforcing the law. Police were just doing their jobs.” Kevin said. “Police forces are trained and controlled by the rule of law, so their actions would be within a certain standard,” said Yami, who had applied to be a police officer after graduation.

Although police had little space for disobedience, the officers believed that they still had the agency to disobey orders when necessary. “If my senior gives me an illegal order, I will not do it, because it would be a risk for me. I will be at fault for obeying illegal orders.”

Interestingly, in one conversation, an officer told me that could be a difference between obeying orders and being a law enforcer. Although on very rare occasions, enforcing the laws and obeying orders could be contradictory, these situations were often very controversial, especially when it came to protests.

### Emotions

When I asked them why they continued to work even amid social pressure, an emotional element of work was displayed: a deliberate abstraction of their personal emotions from their professional work. Removing the element of personal sentiments allowed their narratives around their work to be strictly professional in focus. There were two ways this played out in their job routine.

A suppression of emotions was deployed as a tactic for them to handle their tasks. To act properly as police, they must set aside their own feelings. Police work involved both strong feelings and rules that required officers to suppress their emotions. As a coping mechanism, emotional distancing and depersonalisation were strategies that officers may consciously opt

for. (Drodge and Murphy, 2002) To follow rules and orders, this specific type of emotional processing was needed for them to carry on with their tasks.

Nick, a young officer, was told by his superiors to chase a group of people wearing black clothing, the colour that protesters sometimes wore. He naturally chased after them. In hindsight, he was confused and doubtful. Not given any explanation, he felt like the only reason he was chasing after them was the colour of their T shirts. Like many other officers at the scene of conflicts, Nick had no time to enquire. Although later he did learn that the people were thieves, his experience had shown that personal feelings and hence judgements must be put aside. Another case in point was Nick's colleague, who said that he would arrest his son with tears in his eyes if it was the deed that had to be done.

In this sense, leaving aside personal emotions and judgments may seem to be the ethical thing to do when this could contribute to organizational unity. If a policeman got scared and left the crime scene, we would naturally say it is an unprofessional thing for the officer to do as well. It is in the nature of police's work that ethically, they should detach themselves from any personal inclinations that might cause them to refrain from carrying out their jobs. Going as far as arresting their sons and daughters, officers went through internal struggles as they conformed to work ethics. This echoes Max Weber's finding that the "honour of the civil servant" will lead him to renounce personal feelings to "execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction." (Weber 1919:13)

Being self-disciplined was an important element that was mentioned by many of my interviewees. It was the main reason that kept them going even during the most difficult

times. They would have earned the same amount of money if they slacked off during work, since no one was supervising them that closely. But they still devoted themselves to their jobs because of their work ethic. “After I joined the force, I became much more self-disciplined than my classmates. For example, I am always the only one that would be on time for an 8:30 am class.” Gabriel, a young officer who was studying at a university said. Daniel, a more experienced officer elaborated on this topic of self-discipline. “This is the special thing about disciplined services. Unlike other jobs, you cannot do just enough work to get by. Everything had to be well-founded. There are consequences for what you have done.”

This suppression of emotion also separated them from being affected by public opinion while at work. Because emotions were personal, they could not be shown regularly in the police culture, which placed individual agencies into their contextual circumstances. (Galtung, 1969) Emotions also played an important role when it came to constructing the police identity.

“The police construct themselves as distinct from the citizenry for three principal reasons: to protect themselves from public meddling; to command the capacity to dictate the flow of action; and to celebrate their professional status.”

(Herbert, 2006:492)

Many of my informants stressed the dire consequences of an officer choosing personal preferences over organisational orders. Not only would it be illegal for them to not follow commands, but it would take a toll on society as well. If public opinion changed from time to time, the social order would be continuously disrupted. Yami used a train metaphor to describe this situation. “Imagine that we were all passengers travelling on a train. If some

passengers entered the driver's room and got hold of the steering wheel, it would be a problem as the train would get off track and flip over eventually. Just because some passengers do not like where the train is going, it does not grant them the right to enter the driver's room. To prevent accidents like this from happening, there are security guards on the train. We, as citizens, are passengers on the train. The government is the driver. The police force is the security guards. Police could not just let any citizen disrupt the government's rule because it might lead to social disorder. It might be due to citizens' lack of professional political experience or their lack of consent on the actual direction that Hong Kong should go in." Therefore, the police were not in the position to attend to society's views and let protestors disrupt the government's rule. Rather than listening to citizens' opinions, their top priority was to make sure that the rule of the city was in safe hands. Putting forward another possibility, officer Eric told me to imagine a parallel universe where police had decided to listen to the people and put down their weapons in 2019. He believed that this could have led the People's Liberation Army to enter Hong Kong, further escalating tensions.

Both Yami and Eric's narratives acknowledged that citizens had highly doubted the actions of the police force during the protests, which had placed officers under great pressure. Even though all the policeman recounted how overwhelmed they felt, most of them agreed that showing personal feelings was unprofessional. For example, swearing at protestors, calling them names, and arguing back after being agitated by protestors was understandable, but a better, more ideal behaviour would be to maintain a neutral position.

As much as policemen tried to avoid displaying emotions at work, they were only human. When they were being sworn at and spit on, officers could only suppress their emotions. Humiliation, disrespect and being wronged were emotions that were often described by my

interviewees. This kind of emotional struggle took a toll on their mental well-being.

Difficulties in coping with job-related pressure are likely to lead to higher levels of burnout, cynicism and exhaustion among police (see Ricciardelli, 2018)

### De-policing

Although I previously mentioned various reasons for policemen to continue their work amidst the unwelcoming social atmosphere. However, sometimes the police I interviewed also avoided carrying out their jobs. Shared disapproval of the police force in society (see Agnew1992) can lead to psychological strain experienced by officers. De-policing—not fully carrying out their duties to the full extent that they might—can serve as a coping mechanism for the stress that officers experience, and may involve self-preservation, revenge and responding to legitimacy challenges. (Nix, Wolfe and Campbell, 2018)

In speaking with my informants, many highlighted how they worked with perseverance in 2019 and 2020. However, some of them also mentioned instances when they avoided policing because of the social tensions. “In the past, we would go after crimes even when we were off duty. During 2019 and 2020 though, we dared not to. The criminal could simply shout ‘A cop!’, and then the roles would be reversed.” Daniel explained why he stopped shouldering additional responsibilities that he used to take on as a policeman. This resonated with de-policing as a method of self-preservation. To avoid being targeted, they distanced themselves from unnecessary contact with the public.

The conversations that I had with my informants led me to believe that nearly all of them worked harder than they used to before the protests. However, their willingness and enthusiasm towards their work had become greatly reduced. Many of them had the vision to

help citizens and catch criminals, which often gave them a sense of achievement and satisfaction. However, during 2019 and 2020, their work functions were heavily affected by social tensions. Failing to conduct duties in the way they used to, officers' motivations and emotions led some to detach themselves from their work.

## **Empathy**

“By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.” (Adam Smith, TMS I.i.1.2)

Adam Smith's description of sympathy is more suitable for what nowadays we categorise as empathy (Bloom, 2019). According to Smith, it is the most fundamental element for building a moral system which guides our behaviour. Since empathy is a determinant of one's behaviour, I explore in the case of Hong Kong protests during 2019 and 2020, whether police had empathy for protestors. By exploring how officers' empathy is displayed in civil conflicts, I offer the police's perception of protestors and their behaviour.

### Defining empathy

Do policemen have empathy for protestors? Because of my informants' different definitions of empathy, a variety of responses was received. Officers were willing to put themselves into others' shoes to different degrees, which was reflected in their attitudes when they spoke on this topic. Briefly, most officers I interviewed did have empathy for protestors. Not only did

they show kindness to protestors, but they were also more likely to hold the belief that other officers also acted the same way towards protestors. Empathy was demonstrated in two ways, actions and feelings. Empathetic actions were illustrated by officers recalling past interactions they had with protestors, as well as their observations of their colleagues' behaviour. They gave examples of themselves and co-workers who exceeded their job descriptions to 'be good' to protestors. Nick asked the detainees whether they would like to have warm and cold water, which he believed to be a small gesture that could warm the protestors' hearts at critical moments. Gabriel talked with the detainees and learned about their motivations for participating in the movement. His co-worker would counsel the detainee and try to lead them to "the right path." Unstipulated in their job descriptions, these gestures implied a degree of comprehension of protestors' views, feelings and situations. Rather than a commitment to responsibility, these actions were claimed to have come from a place of understanding and benevolence, which were signs of empathy.

"We could have simply let it be. But we reasoned with them (講道理) and shared our thoughts with them because we wanted them to be good too. It was for their own good." In this way, Manson explained to me the rationale behind acting empathetically towards protestors. 'Being good' to protestors had a deeper implication than merely responding to protestors' needs. Apart from offering necessities to protestors or chatting with them, officers also wanted to guide them to 'the right path'. "My co-worker scolded a thief because he cared about him. He could not bear his care-free attitude," said Nick. When talking about the counselling sessions with protestors, officers used narratives like 'reasoning with them', 'leading them to the right path' and 'for their own good', which involved ethical judgements. Being considerate to protestors required officers' moral judgment on various events and actions. When officers reasoned with protestors at police stations, they reminded them of the

dire consequences of illegal actions, their families that they should bear in mind, and the future that they could have. Officers presented these prospects through a set of moral principles which involved abiding by the law. For instance, following police commands for protesters to leave a venue when instructed, instead of staying and fighting police, may be interpreted as being responsible to one's family.

Officers' personal feelings also reflected how they cared for the protestors, despite their opposition and tension. Gabriel recalled a conversation he had with a detainee. "When he started crying with his mother, my heart ached a bit too." The sign of regret made Gabriel feel for him. Daniel also shared his thoughts, "There were those who participated for personal benefits. But some were simply misguided by others or appeared at the wrong moment. I feel bad for them." These narratives illustrated the reasons why officers were empathetic with protestors. They preserved the idea that the protestors had been guided to a wrong path and that they were not in their right mind when they acted illegally through the protests. Thus, officers felt sympathetic and wanted to reason with them. When I offered them other possible motives of the protestors, such as demanding changes from the government or expressing their opinions, officers' attitudes altered slightly. "That is fine too. I understand, but they must bear the consequences of their actions." Their change of attitude revealed a reduction in empathy when protestors were clear-headed about their political goals.

For officers, empathy was conditional. Depending on protestors' motives and actions, they could be categorised into two groups. The first group contained people whose intentions were pure, only hoping to express their opinions through protest. Their actions were mostly peaceful as they sought the greater good of society. If they were violent, they were impacted by the crowd or the media. A concrete embodiment of this would be signs of guilt when



protestors were taken to the police station. Showing remorse was an indication that officers interpreted as being worthy of empathy, as it represented that the person discerned their guilt, and understood that what they had done was wrong, or at least reckless. For this first group, officers would give an account of detainees feeling sorry and sometimes crying. Deeming them as unfortunately arrested, officers showed empathy towards this group of people.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the second group was formed by people who had purposes other than expressing their views and demands. Their motivations were rooted in personal benefits, including money, votes (for legislative and district councillors), and entertainment. Despite the lack of evidence, some officers believed that at least some protestors were being paid to participate in violent events. “It is impossible that no money was involved. The scale and the concrete organization of the protests were a tell-tale. Who is paying for the design of the posters, their gear and their food?” said Daniel. Officers also supposed that some people joined the protests for fun because they enjoyed being violent and sabotaging public transport and properties.

Officers found it problematic to empathise with the second group because, in their eyes, these people did not understand that what they were doing was wrong. They showed no regrets when they were taken to the police station, which was embodied by them talking back at the officers or ignoring them. The second group included protestors whose acts of violence directly compromised officers’ safety. Geared with weapons and bombs, they usually stood at the frontlines to fight the officers. Due to the serious threats that they were imposing on officers, this group of people were the hardest for the officers to empathise with. “How could it be possible for me to empathetic with you when I have to be against you?” said Manson, implying his view that empathy and opposition were incompatible. Officers who had been to

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<sup>7</sup> For officers, although deemed as unfortunate, arresting these group of people were by no means wrong. It could be because they were indeed violating the law or because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

the frontlines in protests tended to display less empathy. They recalled the life-threatening situations they were put in because of protestors' unruly behaviour, which were detrimental to their safety as well as personal interest.

“The police distinction between 'good' and 'bad' demonstrators is based on their conception of 'legitimate' protest, as well as on their expectations of the demonstrators' behaviour.”

(Della Porta and Reiter, 1998)

Corresponding to Della Porta and Reiter's theory, officers showed a principled division between two groups of protestors based on a subjectively constructed conception of the elements and forms of legitimate protests. Officers suggested clear political demands, a passion for the good of Hong Kong, peaceful demonstrations, peer pressure and media influence as legitimate reasons for participating in protests. In contrast, personal benefits, monetary gains, political fame and a passion for violence were illegitimate reasons to demonstrate on the streets. For the police, while some people retained reasonable grounds, others had apolitical, primarily expressive justifications. (Marx, 1972) (Soares et al., 2018)

### Empathy at the frontline

Manson, Daniel, Gabriel and Anthony were all officers who had opportunities to confront protestors in relatively calm or protected environments. They and other officers emphasised to me that empathy was a personal quality that was variant among different officers. They believed that by braving storms of bricks and bombs, frontline officers were under the circumstances to be less empathetic towards protestors. Although I failed to interview officers who worked at the frontline, those I interviewed explained their observations and

thoughts. Police officers on the frontlines had to establish a clear boundary between law enforcers and criminals. A lack of empathy appeared to be a precondition for frontline officers to conduct their duties, which involved direct physical confrontation and a war of nerves. Manson explained sternly why officers would act violently towards protestors, “It was not an attack. It was self-defence. When your safety and personal interest were at stake, of course, you would act defensively. That is why we have a different attitude compared with frontline officers.” The more officers were exposed to threats and danger, the more likely they would fight back to ensure their own safety. Descriptive profiles of frontline officers from their colleagues and family members depicted their adversarial stance. A daughter of a frontline officer, Sam recalled the hatred her father had towards protestors, “We were simply watching television. When the scene of protests appeared, he would insult all the females as ‘angels’ who provided sex service to the male protestors.” She also described her father’s rage when he saw people with gas masks and black T-shirts on the street. Understandably, frontline officers declined my interview invitations. Their colleagues and family members reminded me that this group of officers who held extreme views did indeed exist.

“Unarmed and ill-equipped (手無寸鐵) were terms that only protestors would use in describing themselves. Police would never use this term. He and his colleagues who had been crowded by a group of protestors with weapons in their hands felt scared and threatened. He felt like he was going to die at that moment when he could not get to the police car,” said Sam, whose father dismissed the idea that there were any innocent protestors. This resonated with Manson’s idea that officers’ empathy towards the protestors was inversely proportional to the harm that was inflicted on them. Officers had clearly drawn the distinction between officers at the frontlines and those who were not. They attributed the attitudinal difference to environmental factors. Officers were likely to act more violently when their surroundings

were chaotic and crowded. Daniel explained, “There is just no way for us to ask you to be arrested nicely in such an environment. ‘Please lay down and let us arrest you.’ No, that is impossible. We had to use force. But when we are back at the police station, the setting had changed to a safer and calmer place. Then there is no need for such use of force, and officers could reason more.”

The empathy of the police towards the protestors was largely dependent on their interactions with them. Over two years, long-standing public conflicts acted as sites of continual negotiations and reproduction of police-protestors relationships, of which the negative dynamics escalated steadily due to prolonged periods of exposure and constant contact. “Some would think: if it took tear gas bombs to stop the last protest, then perhaps this protest could be stopped sooner with tear gas bombs too,” said Anthony, an officer new to the force. When this process was repeatedly performed, the hostility progressively rose and the relationship between police and protestors significantly deteriorated each time. Emerging in an increasingly more inimical environment, police’s empathy for protestors shrank proportionately.

While direct confrontations on the streets was more violent, intense, and threatening to officers, contacts made in police stations or regular stop-and-frisk events were relatively calmer, and more peaceful. Thus, their interpretation of protestors’ behaviours, motives, and attitudes towards police diverged from the officers working at the frontlines. Resonating with symbolic interactionism, representations of groups shaped the identities of each other through their interpretation of one another’s behaviour (Blumer, 1969). In the case of police, the extent of empathy was dependent on their knowledge of protestors’ motives. Officers’

identities concerning empathy was also moulded by protestors' behaviours towards them, affecting their display of empathy.

### Sympathy

Personal differences in empathy in officers can be explained by how they perceive protestors and their interactions with them. Most of my informants were empathetic towards protestors to some degree. This taught me that some officers indeed empathised with protestors.

Officers' empathy came with preconditions. The prerequisite appeared to be that the person must admit themselves to be wrong in participating in protests illegally. This underlying moral judgement is what segregated protestors from police.

Empathy, defined as a response in which a person's situation was perceived as potentially similar to one's own (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Champion, 2004), could be deficient in some officers' cases. When it came to day-to-day interactions, officers were able to share protestors' feelings, for example, in caring for their families. However, when it came to protests, the resonance was mostly limited to their definition of political motives, which was confined by their beliefs on what constitutes a legitimate protest. Some protestors, outside of officers' moral community, were categorised as "bad protestors". Instead of fostering moral engagement and the questioning of authority, the displayed empathy was influenced by their inherent moral judgments and conservative political stance. Situated in the context of political conflicts, I believe sympathy rather than empathy would be a more accurate interpretation of the caring feelings they had for protestors. Sympathy would allow them to feel with the protestors emotionally while giving them the ability to hold to their own political grounds. Sympathy enabled them to connect with protestors on a personal level while also maintaining a safe distance between protestors and themselves.

### Emotional Responses to Police's Own Close Relations

Empathy or sympathy was a kind of emotional response that police officers displayed in response to protestors' hatred or hostile attitudes. When it came to their own loved ones, police officers adopted slightly different approaches emotionally. The more intimate the relationship was, the harder it would be for a person to cope with negative emotions they encountered or imagined. I asked Eric, who had a close relationship with his 8-year-old son, to imagine his son being a protestor 10 years later. "What would you do if your son hates you then?" He said, "No, it is impossible. He and I are so close." When I argued that it was possible, like many police families in 2019, he replied, "No. I think it would be very difficult for him to hate me. He is such a good boy. We bond really well." In another interview, I asked Kevin whether he would proactively disclose his occupation to his future girlfriend, to which he answered no. I asked, "What if after 2 years of dating, she finds out that you are a police officer and want to break up with you because she hates police?" He sighed and said, "Then it is fate that we cannot be together."

Denial and reluctant acceptance were not the only way officers emotionally dealt with hatred from people they were close to. A few officers attempted to deeply communicate with their family members, often in vain. These examples illustrate to me that officers struggled more with conflicting emotions they had for their friends and families as compared with protestors whom they did not know. If their family members were protestors or disliked the police, officers displayed frustration, sadness and disappointment as their relationship with their families became worse. This emotional response showed that when officers were connected to protestors on a personal level, empathy or sympathy would be replaced by more intense negative feelings as they dealt with their loved ones' negative attitude.

## **Police, law and government**

A short explanation of the intertwining relationship between the law, the government and the police is this: the government makes the law, and the police enforce the law. In the real world, however, there are many complications between the three intertwining parties. The police's legal obligations in practice are defined by how officers understand the relationship between themselves, the law, and the government. These interpretations act as anchors for officers to fix their positions in society. Complying with their sculpted imaginations of their roles, officers dealt with social conflicts in accordance with their presuppositions. From officers' perspectives, they had been forced by the government to occupy the space between the government and the protestors. They were the buffer zone that the government needed in order to begin negotiating with the protestors. This chapter dives into officers' understanding of the relationship between the three parties and how their views on social conflicts in 2019 and 2020 were affected by it.

### Police presented as law enforcers

Constitutive of the government, civil servants such as police must answer to the government. The duties of police as civil servants were layered further with paramount obedience to enforcing the law. Police must carry out both government orders and law enforcement. I asked officers whether officers identify more with the former or the latter. Officers repeatedly stressed only their roles as law enforcers. The implications were clear: they only acted according to the law. Establishing boundaries between police and the other parties such as the government and the public, officers claimed that the law was the sole principle guiding their actions. A retired officer, Chris, said, "We are not representing the government. We are only enforcing orders from the government (according to the law)." Police lawfully conducted their duties as the government commanded. He further explained this by contextualising the

use of force in civil conflicts. “Protestors were surrounding the Central Government Offices, a symbol of the government’s power. Police conducted dispersal actions to secure the rule of law.” As defenders of the rule of law, officers reinforced the social order. The Hong Kong Government was the only lawful administrative bureaucracy that they were obliged to obey so that law and order in Hong Kong could be restored. Thus, authorized with legal powers by the Police Force Ordinance, officers were not only responsible to the government, but they were liable to the citizens living under the rule of law in Hong Kong. In short, the police were only acting according to the law as commanded by the government, but they were responsible to the public.

“The Police is empowered to impose conditions in public order events for the interests of national security, public safety, and public order under the Public Order Ordinance (Cap. 245).”

(Research Office of Legislative Council Secretariat, 2020:2)

Although the police force submitted to the government, for officers the roles of law enforcers and government were distinct from each other. Officer Nick described the police’s position to be ‘unmoving and static like a mountain (一座不動山)’, strictly restrained to the execution of laws. By detaching the police from other parties, they could remain in a relatively unmoved position in which they acted on commands and laws from the government, while the government had the right and the decision to command and make laws. Theoretically, being strictly confined to enforcing the law, their position allowed no place for personal disposition. However, regarding the 2019 social conflicts, officers recognized the shifting nature of law enforcement practices. The execution of the law was, to some extent, subject to individualistic and organizational influences. They agreed that, as much training and



socialization as they had been given in their career, it was impossible to always make the best, unbiased decision.

On an individualistic level, emotion was a factor that could hinder officers from being solely amenable to the law. The tension and atmosphere in protests could be agitative and triggering to officers. Being insulted and spit in their faces were cases in point. When officers act concerning their emotions rather than the law, it would affect their neutral stance in the legal system. Another factor was the incorrect judgments of officers. In protests, decisions had to be made in a split second. Officers admitted there were incidents where officers made ‘unideal’ decisions. For instance, some said that the policemen who passed by the 721 Yuen Long Attack<sup>8</sup> could have made a better judgment of the situation at hand.

On an organizational level, one factor was the presence of bad apples in the police force, which would be a mission impossible to get rid of due to the sheer scale of the organisation. Stating examples from the news of delinquent colleagues<sup>9</sup>, officers were aware of the presence of such officers in the police force. The other factor was the general direction of police policies. According to the officers I spoke with, there was a stark contrast in the way protests were being regulated, during the leadership of Stephen Lo and Chris Tang as Commissioner of Police. A comparison was made between the number of arrests at the siege of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the siege of Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), which was five and over a thousand people respectively, despite the events similar in nature being only a few days apart, during which Tang succeeded Lo<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> See footnote 1

<sup>9</sup> Examples included transport police driving into protestors on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020, Franklin Chu assaulting protestor in 2015 and beating of Ken Tsang by seven officers in 2014.

<sup>10</sup> My professor reminded me that this could also be due to the difference in tactical moves. CUHK is surrounded by forests and the exits were not easily blocked. HKPU on the other hand, is much smaller and the police could surround it and block the exits easily.

Leadership created a difference in the style of law enforcement, which was readily discerned by the officers.

These factors affected the impartiality of the police force as law enforcers. Officers acknowledged that these biases in law enforcement practice were considered inevitable. This contradicted officers' initial emphasis on the police's unmoving role in the legal system. When I asked them how such conflict could be resolved, they mentioned both structural adaptation and personal integrity [人格/个人操守].

Structural adaptations included punishment pronounced by the Independent Police Complaints Council, internal investigations to hold officers accountable and systematic training to align officers' understanding of laws. Structural systems would align the officers' ideologies and behaviours, producing a united and consistent body of law enforcers. Without shared ideologies and behaviours through these systems, officers risk their reputation as a fair authority. Presenting an image of arbitrariness in law enforcement would compromise their authority as a neutral party.

“Unlike the rumours, it is almost impossible for officers to hit or rape detainees. There are CCTVs everywhere. There are serious consequences for that because there are a lot of strict procedures that needed to be followed,” said Manson. The strict and complicated procedural guidelines were referred to as proof of procedural justice ensuring that those policemen violating the rules would be punished. Contrary to what Manson said, Chris believed that there were instances where officers did hit detainees, “But they cannot be too unruly. They will get punished.” Underlying Manson and Chris's portrayals was the fact that there were established systems at work that would prevent much deviation in the force. Through

reinforcing these regulatory systems, the shared ideologies concerning policemen's behaviour and roles were reiterated. While some might have made wrong judgements or behaved poorly, their actions had to stay within the range of actions that were considered acceptable to represent a consistent, professional image of the police.

Another way that officers attempted to resolve the contradictions between the bias in law enforcement and the police's unmoving role was through personal integrity. Due to the large size of the police force, mistakes and deviants do indeed surface. "There are some personal factors that just cannot be controlled by police's training, like their good or bad hobbies, or their upbringings. There was only so much that the police force could offer to them to control the overall quality of policemen," said Yami. To her, police were doing their best to maintain the quality of their services through systems which eliminated officers who did not conform to the shared image. Integrity could be a hurdle to maintaining the professional actions of the police force. Emotions were presented as an explanation for why deviant and unruly behaviour happened among police. Officers took pity on those who were punished for being ruled over by their emotions. "Police are only humans. We have emotions too. If others were put in their position, they would likely have done the same thing," said Chris. Emotions were seen as an uncontrollable and irrational element that contrasted with the controlled, professional image of a police officer. In this narrative, officers would often incorporate the human side as a defence as to why unruly behaviour by police deserved compassion.

One other factor that was difficult to control was personal judgements. Controversial actions taken were often made in a split second, which implied that police might not be able to fully comprehend the situations at hand before acting. An example mentioned earlier was a

journalist being shot in her eye<sup>11</sup>. When I asked, “Would you describe this as a wrong action?” my informants often corrected me: “It was not wrong. It was the best decision they made under the given circumstance. Granted, the officers could have taken better or more ideal actions, but they had their reasons and limitations at that moment.” “Don't you think journalists should not be shot?” I asked. They told me, “It was part of her job. Just like a war correspondent, she should have expected it.” For officers, it was due to these factors and limitations that violence and the use of force were inevitable. They believed violence should be an expected and inevitable reaction, the conduct of self-defence. (Bandura, 1990, 1999, 2004). They highlighted their right to use violence when it came to restoring the peace and order of society. They identified the control measures that were taken to ensure the neutrality of the police force. Their beliefs on the credibility of these measures provided moral legitimacy for the ‘unideal’ actions carried out by some officers. They shifted the responsibility by blaming the victims or the circumstances.

### Finding legal legitimacy

Being law enforcers did not exempt them from being emotional and from making ‘unideal’ judgments. As long as they were disciplined, following the Police Ordinance, they were doing the best that they could, they felt. Only those acts that were illegal would be considered wrong. Controversial but legal behaviour by the police was considered acceptable.

This leads to a dichotomy of acceptable, lawful police and unacceptable, unlawful police. In the case where a journalist was blinded by a police’s rubber bullet, since it was considered an action taken legally, it was acceptable to the officers I interviewed. As long as the actions

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<sup>11</sup> On 29 September 2019, Indonesian journalist, Veby Mega Indah was blinded in the right eye by a rubber bullet shot by police when she was covering a protest in Wan Chai (Graham-Harrison, 2019).

were legal, the degree of power and force used would only be considered ‘unideal’ but not wrong. When put into context, the word ‘unideal’ meant that the officers’ decision was not the best decision that could have been made to uphold the police’s neutral position. For instance, shooting a journalist or passers-by would be interpreted by the public as officers attacking civilians not involved in the protests. However, this term also avoided deeming the officers’ actions ‘wrong’ or ‘inappropriate’. Despite the clearly disproportionate use of force, violation of fundamental human rights and the severe physical harm inflicted, officer Chris defended the police’s action, “You have to understand that we had to make decisions in a split second. We saw things differently from the public because we were more concerned about law and order.” Controversial interventions and use of force were justified by police officers by their reliance on the lawful limits of their professional codes of conduct.

Nonetheless, endorsed by the state’s monopoly on the use of force, conduct that was illegal would likely be tolerated. (Cohen, 2001; Matthews & Kauzlarich, 2007; Waddington, 1999)

Officers found it unfair for the public to judge the neutrality and professionalism of the police force in hindsight by taking officers’ actions out of context, excluding environmental factors and emotions that could affect the officers’ judgment. They believed that no logical officer would compromise their self-interest to act out of line. Manson said, “Do you think we catch criminals and hit protestors for fun? Did you know how much trouble the officer got in for shooting the protestor at Sai Wan Ho<sup>12</sup>? His daughter had to transfer schools. The bald officer at Yuen Long had to move with his family just because he pointed guns at protestors<sup>13</sup>. Do you think we were not frightened? We only conduct these acts when we must.” There was a strong belief of officers that their colleagues had made the best out of every situation by

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<sup>12</sup> On 11 November 2019, a police officer shot a protestor at in his abdomen in Sai Wan Ho. (Cheng, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> On 30 July 2019, a police officer outside Kwai Chung station pointed a shotgun at protestors. (Zhang and Chen, 2019)

acting professionally as trained. Corresponding to Prenzler, Porter, & Alpert's findings, officers' priority was put on their legal and disciplinary ethos over the harm associated with police conduct. When it came to internal accountability, principles such as officers' safety and avoidance of the use of force drew the distinctions between accepted and unaccepted use of force (Prenzler, Porter, & Alpert, 2013).

When the dichotomy of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours was drawn strictly by legislation, officers could largely eliminate moral judgements based on social, cultural, and historical meters. Their legitimacy was established through the law, which made them as the only legitimate law enforcers. Chris mentioned one of the most insulting experiences during the movement, which was when protestors besieged the police headquarters and denied officers access to food and other goods. "First, besieging the police headquarters was very insulting because it was the symbol of police power. Who do you think you are? You are not the police."

Officers demonstrated an understanding of 'legitimacy' similar to the definition from Weber. He asserted that the state was the only actor that could authorize legal and legitimate use of force. (Weber, 1958) Protestors shook officers' view that the deployment of legal and legitimate violence was theirs alone. Being questioned and condemned by many citizens was a symbol of their legitimacy taken away from them.

### Police and the government

The relationship between police and the government was complicated. I received three kinds of responses regarding their position: police as representatives of the government, police as representatives of the law, and police as only part of the government hence unable to

represent the entire government. Despite officers' responses being different, they all maintained that police were distinct from the government.

The implication of 'police representing the government' was that the police were acting on behalf of the government. In other words, as representatives, the police's actions spoke for the government. However, for most officers, this was not the case. They rejected situations in which the police were perceived as the acting agent of the government as well as the government speaking on behalf of the police. An example would be officers' anger towards Matthew Cheung, Hong Kong's number two official at the time, who apologised for the police's actions during the 721 incident (Chan, 2019). "Why were you (Matthew Cheung) apologizing on behalf of the police department? It gave the impression that the police were wrong. It diminished our morale," Chris said, "If you think we were wrong, you could start an investigation. But you could not, without communicating with the police department, represent us."

While Chris and other officers indicated the non-interchangeable relationship between the two parties, they acknowledged the position of the police force as a member of the government. Their actions were executions of commands from the government. Chris added, "We are not representing the government. We are only conducting our duties according to the government's commands." But even though they conducted their lawful duties on behalf of the government, officers denied that the police force was a representative of the government, which seemed contradictory. The contradiction emerged from their position as law enforcers who obeyed commands from the government, while simultaneously endeavouring to remain neutral. This contradiction was resolved by officer erasing political dispositions from their narratives. One of the officers, Manson, clarified this angrily when I had assumed that police

represent the government, “This is what you guys (protestors) would think. I don’t care who Carrie Lam is. Her political stance is none of my business. I only enforce the law.”

“Agency displacement is fostered by the volunteer character and high legitimacy attributed to the authority of democratic states and to the legal standards governing their actions.” (Freire & Neto, 1988; Bassiouni, 2010, cited in Soares, Barbosa & Matos, 2018:179)

Extracting the police force from political involvement detached the officers from the political narratives present in society. In this way, even though they were part of the government, their actions had no political meanings of their own, they felt. Instead, the law was their ultimate guidance. The perceived agency was reduced as the decisions made and actions taken could not be seen as their political intention to support or assist the government. Manson’s anger also unravelled another issue related to the police-government relationship. His words reflected his presupposition that the protestors were at fault for merging the two parties, rendering the police force partially responsible for the government’s decisions. His beliefs were shared by Daniel as well, “The extradition bill was not made by the police. The police were only enforcing social order. The law was set by the government. Go talk to them. Why did protestors target the police for restoring social order?” Through the comparison between the two parties, officers shifted the political negotiations in social conflicts away from police practice. Political opinions expressed should be presented to the government, which was the party with political capacity. In their eyes, law enforcement was apolitical, *de facto*. To them, protestors transforming the occasion of law enforcement as a site for political negotiations was insensible. Examples of officers defending themselves by attributing their contribution to social order, and their legal right to use force involved behavioural processes that used moral



values and principles to turn a morally perceived harmful action into a legitimized one. As studies suggest, these behavioural processes revolved around a moral reconstruction of the harmful action through moral justification, sanitized language and advantageous comparisons (Bandura, 1990, 1999, 2004; Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2011).

### Officers' Reflections on Their Positions

Officers' perception of the police's relationship with the government sometimes led them to feel trapped and frustrated, as they were caught between the government and the citizens.

'Being caught in the middle (成為磨心)' was the description that resonated most with them.

They believed that they were wrongly accused by protestors of being supporters of the government. In their minds, the police as an organization should have no political stance except being the executive organization for the government's commands. Charged with the assumption that police were blue (pro-government), officers felt they were misunderstood by the protestors. Some officers expressed anger at protestors who tarred the police and the government with the same brush. Kevin, a student who applied to be a policeman said, "Police were like the parting line between regular citizens and crimes. It is the police's duty to protect citizens from crimes. But the police's role was obscured and vague during the protests." His words were reflective of the changing social perceptions of police as law enforcers needed by citizens. Deployed as part of the government's policies on protestors, police stood between the government and the citizens, which put them in a difficult position. "Do you remember when Carrie Lam said that all she had was thirty-thousand people (the police force) <sup>14</sup>? This sentence precisely manifested the way she put the policeman in the

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<sup>14</sup> Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong said in September 2019, "... apart from the 30,000 men and women in the [police] force we have nothing. Really. We have nothing. I have nothing....So that means that whatever we do we have to take into full account the police assessment and reactions, so to give them some powers which they could not enforce because they're outnumbered." (Reuters Staff, 2019)

middle,” said Anthony. Many officers also believed that the government could have done better in reducing the friction between the protestors and the police, and some also expressed their dissatisfaction with the government

### **Family members**

Although I had the chance to talk with officers, I often could not know them in any depth. Family members of the officers were mirrors that showed me another side of the officers that could not be perceived from interviews. Since family members of officers were also a target of attack in the anti-extradition bill movement, their observations and attitudes offered a unique point of view.

### Impact on the family members

All the family members I interviewed were sons and daughters of officers. The term ‘sons of dogs, daughters of dogs (狗仔狗女)’ was coined during the movement to address this specific identity. The offspring of policemen were targeted to be bullied and attacked by some protestors. This kind of indiscriminate attack was controversial at the time, with some arguing that offspring did not necessarily hold the same political opinions as their parents. Some protestors destroyed and defaced the police quarters<sup>15</sup>. Some of the personal information of their offspring were also leaked maliciously on the internet. This showcased the significant changes that were brought into their lives. I asked the sons and daughters whether they were severely affected by these events. Surprisingly, none of them was greatly affected because their friends were all familiar with them and their political views. The only case where the child was severely impacted was mentioned by an officer, which happened to

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<sup>15</sup> It said that, for instance, six petrol bombs, two paint bombs, two acid bombs and other hard objects were hurled into the Sheung Shui Police Married Quarters on October 5. Protesters have also repeatedly targeted Wong Tai Sin Disciplined Services Quarters because it was next to a police station.

the daughter of his colleague. She had to transfer from her primary school because she was being bullied. No other similar incidents were mentioned. This might also be related to the age range of my informants, who were mostly sixteen to twenty years old. Although their social life was unaffected, their online presence submerged them into a new experience where they would be insulted by strangers on online forums.

Most of them ignored the hateful comments. However, all of them felt being unfairly treated because their identity did not provide a reason for hateful actions against them, although most of them understood the motivations behind these actions and comments. “We are not going to break off our relationships just because of this movement. It is impossible considering how much my dad has contributed to the family,” said Britney, a daughter of an officer. Britney belonged to the yellow camp, so she disagreed with the police’s actions. Threatening and insulting officers’ family members to compel officers to quit their job was a strategy that she understood but objected to. Being a family member of an officer was an experience that enabled her and others I interviewed to see both sides of the story, especially if they were yellow. They were put in a position where both sides needed to be heard. Another daughter of an officer, Sam compared the word ‘sons of dogs, daughters of dogs’ to the demeaning words that her father used to shame the protestors, “I feel uncomfortable because my dad said words just as insulting about the protestors. Like all the female protestors were prostitutes. These insults would not change the political situation. It created conflicts that could have been avoided, so they were unnecessary.”

As the linkage between family members and the officers was brought under the limelight, their identity changed. Some of them would consciously avoid letting new acquaintances learn about their parents’ occupations to avoid unnecessary conflicts. “You never know what

their political stance was.” Although their social lives remained mostly unchanged, their identity was sensitive. “It is logical if you told an officer to go die because he did something wrong. But if you were saying that his offspring were also wrong then that doesn’t work,” said Triston. Apart from being illogical, making moves on the family members was described as unnecessary and ineffective. But while most of them found the treatment unfair, yet they did not blame the protestors.

### Relationships in Police Families

Conflicts in the family usually began with political arguments between the officers and their offspring. “At first, my dad and I had a lot of conflicts when we talked about politics. The biggest fight we had was about the 721 Incident. But we learned that arguments would not make any difference, so we stopped,” said Owen, the son of Daniel. “Eventually we avoided talking about politics. We just reminded each other to be careful when we were at the protests.” It was fascinating to hear how Owen told his father to be careful about the protestors while his father asked Owen whether he got hurt from the protests as he arrived home. They communicated care and respect for each other through considerate gestures while avoiding any political dialogue. At the peak of the movement, there were instances in which Daniel cried because of guilt. He would tell Owen how he should have raised him to know better, to not succumb to peer pressure. Although Owen could not promise his father that he would never go to the protests again, he also had tears in his eyes when he saw his father crying. He handed tissues to Daniel and sat beside him while letting Daniel vent. These moments with his father always hit Owen’s soft spot. The mild tension between them had been relieved since then. When I interviewed Owen after one year of the movement, he talked about how they joked with each other about their political stance, “My father would laugh at me for eating at blue restaurants and I would laugh at him for eating at yellow

restaurants.” The exchange of political banter was a sign that they had reduced the level of avoidance of the topic. Even though I interviewed them separately, their respect for each other was mutual despite their oppositional political stances, which was very heart-warming since it was so rare.

Usually, the children’s way of deflecting family conflicts was through ignorance. They would avoid talking with their parents and remained silent. “I simply locked myself in the room more,” Britney described the way her father-daughter relationship took a turn for the worse. “It was because I didn’t want to quarrel with him. To avoid quarrels, I focused on my stuff in my room.” Since her father knew about her going to the protests, they were both engaging in pretence when Britney said she was going out to work. The family relationship was unhealthier and more incommunicative for Sam, whose parents coerced her into talking about politics. She would always be asked about her political opinions. Seeing how her mother broke off the relationship with her aunt because of political opposition, and how her father treated the protestors on the street harshly and rudely when off duty, she dared not to say her true feelings. Instead, she portrayed herself as being apathetic and uninterested in politics. “We had different views, I would not want to humour them, but I could not express my true thoughts. My solution was to portray myself as a person who did not care about politics and knew nothing about politics.” As the protests showed her the dark side of her parents, she felt scared to talk to them. To this day, she is reluctant to discuss personal matters with them as they earlier did, “I just want them to be happy....They had threatened to break off our relationship if I ever go to a protest again. Or that they would never talk to me ever again. Seeing how they had done that with other people they were once close to, I did not want things to be that way.”

Owen, Britney, and Sam were three different cases concerning the impact of protests on families, but the deterioration in family relationships and the changing dynamics to avoid politics in the family was common among them. There were many typical cases of families with blue parents and yellow children, but the intensity in their families was higher because of their father's occupation.

Although most verbal communications were ineffective, they conveyed messages beyond words. The children listened to the conversations between their parents and witnessed their feelings including sadness, frustration and anger, which were emotions beyond the public sphere. Seeing officers without their professional masks, children would classify their political stance as different from those of their peers. Nelson said, "I believe I disrespect the police slightly less than other people do. I did not agree with what the police had done, but their way of thinking changed with their environment. It is the same for everyone, like the Lucifer effect." It was similar for Sam, who said, "Many of my friends in similar situations would leave their homes, move into dormitories, or break off the relationship with their family. But I don't have the courage and strength they had." Being the offspring of an officer had placed them in a dilemma if they belonged to the yellow camp. When responsibilities and feelings as a son or daughter came into conflict with their role as protestor, they attempted to find some equilibrium point. They appreciated their parents' contribution to the family through their jobs. They were glad to see their parents finding happiness in their usual work routine. They were adamant about their parents' jobs being necessary, both for the family, for society and the parents themselves. Yet, at the same time, they were critical of the police in protests. They were hateful towards the occupation of the police. They were hopeful that the police would be punished for their wrongdoings. As Britney said, "I am not sure if I am a good daughter, but I did try to avoid conflicts. I played both roles well. I would not pick a

fight with my father and sabotage our relationship.” Attempting to balance herself between the family and the society, Britney hoped that she could fulfil both.

### Officers in their families’ eyes

Due to the protests, there was an increased workload for most officers. There was a change in their usual shifts, as they were extended by about four hours. Their stress level rose as their work became increasingly more demanding. Their families observed such change. Owen observed his father becoming more exhausted and frustrated due to his increased workload. Although his father worked in the traffic department, protestors intervened in his work routine by questioning his decisions and crowding him. His father always came home tired. On the other hand, Britney saw anger and annoyance in her father, “He became more short-tempered during that time, especially after work. When we put on the television and he saw the protestors, he would get really angry and started to shout at the protestors on the screen.” Another kind of emotion was fear. Children saw how their parents feared for their lives and felt worried about their safety. This was portrayed in a softer tone when they were being reminded by their parents to be careful about their safety, especially when they were on their way home from the disciplined services quarters, as well as to avoid talking about their parents’ occupation when in school. Meanwhile, fear could also be conveyed through their parents’ confrontation with threatening incidents. Nelson reminisced, “I remember my family thought that they were being attacked, so they made a weapon with a resistance band at home. My dad held it so nervously, saying ‘If anything happens, you got to protect yourselves.’ So, I thought, for them, it was a serious matter. They were in an extremely tense state.” Although most of the emotions experienced by both the officers and their offspring brought a negative impact on the family, these emotions were temporary. The family members described the presence of these emotions using terms like ‘during that time’ and

‘back then’. When I conducted interviews in December 2021, it had been more than one year since the anti-extradition bill movement. Society had become relatively more stable and quieter. The reduction in tension was reflected in the decreased level of stress in their families.

However, some changes the children observed were more long-term, as the parents’ personalities changed. Unlike temporal changes of mood during the movement, some officers altered their way of thinking. Underlying their negative emotions, were values and beliefs reshaped by their experiences with the protests. This was particularly acute in Sam’s family. “They used to be a bit anti-CCP. They would sometimes criticize the government. They still criticise now. But after going through the movement, they began to agree with the CCP’s autocratic rule, which was a managerial method that could put citizens under control. But they were not like this before. Just suddenly after the movement, their political stance became pro-CCP.” Sam believed one factor that led to this change was their experience with the protestors. Not only were they insulted by protestors in the street even though they were just walking by, but they were also attacked in the protests suddenly without justification. A negative experience with the protestors transformed into a positive experience within the police force. They bonded more over their victory in stopping the protests and fighting for each other. Their sudden change of political values might also be contributed to their work environment where an echo chamber was formed as their social connection with other groups and communities eroded. Nelson believed that this was the reason why segregating police and their communities were an ineffective measure for protestors, “To a certain extent, it only makes the police’s internal sense of community stronger. I think that the social atmosphere enhanced the conflicts between the protestors and the police. Even if the officer was yellow, or had a tendency to support the protestors, their social circle would still change because of



peer pressure.” Their change in social lives had cut off most of their connections to the outer world.

The last factor was the disciplinary characteristics of police organization, which influenced the officers by sculpting the formation of their beliefs. Organizational training and practices shaped their way of establishing their sets of personal values. According to what Triston observed, his parents’ occupation prevented them from receiving information from the outside world, “Disciplined services deploy a strong sense of group consciousness. They must obey their seniors’ orders. It gave me the impression that for them, it is hard to criticize their colleagues and seniors for being at fault. As a whole, a disciplined service needs to maintain their group consciousness.” Reflecting on their distant relationship, Triston believed that the organizational practices his parents were exposed to affected them greatly. He believed that, as his parents became compliant with others’ opinions, they did not try to learn about him at all. Children’s interpretations of their parents were both personal and distant. Sometimes, they abstracted themselves from heated debates and took an observational role in the family. This allowed children to maintain their political stance without disrupting the family dynamics. At other times, their interpretations originated from personal matters. Officers’ characters and changes took place in relation to these personal matters.

## **Conclusion**

“[To] understand the viewpoint of law enforcement agents, and recognize that where most observers see flagrant abuse of ethical precepts, the officers themselves are convinced they are acting in accordance with the moral code of their profession”

(Fassin, 2011:198)

Sometimes, before I asked, officers would proactively talk about their stance in contrast to those of the protestors and explained why they believed their views were more grounded. Drawing on various incidents that occurred two years ago, officers remained clear-minded about the social atmosphere and backlash they received as officers during the anti-extradition bill movement. Through our conversations, I could see how they had gone through ethical struggles at that time. “I know the protestors said that. But imagine if we were not there?” “I am doubtful whether the situation now is the best for Hong Kong. There is less freedom of speech, like in mainland China. But then mainland China has a larger capacity for entrepreneurship and economy.” Undergoing internal ethical and political struggles was a side of the officers that I never imagined before this project. Positioned between the government and the protestors, officers confronted not only the external condemnations but also dealt with their internal struggles, to find legitimacy in their work.

Aiming to understand policemen’s thoughts and ideas on a personal level, this project could be a beginning of a conversation that was overlooked during the anti-extradition bill movement. By unravelling officers’ motivations, feelings, and logic, the project provided insights into officers’ perceptions of social conflicts. Their unique positions as law enforcers provided them with an opportunity that others lacked. I was enlightened about the mental battle they went through. I became appreciative of it because it implied that officers were not cold hard machines who followed orders without hesitation. They were ordinary humans who struggled within the structures they lived in. In their case, the families they contributed to, the organisation they answered to, and the society they responded to were intertwining aspects that constituted their responsibilities and expectations in their role of being law enforcers. Finding meaning in their work amid an era of social conflicts heightened their interactions with these aspects. The quest for meaning never stopped. Interviews with the young, middle-

aged and retired officers allowed me to see the range of meanings they found being a law enforcer in different phases of their lives. Young officers had a passion for helping citizens and catching criminals, but they struggled the most internally. Middle-aged officers also found it hard when they first were socialised into the force; twenty years later, being a police officer for the sustenance of their families implies a shift from focusing on themselves to their families. Being disciplined was no longer a struggle, but a professional quality they found in themselves.

I was glad that I interviewed officers who were willing to share with me their personal experiences and opinions, offering me a more holistic view of their stories and perspectives. At the end of the day, we withheld our oppositional stance, but I saw the possibility of communication and finding common ground. Politically speaking, we might never see eye to eye, but their pursuit of improvement, love for their community, and care for their city were values that I believe many people held on to. Despite the embodiment of these values being achieved in different ways, it was the collision of ideas that can lead us to discover what is truly important to us.

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