

Original Article

Making of a Patrolman: A Qualitative Study on the Lived Experiences of New Philippine National Police (PNP) Officers

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Abstract: Modern policing has expanded far beyond its traditional emphasis on physical endurance and procedural discipline. Today, law enforcement officers are expected to demonstrate emotional resilience, ethical judgment, and effective decision-making in high-pressure and socially complex environments. Yet, globally, there remains a persistent disconnect between the training provided in police academies and the multifaceted demands of real-world policing. The qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of newly recruited members of the Philippine National Police (PNP) assigned to the Western Visayas. Anchored in Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Resilience Theory, the study examined how new recruits interpret and respond to the realities of training and early service. Using semi-structured interviews with five purposefully selected participants with less than three years in the service, data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Findings revealed five emergent themes: personal and professional growth, endurance through physical and psychological adversity, challenges faced during training, coping mechanisms rooted in spiritual and emotional resilience, and aspirations for an improved training process. Participants described their transformation from civilian to officer as a formative journey shaped by hardship, mentorship, and social learning. Despite institutional stressors, recruits exhibited strong commitment to public service and emphasized the need for training programs that integrate technical skills, emotional intelligence, and ethical foundations. The study offers critical insights into police development in a rural, resource-limited Philippine setting and recommends reforms to align police training with contemporary law enforcement demands.

Keywords: Philippine national police, newly recruited, lived experiences, western visayas, and training

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern policing has expanded far beyond its traditional emphasis on physical endurance and procedural discipline. Today, law enforcement officers are expected to demonstrate emotional resilience, ethical judgment, and effective decision-making in high-pressure and socially complex environments [1]. Yet, globally, there remains a persistent disconnect between the training provided in police academies and the multifaceted demands of real-world policing [2]. In the Philippines, particularly within the Philippine National Police (PNP), efforts have been made to enhance recruitment and professionalize the force. One such initiative is the "Faceless and Nameless" application system, aimed at reducing biases and nepotism in hiring [3]. Despite these reforms, significant challenges remain, including public mistrust, corruption concerns, and mismatches between training and field expectations [4]. Recruitment itself is a complex process shaped by institutional standards, community expectations, and the growing need for officers who embody integrity and public accountability (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.). However, traditional recruitment

systems often fall short in achieving inclusive representation, particularly for minority or marginalized groups [5]. Global police institutions have introduced strategies such as blind application reviews and community outreach, yet gaps persist in fostering diversity and equitable training [6]. These limitations are mirrored in the Philippine setting, where structural reforms remain insufficient in bridging gaps between institutional goals and practical readiness [7]. Across countries, entry into policing is commonly governed by stringent assessments, including physical fitness and psychological stability, to ensure the competency and ethical reliability of officers [8]. Nevertheless, recruits often experience a “reality shock” upon deployment, discovering a stark contrast between academic training and field realities, particularly in community engagement and crisis management [9]. Mentorship and field exposure are essential during that period, yet inconsistency in mentorship quality undermines the integration and morale of new officers [10]. Furthermore, in some cultural contexts such as the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea, recruits face heightened expectations of discipline and collective responsibility, which may conflict with evolving democratic and community-oriented policing models [11]. Study in the Philippine context reveals that new officers commonly struggle with autonomy, conformity pressures, and institutional rigidity during their initial service period [12]. These challenges are exacerbated by a lack of psychological support and inconsistently trained field instructors, creating a stressful environment for adaptation [13]. The burden is intensified by public scrutiny and media portrayal, which amplify expectations for professionalism among even the most junior officers [14]. For instance, in Western Visayas, Regional Training Center 6 in Bacolod administers the Public Safety Basic Recruit Course followed by field training that immediately immerses recruits into operational policing [15]. Despite these structured programs, the region remains undermanned, operating at below optimal police-to-population ratios—creating additional pressure on newly deployed officers [16]. Compounding that are reports of inconsistent mentoring and inadequate psychological reinforcement, reflecting a persistent gap between equitable recruitment and sustainable onboarding practices [17]. Studies have shown that the recruitment experience itself significantly shapes the applicant's perception of the organization. Regular communication and transparency, for example, increase applicants’ confidence in law enforcement institutions [18]. In contrast, fragmented recruitment processes deter potential applicants and compromise the quality of hires [19]. Rural and remote areas such as Guimaras are particularly vulnerable to recruitment and retention issues, primarily due to limited applicant pools and competition from urban police agencies offering better compensation [20]. Moreover, systemic barriers such as cultural biases and stringent criteria disproportionately exclude underrepresented groups [21]. Study further suggests that recruitment motivations vary across demographics. In developing countries like the Philippines, economic security and job stability are prioritized, especially by young adults entering the force [22]. Training then becomes a critical phase for shaping not only tactical readiness but also professional identity. In Taiwan, for instance, police training has been found to directly influence recruits’ attitudes toward justice and bias, particularly during academy instruction [23]. Similarly, family-oriented interventions have shown promise in supporting officer wellness and reducing early-stage stress [24]. However, leadership transitions and training reforms are often met with institutional resistance, as seen in European policing contexts [25]. Despite that, nations such as Germany and Sweden have reported success with scenario-based learning and mentorship models, emphasizing interpersonal skills and experiential knowledge [26]. In the Philippine context, recent studies reinforce the global narrative. For example, [12-14] identified several persistent issues in PNP recruit training, including outdated curricula and limited stress management support. Similarly, [19] emphasized that ethical training contributes significantly to the reduction of misconduct among law enforcement officers. An author [18] documented how frontline officers experienced psychological strain during the pandemic, exacerbated by a lack of mental health resources. Additionally, findings by [27] and [28] suggest that organizational support and

communication are key to boosting morale and retention. The present study contributed to the evolving discourse by capturing the lived experiences of newly recruited PNP officers. Through qualitative analysis, the study provided grounded insights into how these officers interpret their training, overcome challenges, and envision the future of policing in their communities.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative phenomenological study design was employed to explore the lived experiences of five newly recruited PNP officers. Phenomenology, as outlined by [29], allows researchers to access the essence of human experience through detailed description and interpretation. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and met the following inclusion criteria: (a) active PNP service, (b) less than three years in tenure, and (c) current assignment within Western Visayas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a study-developed guide that was validated by experts in qualitative study and criminology. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis followed [30] six-step model: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The study was theoretically anchored in Transformational Leadership Theory [31], Social Learning Theory [32], and Resilience Theory [33], offering a triangulated lens through which participants' narratives were interpreted. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and institutional approval, following the guidelines of [34].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed five interrelated themes. The first theme, personal growth and professional readiness, captured how participants developed discipline, emotional control, and teamwork throughout the training process. These findings support [35] emphasis on observational learning and [36] assertion that resilience can be developed through structured challenge and support. The second theme, endurance through physical and psychological adversity, reflected experiences of extreme fatigue, emotional strain, and "psychological warfare" strategies employed by trainers. These conditions were perceived as both distressing and necessary for field preparedness [37]. The third theme, challenges during training, highlighted injuries, fear of failure, limited emotional support, and stress related to rigid institutional structures [38]. The participants emphasized the importance of physical conditioning and mental preparation to avoid dismissal or reassignment (RTU). The fourth theme, coping mechanisms and resilience, revealed that participants relied heavily on prayer, positive thinking, social support, and internal motivation to withstand adversity. These align with [39] conceptualization of protective factors and [40] discussion on self-efficacy. The final theme, aspirations for the future of training, expressed the need for updated instructional materials, digital literacy, emotional intelligence training, and values formation. Participants advocated for a curriculum that aligns with contemporary law enforcement needs and community expectations [41]. The findings provide a nuanced view of the developmental trajectory of new PNP officers. The training process, while physically and emotionally taxing, served as a crucible for the development of discipline, resilience, and a service-oriented identity. These transformations closely align with [42] model of transformational leadership, where individuals are shaped through vision, challenge, and moral engagement. The role of instructors, peers, and family support systems emerged as crucial mediators of learning and endurance, in line with [43] social modeling framework. The participants' emphasis on purpose-driven service and ethical commitment underscores the applicability of Resilience Theory, particularly [44] finding that adversity, when mitigated by support, can result in positive developmental outcomes. Importantly, the data suggest that the current training curriculum may be insufficiently responsive to modern challenges, including digital threats, cybercrime, and the need for

community-sensitive policing. These perspectives reflect global calls for emotionally intelligent, culturally competent, and technologically equipped police training models [45]. Thus, the study contributes to the growing body of literature that recognizes the complexity of police socialization and the need for integrative, reform-minded training strategies. Law enforcement institutions, especially in developing contexts, must consider holistic approaches that balance tactical readiness with psychological preparedness, ethical grounding, and civic engagement.

4. CONCLUSION

Findings revealed five emergent themes: personal and professional growth, endurance through physical and psychological adversity, challenges faced during training, coping mechanisms rooted in spiritual and emotional resilience, and aspirations for an improved training process. Participants described their transformation from civilian to officer as a formative journey shaped by hardship, mentorship, and social learning. Despite institutional stressors, recruits exhibited strong commitment to public service and emphasized the need for training programs that integrate technical skills, emotional intelligence, and ethical foundations. The study offers critical insights into police development in a rural, resource-limited Philippine setting and recommends reforms to align police training with contemporary law enforcement demands. Thus, the study contributes to the growing body of literature that recognizes the complexity of police socialization and the need for integrative, reform-minded training strategies. Law enforcement institutions, especially in developing contexts, must consider holistic approaches that balance tactical readiness with psychological preparedness, ethical grounding, and civic engagement.

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