

# Listening to Narratives: The Dynamics of Capturing Police Experience

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*This article details a method of listening gradually discovered during years of interviewing police officers. The method is especially revealing of the role that control, and giving up control, plays in listening. The use of narratives allowed the author to focus on the function "core stories" serve to keep unwanted/fringe members in line and perpetuate organizational culture. Thus, using a qualitative method, the article discusses the importance of giving up control in listening.*

Interviewing police officers carries with it two challenges, both connected to the familiar roles of police officer and civilian. The first challenge an interviewer confronts is that of assuming the listener role with officers trained and experienced in assuming this role with civilians. The interviewer must also break through professional reticence with civilians, which may be more heightened with police than with many other occupations. In each case, the interviewer must break the frame of expectations concerning what should happen in a police-civilian interchange.

Despite the inherent difficulties, the process of interviewing police carries with it great opportunities to learn about the nature of listening. This is so because the listener must be both highly self-oriented and other-oriented in order to find ways to elicit responses from people who are unaccustomed to, and suspicious of, opening up to anyone.

This article details a ten-year listening sojourn with more than 300 police officers, for three published oral histories in which I recorded police stories: *What Cops Know* (Random House, 1991), *Pure Cop* (HarperCollins, 1992), and *Breaking and Entering: Women Cops Talk about Life in the Ultimate Men's Club* (HarperCollins, 1995). The collected stories were assembled without authorial intrusion, except for brief chapter introductions. The goal was to give the reader the same experience I had in interviewing these police officers: that of overhearing conversation.

The first group of police to whom I listened for the first two oral histories were off-duty members of the Chicago Police Department, ranging from street cops through specialists in various units (including Homicide, Narcotics, Bomb and Arson, Property Crimes, Major Accidents, and SWAT).

The next group of police I interviewed were women in city, state, small-town, rural, and governmental law enforcement all over the United States.

The goal of my research was to present the richness of police experience through a direct transcription of their stories. My research method was ethnographic. Ethnographers regard stories as a crucial way of revealing culture (Geertz, 1973; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Clough, 1992; Denzin, 1997). Therefore, collecting the police stories — focusing on narratives — provided a unique look into one aspect of law enforcement culture.

I started by conducting pilot interviews with individual police, collecting information and ideas for further questions, and then interviewing police with their partners, tactical teams, or in small groups who worked in the same unit. The average length of an interview with a single police officer was one and a half-hours, while many of the pair and group interviews extended to three hours or beyond.

When interviewing men and women police officers, I discovered, as other students of police organizations have (e.g., Trujillo, 1987; Van Maanen, 1988; Wilson, 2000) what a rich oral culture police create and how this oral culture can serve as a sanity-preserver, social glue, or a type of survival handbook.

Much that has been written in recent years by experts on narrative on the variegated functions of storytelling, ranging from self-presentation (Bamberg, 1996) through giving others advice and information (van Dijk, 1975) to serving as a connective tissue in organizations (Bateson, 1979; Bormann, 1983; Query and Kreps, 1993; White, 1981) is borne out by examining storytelling within police organizations.

Police organizations are filled with storytellers. Members recount to each other stories about what they encounter on the job as a means of entertaining each other, of making sense of their experience, of coming to terms with often troubling/traumatic situations, of warning others about the dangers inherent in police work, and of initiating and maintaining group identity and cohesiveness. In other words, storytelling is an essential part of a cop's equipment.

## BACKGROUND

I came to interview police through an accident of birth. My sister joined the Chicago Police Department in 1981. Some time after my sister became a police officer, I became aware that police operate in an intensely oral community. From the Academy, through her probationary period, and con-

tinuing through her first assignment in narcotics street sales, my sister would report stories she had heard from other officers, stories that were sometimes instructive, sometimes cautionary, often humorous, many times tragic.

Some stories that my sister recounted had a “story trail.” My sister would tell our family that a number of officers had told her a story and had talked about the original storyteller. The storyteller seemed to be as celebrated as the story. It was not until I had done a great deal of interviewing that I was admitted into this oral tradition of repeated, locally famous stories.

One story trail I pursued most assiduously, since so many Chicago police officers referred to it and the storyteller, even had a name: “The Pigs Don’t Wear Neckties” story. It took me a year to track down the storyteller, a former homicide detective, and the story:

There is a torso that is found over in the Eighteenth District, in like a truck park. That’s all it is – no arms, no legs, no head – just a torso. It has a shirt tucked around it.

The beat officers see this thing, and they don’t know what it is. They come up and look at it, but if you’ve never seen a torso, it looks a little strange. All they can see is the pink skin and stuff.

So they call the homicide detectives and everything. The detective gets over there, and the beat officer goes, “Listen, I don’t know what I got here. I’m not sure what it is. It could be a pig.”

The homicide dick looks at the torso, and he sees that it’s got a tie on, around the neck of the shirt. He looks at the beat officer and says, “Kid, pigs don’t wear neckties.” (Fletcher, 1991, 59-60)

An interesting aspect to this story was that several officers repeated the story almost *exactly* as the original version, yet all insisted I had to hear it from this particular storyteller.

I listened a great deal to my sister and the officers with whom she worked during her first few years on the job. My listening at this juncture was not at all active, but took on a passive form — “overhearing” the police group tell stories to each other.

I found the stories utterly fascinating, both for content and for the confident way in which officers would tell stories. This was a far cry from most conversational exchanges in which stories, while valued, are fairly rare. I also found the insights startling. For example, one narcotics officer said, “The only Americans who have ever accepted the metric system are

the dope dealers. Here are guys who probably couldn't get a D in grade school math and they're converting grams to ounces to kilos in the blink of an eye." Another officer, who had worked in Major Accidents, explained that emergency personnel call motorcycles "donorcycles" because most motorcycle accidents involve massive head trauma, leaving the rest of the body, as he put it, "ripe for the harvesters."

I learned something vital about listening to police at the stage when I attended to the stories of my sister and her police friends. The lesson was this: The more I faded as a presence, the more the officers came forward. It was as if I was watching a performance that would come to an end if the audience made its presence known in any way. The police I encountered at this stage ignored me except for perfunctory comments. When I was not noticed, they would sail into stories effortlessly, carried along by the changing topics in the group. However, they were unresponsive to direct questions. It was as if they were allowing me to "overhear," but not to participate. They never seemed to lose consciousness of my outsider status (nor did I). It was much like being a small child, sitting at the top of the stairs, listening to the ebb and flow of talk at an adult party downstairs.

I also learned at this early stage that police seemed to talk more expansively and meaningfully when they were in groups than when they conversed with my sister one-on-one. If my sister and one police friend were talking, the talk was much more desultory, and many times centered on station house politics, than if she was with a group. This is still borne out by my brother-in-law, a homicide detective, who is very reluctant to tell family gatherings any details of murder investigations *unless* some of his friends are present. Then, food and digestion be damned as they go into details of unspeakable crimes.

I believe this habit of speaking more comfortably in groups reflects part of the "them versus us" mentality so prevalent in police culture. It also may be derived from long experience waiting -- in the station house, in the patrol car, in various hangouts -- for a call to come in. The time is wiled away through conversation that, with practice, becomes honed into full-blown storytelling.

Eventually, I decided to conduct a formal interview of my sister and the narcotics officers with whom she worked for a magazine article. Believing that interviewing in groups was the way to go (and knowing from my sister and from my own observation that the best way to keep police-talk flowing was to grease it with food), I collected my sister's tactical

team in what my sister had identified as a favorite police hangout near Wrigley Field. I waited for the cop-talk to start, as it had before. Nobody talked. I decided to use more formal questions to get conversation going. Nobody talked. I had told the officers that this interview was intended for publication and that I wished to take notes and use a tape recorder for accuracy. It became obvious that the prospect of being quoted (even though I had promised the officers anonymity) hung over the group like a pall.

Finally, a narc named Tony told a story. A couple others corrected him as he went along, then told *their* versions of the story. The officers spoke easily to each other, with me in the role of eavesdropper (even with the tape recorder going), regaling each other with shared experiences and individual insights.

Tony had acted as a catalyst to the group. He moved me from unsuccessful *interviewer*, asking questions to which nobody responded, to *listener*, attending to, but not directing or interrupting the conversation. From this experience, I started to learn the value of giving the control to the interviewee.

I also learned that, at least for this culture, group interviewing was most effective. This seemed most effective for discovering the ways in which police tell each other stories, since the officers acted as reality checks upon each other and would also, after a time, fall into patterns of telling each other stories, or re-living shared stories, as if the interviewer were not there.

This phenomenon speaks to the issue of control, a dominant one in policing. It makes sense that people used to interrogating others, fully aware of the way words can be used to condemn, would be wary, from long habit, of responding to questions. The traditional stimulus-response interview would seem to be anathema to people who both procedurally and psychologically resist giving up control.

### An Exception

The method of listening in on a group, however, did not work as well for women police officers as it did for men or for mixed groups. When I interviewed women police exclusively for an oral history on women in law enforcement (Fletcher, 1995), I started out doing what had worked previously — collecting my interviewees in groups (usually over dinner). I quickly learned, however, that women in groups tended to exhibit two tendencies that worked against self-revelation and spurring on to stories that

typified the male/mixed groups. First, women seemed more hesitant to relate stories starring themselves, whether they were interviewed one-on-one or in a group. Second, women frequently got off-track from talking about policing and, instead, used the opportunity to catch up with each other's personal lives. At times, interviewing women in groups became a sort of "Girls Night Out" experience, in which the assembled women veered from police conversation into general fun and joking.

Women police, in general, are not the confident, skilled storytellers male police are. When I asked them about their apparent reticence when they told stories compared to male officers, many women police told me that they simply hadn't the practice the men had.

They were not allowed to tell their stories, having to take a back seat to the male storytellers. Also, they were often excluded formally (in the case of locker rooms) and informally (after-hours bars) from the traditional male venues for storytelling and thus missed out on the much-needed practice for accomplished storytelling.

Women police seem to have trouble casting themselves in the "hero" role in stories. Many times, my women interviewees would stop short of describing the actions they had taken that had resolved the situation. Recent research on "positioning" in narrative (Davies and Harre, 1990; Bamberg, 1997) and self-aggrandizement in storytelling (Oliveira, 1999) provide insights into the function of the story as self-display. This reticence could be part habit, of not having had the opportunity of using narrative to project themselves heroically, and part reflection of a police culture that is still rejecting of women. Also, if storytelling conveys status on the storyteller in certain groups (Ward, 1990), male police may be reluctant to accord this status to women.

One woman officer who worked on the narcotics team for the Dallas Police Department for ten years related how she faded from her own story:

I was on a narc team that was headed up by my boyfriend. We did a bust once – I forget exactly what happened, but I was in on the entry and I was the one who subdued the doper with the gun on the other side of the door. I heard him tell this story for years. At first, when our relationship was still good, I was the shining star of the story. Then our relationship started to get rocky and I was just there. Then we broke up. And I'd hear him tell the story and I wasn't there at all. (Unpublished interview, 1997)

After my initial magazine article based on my interview with my sister's tactical team appeared (Fletcher, 1991), I started to expand my research

into a book-length oral history. My sister had given me access to a closed society, held together by a fascinating culture based on oral traditions and narratives. I decided to interview one hundred police officers from widely different backgrounds, ranks, and specialties in order to collect their stories for an insider's view of police work. Through many missteps and some serendipity, I learned a great deal, not just about police, but about the nature of listening.

### DINING ROOM TABLE DYNAMICS

Two constraints initially inhibited, and ultimately expanded, my research. The first constraint came from the Chicago Police Department, which requires all interviewers to obtain permission to talk with police officers: the permission came with a string (at the time, it seemed like a noose) attached: I could only interview officers off duty.

My initial response was to believe that no one would talk with me off duty, since this would infringe on the informants' free time, much of which, I knew from my sister, was spent in working at second jobs. This constraint ultimately provided freedom, I believe, both for the interviewer and the informants. It meant that I met them on neutral ground (mostly in coffee shops, donut shops, restaurants, sometimes in their homes). Several advantages kicked in.

To begin with, I was harder to get rid of than when I met them on official ground. I had noticed that when I tried interviewing police at their station houses, before I was aware of the ban on interviewing on duty, the interviews were very inhibited and quickly terminated. The officers seemed overly conscious of other officers; phones rang constantly, suspects were brought in; orders to go out on the street were given. The interviews were often cut short by officers running out on me — on real or pretend business. Also, at station houses, a woman civilian is perceived as either victim or witness — that designation can be hard to shake and can pollute an interview.

Once I learned the restriction of meeting officers off duty, and once my sister impressed upon me that police would talk if I fed them, I decided to meet them on neutral turf, at various eateries. Once this went into effect, I noticed that the interviews were longer, since no one could run out before the check (although a few did).

Sometimes, the police invited me into their homes. I have spent some interesting afternoons listening to male officers hold forth on the job. All

the talk took place between plays or during commercials of televised football games. However, this was fairly rare. Most interviews centered on food. I noticed that food fuels conversation and makes listening much more natural than in the typical interview situation. I think of this as the "dining-room table syndrome," in which sitting around a common table reactivates storytelling habits ingrained since childhood (including turn-taking, "topping" others' stories with more outrageous stories of one's own, valuing humor).

I even became somewhat expert at which types of eateries brought out the best stories. Noise level is important. A quiet restaurant is anathema to people opening up about themselves. I once interviewed a homicide detective at a pancake house at a fairly quiet time in late afternoon. His story about a torso stuffed into a bathtub seemed to bounce off the walls, embarrassing all within earshot. There should be enough noise that the most grotesque story or wild observation can be absorbed in the general din. I found the best restaurant for interviewing was Mexican; the atmosphere is festive, loud, and exciting.

Talking in eateries helped police to shed their official roles. It made my listening role much easier, since, especially with police who worked together as partners or on teams, the storytelling habit kicked into high gear. During these times the police tended to forget my presence as a listener and engaged in fantasy-chaining (Brown, 1985) -- a process in which one story sets off a string of related stories and reminiscences.

This way of speaking also served as a reality check. Sometimes individuals were laughed at or censured for embellishment. Sometimes the officers (especially narcotics tactical teams) gleefully reconstructed (and embellished) stories together. Very often, police would vociferously back up or disagree with the storyteller. What might have gone by uncorrected (the memory of a fact, experience, or case) in a one-on-one interview was often corrected by the group.

Once I discovered how group interactions made storytelling more natural and listening much easier, I reserved one-on-one interviews for the first interview. Usually, I would do this with the head of whatever specialized unit I was researching. This interview gave me technical information, ideas of what should be explored further, and names of contacts for future interviews.

The second constraint I felt in interviewing was that of being an outsider. It was difficult enough being a woman -- I was also a professor. At first I felt that this would inhibit male police in their storytelling. However,

my status as a total outsider (police call it a “moosh”) actually made it easier, especially for male officers, to explain their culture. Sexism seemed to work in my favor also, since many male police told me they felt relieved to be able to talk about their feelings, feelings they never felt free to share with the women in their lives. I believe that in many instances I was cast in the role of the “ideal listener,” a surrogate for the women to whom they wanted to express their fears and emotions, but for a variety of reasons, felt they could not. What follows are three stories from officers that are examples of what I am talking about.

### Story 1:

They used to have cops working Homicide exclusively. No right-thinking manager in industry would ever allow an individual to be faced with that kind of trauma. Old Irish Catholic cops would go to Communion every day. Others would climb into the bottle. Anybody that’s spent time exclusively on murders becomes almost paranoid.

When I worked Homicide, I was living in a nice neighborhood. But I wouldn’t take out the garbage without my gun. I’d be at home, reading a book, and I kept my pistol next to me. Because they were never going to get me. (Fletcher, 1991, p. 119)

### Story 2:

I’ve had the same dream for years. In my dream, an offender is shooting at me, and I’m shooting back, but the bullet never gets to the person I’m shooting at – it gets to within a foot and then it just drops. The bullet never gets there.

I’ve been having this dream since I’ve been on the police force; it started right when I came on.

Over the years, I’ve talked with other officers about it, and they’ve told me they have the same dream. I’m glad to hear that. (Fletcher, 1991, p. 18)

### Story 3:

We had a call once of a man with a shotgun. He was holding his ex-girlfriend with the gun right at her neck. We’re talking to him – “Come on, cool it, you know. We’re your friends.”

While we’re talking to the girl, he kills her. Here’s the girl he supposedly loves – what’s he gonna do to us?

He pleaded guilty on insanity, and he beat it. He killed in cold blood and he got off. You have real bizarre things happen all the time. It doesn’t bother you till you get home and go to bed. Then you can’t sleep. You can’t sleep. Your heart is pounding. You keep thinking, What if.... What if...? (Fletcher, 1992, p. 211)

## ISSUES OF CONTROL

Throughout the interviewing process, I became more and more impressed with the value of giving up control, of listening in a way I had only encountered sporadically in journalistic interviewing. At the same time, I often felt I was doing something wrong in giving up control, and that the intriguing revelations I was privy to were a result of luck, rather than technique. Giving up control came to me largely accidentally. Having started the interviews well into a pregnancy and continuing them throughout the next two years, I was often very tired. I would show up for interviews and that was the extent of my active participation. I couldn't understand why I was getting such intimate, free-wheeling material. I often had the experience of police saying very revealing things at times when I felt barely conscious. In the silence created more by my exhaustion than anything else, officers would many times startle me by telling me, a propos of nothing, very revealing stories. For example, one homicide detective broke a long silence with this reflection:

There always comes some quiet moment when you're standing there with the dead person. And you know that if that murder is going to be avenged, it's up to you to avenge it. It might be some old lady in her seventies – she's lived in the neighborhood all her life, the neighborhood's changed around her, she's been at death's door for the past twenty years – one night they come in and kill her for her few pitiful possessions. And that's the one where you look at her and you say, 'This is it. We're gonna get them.' (Fletcher, 1991, p. 57)

Silence is the listener's friend. One evening, I had talked with an officer who worked, first as a beat cop, and then as a cop in one of Chicago's toughest housing projects. He spoke for hours; I was tired, and wanted desperately to leave. Finally, we exited the restaurant and, as I stood there, silently waiting for him to take his leave of me, he looked at the street and had a recollection:

My partner and I were driving one night, a guy flagged us down. He had a knife sticking out of the top of his head. All we could see was the hilt coming out.

"Somebody stabbed me."

"Okay, get in, get in, we'll take you to the hospital."

He sat in the back of the squad; he had to keep his head tilted so he wouldn't hit the car roof. The amazing thing was, he was talking away, laughing, joking, didn't seem to hurt at all. Perfectly calm. He just couldn't sit normally.

We take him to the hospital – he’s out of the car, walks in, he’s still talking to us normally. They take him into surgery. We ask one of the docs, “Is he gonna make it?” The doc said, “The minute they take it out, he’s dead.”

Just like that. I don’t know. I’d keep it in. Get a good barber. (Fletcher, 1991, p. 7)

The experience of sitting around a table with, most commonly, partners or groups of police, profoundly changed the essence of interviewing for me. My original goal of conveying police expertise in various areas (“what cops know”) expanded from knowing in the technical sense to knowing in the feeling sense, which is what many of their stories conveyed. This was only possible as they allowed me to listen to their stories. For example, a form of this story was shared by several narcotics officers:

... what really gets me is, I have kids. And you see the look they get on their faces when they see something scary or horrible on TV. Your heart goes out.

And when you go through a door and there’s children there, you feel terrible because now you’re the bogeyman. You’re like a monster coming through that door. So, as you’re coming through, they’re running from you; they’re in horror because you’re tearing their door down, you’re screaming, glass is breaking, you’re using profanity, you’re telling everybody, ‘Don’t move!’ (Fletcher, 1992, p. 78)

I later realized how critical my unwittingly giving up control was to the interview process, how it empowered the informants to answer, not my questions, but their own. As this became more and more clear to me, I started showing the police my interview questions before our talks began by saying, “These are my questions. But they may be the wrong questions. If I’m not asking the right questions, or if there’s anything I should be asking, let me know. You’re the experts.”

When I interviewed women in law enforcement several years later, I discovered, as mentioned previously, that group talk did not work as well with these informants. Not did interviewing in eateries, for the most part, since most of the women I interviewed had family responsibilities when they were off-duty. Interviewing one-on-one or in pairs of partners worked. Interviewing on the phone was surprisingly effective. As I reflected on this, it seemed not to be surprising, since women are used to multi-tasking as they talk on the phone and, seemingly, are more comfortable with this approach than men are.

## THE CORE STORY

The lesson in listening I gained from women police came from an interview with two former partners in a Mexican restaurant. These women had been with the Chicago Police Department for twenty-five years, and had much to share. They had come to the point during an interview where they had forgotten about me and were reminding each other of good and bad times past. I had pretty much faded from any kind of inclusion at all, when one of the women officers said to the other: "You're not gonna believe what I got today. The alley story! Can you believe it?" I asked what the alley story was. The story, as I first heard it, is as follows:

The one major thing that came up endlessly, endlessly, endlessly, and I still have to answer this sometimes, starts: "Women on the job. I have nothing against women on the job. But what would you do if you found yourself in an alley with a 250-pound man comin' at you? What would you do?"

Always. It's always that guy in the alley. Every day, that same scenario. Always. Always. Always. They say this: "You're there. You have no gun, no radio, no club. And you're at the end of a dead-end alley. And some huge 250-pound raving maniac is coming after you. What would you do?" (Fletcher, 1995, p. 2)

These two women Chicago cops claimed that every woman cop must endure this story from male cops throughout her career. As I continued interviewing, I asked the women I spoke with individually (one hundred and six in all, from all parts of the country, at all levels of policing) if they had heard it.

I also checked the story's range at national conferences I attended. To my surprise, every woman officer I interviewed, with the exception of five women newly minted from Police Academies, had heard this story. The story appears in police organizations across the U.S. The essential elements: the alley, the vulnerable woman cop without gun, radio, or back-up, the brute facing her, appear in all the stories. In every story I've heard, and in women police recounting their history of hearing the story, the brute coming at the woman officer weighs at least two hundred and fifty pounds, and, most often, weighs exactly two hundred and fifty pounds.

There are some geographic variants, as in this report from two women state troopers in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan:

What we get – it's a 250-pound Finlander. A Finlander drunk. Who just came out of the woods after all week cutting wood. A woodsman. A two hundred and fifty

pound drunken woodsman. But most of the time it is a Finlander. (Fletcher, 1995, p.3)

I believe this to be a “core story,” one that encapsulates, and by retelling, enforces the key values of an organization, because every woman across the United States whom I interviewed who had been in policing for more than three years had heard this story. That means that out of the one hundred and six women I interviewed for my oral history, only the five who were new to law enforcement had not heard this story.

Since I spoke with women who joined U. S. police organizations from as early as 1947, this core story has organizational history behind it as well. While this is strictly qualitative and by no means exhaustive evidence, the fact that many women in law enforcement across the U.S. testified that they had heard this story throughout their careers gives the story credence and almost the status of folklore.

As I collected stories for the oral history, I further researched the depth of the “250-Pound-Man-in-an-Alley” story (many women referred to it as such) by testing it with small groups and large audiences at police conferences at which I spoke. Again, the story was almost universally acknowledged as one that had plagued women police throughout their careers.

At the International Association of Women Police (IAWP) national conference in September, 1995, and at the National Conference on Women and Policing in October, 1995, women in law enforcement who had formerly been in other occupations revealed that the “250-Pound-Man” myth has been invoked by males in different, but still strength-based, organizations as well. A woman police officer, formerly an EMS (Emergency Services) worker recounted the story of the “300-pound heart attack victim on the second floor;” a former game warden said women game wardens are often harassed, in story form, with the threat of a “250-pound guy in the woods,” and a woman firefighter said male firefighters’ version of the “250-pound man in an alley” is a 200-pound comrade, weighed down by firefighting equipment, found unconscious in a burning building.

Part of the power of this core story is that it is unanswerable. First, it offers a scenario so extreme and illogical that it cannot be argued against. Second, women in law enforcement do not have the chance to counter the story, or to offer their own stories, since they are excluded, except as an audience, from many storytelling circles.

Embedded in the policing core story are several pervasive myths, as unfair to most male police officers as they are to women:

- Policing is about force.
- A police officer's relationship with the public is confrontational and combative.
- Women cannot be "good" cops because they do not fit the force model.

The story argues, in almost fairy tale terms (the ogre against the maiden) against change in the organization. The story delivers two change-resistant messages: It argues that women do not belong in the organization (an example of the audience being harassed by the storyteller), even though women have been part of policing since 1910 and have been full partners in police organizations since the 1970s. The story also depicts policing as primarily confrontational, despite the efforts of recent years to move policing into a pro-active, problem-solving, communication-based model.

I have recently come across the male equivalent to the "250-Pound-Man-in-an-Alley" story. At a 1999 Texas Women in Law Enforcement conference, a male officer from the Dallas Police Department told the group this:

"Men have a similar story. Every male cop who goes through the Academy hears this story:"

You're on patrol by yourself and you drive down an alley. There's an overturned garbage can in the middle of the alley. You stop to move it out of the way. There's an armed man behind the garbage can. He has the drop on you and orders you to take off your gun belt and strip. He takes everything away from you. After he leaves, you call for help. The thing is, when your backup arrives, What do you say? What do you say?

This story, if it is another core story (and I have yet to test it) would be a significant corollary to the tale of the woman officer in the alley. Again, it reflects the fear of "being unmanned" and vulnerable that the original core story addresses.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

This article detailed ten years of work – work that involved listening to more than 300 police officers in an attempt to see what their stories told me about their organizational culture. The collected stories have allowed me to reflect on the process of listening as both a research tool and a tool for building lasting relationships.

The stories I heard may be divided into two types: personal and organi-

zational. While the personal stories revealed two functions of narratives: including sense-making and information-sharing; the organizational story revolved around value-enforcement — with the discovered core story of the woman confronting a man in an alley enforcing the value of male-dominated policing.

I was able to arrive at these stories through a combination of constraints and accidents that resulted in my giving up control of the interview process and becoming a rapt listener. This approach may not be appropriate in all listening contexts. However, I have learned that silence and listening are both demanding and vibrant teachers.

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