Policing communities in Vietnam: Intercultural lessons for community policing with Vietnamese Australians

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Abstract

The paper is based on a cultural exchange study group that involved two police officers from Victoria Police and a researcher travelling to Vietnam to investigate community safety and crime. The group was interested in whether a concept of cooperative policing existed in Vietnam and how local safety and crime related issues were addressed. The study is part of a four-year ARC project Exploring the experience of security in the Australian Vietnamese community: practical implications for policing. The wider project is exploring how to build cooperation and trust between Victoria Police officers and Vietnamese Australians. The paper draws on interviews conducted with senior police officers, NGOs and Australian government people in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. It investigates how the Department of Police Vietnam claims to implement community policing and the social and criminal issues of major concern. The paper inquires into the extent to which citizens are involved in crime reporting and solving crime. The paper explores how trust, responsibility and saving face impacts on policing. Based on the research in Vietnam the paper then proposes some further questions for consideration in the broader ARC project to support trust building and cooperation between Victoria Police and Vietnamese Australian communities.

Keywords: Community policing, Intercultural, Vietnam, Trust, Crime, Gambling, Household register

Introduction

In February 2009 a study group travelled to Vietnam to explore policing approaches in local communities. The group was interested in how the Department of Police Vietnam dealt with issues that undermined community safety and security. Through gaining intercultural knowledge of policing approaches, cultural practices and local crime and safety issues, the study brings insights into the complexity of community policing with Vietnamese Australians. This paper uses Samovar, Porter and McDaniel’s (2007) definition of intercultural as ‘an interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the
communication event’. The research in Vietnam contributes to the ARC project *Exploring the experience of security in the Australian Vietnamese community: practical implications for policing*. The paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to address the following three research questions:

1. What do the Department of Police Vietnam and other groups say about the implementation of community policing in Vietnam?
2. How does trust affect policing of security and safety issues?
3. What are the implications of this study for the policing of Vietnamese Australian communities?

The paper investigates how, when and why Vietnamese people respond to or refrain from cooperating with police on criminal and other neighbourhood safety issues and how this is affected by trust. The wider ARC project explores the multiple factors that affect trust and communication between police and Vietnamese communities. There is a perceived lack of trust in Victoria Police officers by Vietnamese Australians, some of which may be attributed to negative experiences with police in Vietnam. The focussed study considers how traditions and structural approaches in Vietnam lead to different interpretations of community policing.

Transnational communities of Vietnamese people are diverse with traditions from Vietnam merging with newer ideas. The Vietnamese population in Australia comprises first and second generation residents along with more recently arrived groups. Movements of people occur between the two countries through family migration, spouse migration, international students, migration workers, family visits or travels. Finances connect people such as remittances sent to relatives in Vietnam to fund new houses, education, motorbikes or other material goods or social supports. Telecommunications and the internet are part of day-to-day lives. In these ways
transnational communities reconfigure and change as well as continue to remain connected to their place of origin. Knowledge, views and perceptions of social institutions in the home country act as reference points in varying degrees of strength, to interpret experience in the new country (Wu and Sun 2009:171).

The paucity of academic literature in English on policing in Vietnam and the lack of capacity to research potential literature in Vietnamese meant that the study relies mainly on primary data for the specific characteristics of community-oriented policing in Vietnam. The past relationship of People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a colonizing country for over one thousand years has left a legacy of Confucian ideology there that influences ideas and practices related to law and order. Some inferences about policing in Vietnam can be drawn from studies of policing philosophy and social control strategies in PRC.

The scholarly literature in English on criminal justice in the PRC tends to be descriptive accounts of policing that, for the most part, does not address the philosophy of community policing (Cohen 1968; Brady 1982; Leng and Chiu 1985; Tanner 1999). Wong (2001:190) advises that the scholarship on community policing in PRC has to be understood within the socio-economic political systems, particularly those of rural communities. Some scholars view community policing in the PRC as part of a mass social control system whereby people take control of their own community and welfare (Wong 2001:188). Community policing, similarly to other social control processes, are mediated through local civil agencies and informal organisations. The groups include ‘local struggle committees’, family, clan and voluntary support groups (Wilbur 1978: 120 –170). Citizen participation in policing is a demonstration of duty, responsibility and rights (Wong 2001; Chen 2002). Policing communities in this way needs only a low police to population ratio and is claimed to
have effectively maintained low crime rates (Brogden and Nijhar 2005:97). Another view is that community policing strategies are not only a means of maintaining social control through discipline and education of citizens, but are an effective surveillance mechanism (Dutton 1992:289). It is the household, not the citizen that that is the basic unit for policing and social control. A system of household registration is integral to the governance of the PRC. It is through registration that households are granted housing and work. The registers also provide statistical data on the population for planning (Dutton 1992:298).

Community-oriented policing strategies are described in liberal democracies as a collaborative effort between police and local citizens to seek solutions to their safety and security problems through identification and control of crime and disorder (Innes 2006:4; Murphy, Hinds et al. 2008). Brogden and Nijhar (2005:23) offer guiding principles for community policing. The principles are based on the specific policing needs of communities, crime and security, ideas of consensus, accountability, transparency and use of discretion. Victoria Police refers to community policing as the recognition of the uniqueness of communities and need to deliver a tailored policing service (Victoria Police 2009). Community policing is also working with other agencies to help young people at risk and the education of police to respect different social and cultural traditions (Victoria Police 2009).

Building trust is an important aspect of community policing. Law enforcement strategies employed to enforce the law within one’s own culture may be insufficient in policing different cultures. The acts of establishing trust and building cooperation with members of different groups require specialized knowledge and skills (Shusta, Levine et al. 1995:4). Fukuyama’s concepts of generalized trust and spontaneous sociability provide a way of thinking about differences in cooperation between
organizations in countries like the US as compared to China (Buchan and Croson 2004:487). Fukuyama (1995) proposes that a boundary of trust exists in every culture that separates those who are trusted and trustworthy people from those who are not. In China this is a tighter inner circle of kin, while in the US it is a larger circle that is more permeable to people outside the family (Fukuyama 1995).

**Methodology**

As in mainland China prior to 1990, gaining research access to data on public security in Vietnam today takes lengthy negotiations and can be a difficult task (Wong 2007:112). Over many weeks Australian Federal Police (AFP) liaison officers negotiated the interview and discussion groups with senior members of the General Department of Police Vietnam. Other interviews were organised with the Consular General and Deputy, Australian Consulate, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and RMIT Vietnam. Data was collected across the variables of police officer/non-police, Vietnamese citizen/expatriate and Government organization/NGOs. Intercultural theory (Cornett-DeVito and McGlone 2000) and critical theory (Alvesson 2000) were used as guiding theoretical frameworks.

Structured group interviews and discussions involved 16 representatives from the Department of Police Vietnam and in-depth interviews with 18 representatives from the other organizations. The interviews elicited thickly descriptive accounts of policing local crime, disorder and safety problems. The interviews with police were formal, highly structured and were conducted in Vietnamese with translators. Gifts were provided for the most highly ranked person present. The interview data with members of the Department of Police Vietnam was collected by written records in
English, taken by designated persons in the study team. A Vietnamese translator provided by Australian Federal Police also recorded the responses in Vietnamese, but this data was not available to the study group. Written note taking by the study group was used for all other interviews. Individuals, departments and organisations were not identified in the data. All quotes are based on verbatim written recording of interview responses. This was made possible for the designated recorder from the study team because the translation process adopted in Vietnam involved short passages of speech followed by pauses for translation into English. Participant observation data on the observed relations between civilians and police was recorded in a journal. The observations and reflections of the police members were collected through two interviews in Vietnam (half-way point and end of trip). The initial coding was based on the three main areas we identified from Brogden and Nijhar’s (2005:23) guiding principles for community policing — citizen involvement, safety and transparency. Subsequent thematic analysis, word searches and identification of patterns led to the themes discussed in this paper. The implications for practice were identified by drawing on the data and the experiences of the study team in Vietnam.

**Contextual background for policing local communities in Vietnam**

Policing approaches in Vietnam are based on collective ideas of community rather than the individual citizen. The primary means of policing local communities involves close monitoring via the household register. Throughout Vietnam household registers are used as a device to track precise locations of people and monitor or restrict movement of people. They inform police who is in their area and who is doing what. The register is a tool to administer temporary and permanent residency of citizens in provinces. Without a household registration book people living illegally in a city do
not have the right to own a home, find a job in a State-run office, or send their children to school (VietNamNet Bridge 2007/07/7). In Hanoi there are reported to be 500,000 ‘migrants’ from other provinces. The household register has been used to discriminate against religious, political and ethnic groups (International Federation of Human Rights League 2009). A new Law on Residency, passed by the National Assembly in November 2008 and implemented from July 2009 removes the requirement to report to police when people move (VietNamNet Bridge 2007/07/7). We observed that the monitoring of these registers is often accompanied by corruption and intimidating visits. Examples of this observed first hand by the research team included payments to police at permit points on a river for boat registration, visits from police demanding to know the reason why overseas visitors had visited a Vietnamese household and subsequent payment. In another situation Australian visitors moved out of the Vietnamese household to reduce the stress for the family caused by police visits. Compliance with the register appeared to be driven by fear with high levels of anxiety expressed by register owners for any compliance irregularity. The Department of Police Vietnam informed us that surveillance also occurs through technical equipment and intelligence from a strong network of informants, a process they advised was costly. In ‘small areas’ there is a police officer in charge of public security. There is a civil operations function that utilises volunteers to work who are paid minimally.

Everything observed in that area reported to that officer. Everything is reported but not very big criminals, usually very afraid of them. (The Department of Police, Vietnam)

We were interested in the policing of ethnic minorities but were advised not to pursue this with police as it is a politically sensitive area. Many of the 53 minority groups such as the Khmer, Hmong, Hoa Hao or Cai Dai claim to experience ongoing
harassment and discrimination (USCIRF 2009; Human Rights Watch 2009/01/21). Some Australians working in Vietnam explained the divide as rural ethnic versus city people. Any overt inquiry into this with the Department of Police Vietnam, we were advised, could cause loss of face for the officials. Instead these questions were addressed in discussions with NGOs. We were also advised not to ask any questions about 3rd country nationals and only to discuss these cases if they were raised by the high-ranking Vietnamese officers. This demonstrated the limitations of interviews with high-level officials where knowledge production was affected by diplomacy. Although the policing of minorities was not pursued overtly in the interviews, police responded to a general question about recruiting diverse people. The Department of Police Vietnam claimed that few people from mountain areas apply for policing as a career. When people from the minority groups are recruited and qualify after three years (the lower stream) as a police officer, they are usually placed back into their own communities to police them. The Department of Police Vietnam explained the recruitment issues in this way:

1st challenge: Not too many females apply. We would like to recruit more females.

2nd challenge: There is an imbalance between localities. Too many from the city and not enough from the mountain areas.

3rd challenge: Students would like to join some areas such as counter terrorism. Prison does not attract many students. (The Department of Police, Vietnam)

The Department of Police Vietnam is a uniformed organisation. The organisational view from AFP was that there is a ‘high degree of emphasis on visibility by the Department of Police Vietnam and its ancillary deterrent effect on lawless activities’ (Australian Federal Police 2009). The study group noted a lack of visible police presence in the streets in terms of marked police vehicles. It was apparent that traffic
police did not have the technological capacity of Australian police forces in terms of random detection of vehicles, roadblocks, breathalysers and signage. Police did not appear to be proactive in the local areas where they were located. An impression was that the public went to the police, but police did not engage with community.

The social prevention of crime is implemented by the government through large-scale community education programs. The usual channels for communication of information was through local police officers, letters or information by phone calls. The programs target the cooperation of not only citizens but all social organisations. The national programs are implemented through networks with Womens’ Unions, veterans and school and university students. Citizens’ responsibility for public security is for the local area in which they live. According to the Department of Police Vietnam these programs are effective.

Very effective, strong support to police matters. They provide information from places where people assemble. They help to arrest and detect criminals. The police officers may be at meetings to encourage others to cooperate. (Department of police, Vietnam)

The academy has a stream of community policing within one of the faculties from which graduates are later employed in the Department of Community Policing. As part of their training students assist with the policing of festivals and other public events. If there was an issue such as the recent campaign to wear helmets on motorbikes, there were centrally driven structures and significant resources to get the messages into the community via leaflets and other means (VietNamNet Bridge 2007/07/7).

Themes
Citizen involvement in policing local communities

Information on how citizens are involved in dealing with crime or other social problems in their neighbourhood was generally difficult to access. Only in private and after a relationship had been established, would some citizens discuss their experiences of informal community safety processes. One example was described by a citizen in this way:

If there was a pickpocket for instance you wouldn’t report that to the police. The community would deal with it and they would all talk to that person, and if they didn’t improve over time they’d be sent off to re-education. If the problem continued, then they’d report it to the community or local police for attention where it would be classed as more serious crime. (Vietnamese citizen)

A new method for dealing with lower level drug offences was recently introduced by police where instead of people being assigned to classification centres for drug usage or associated robberies they could ‘classify themselves in a community’, meaning that they could stay at home to do their classification. Expatriates commented on the informal neighbourhood networks which carried out local surveillance to protect citizens’ property.

There are families who look out for each other. The man who runs the shop or the taxi driver look out...if something happens. (Australian living in Vietnam)

Trust and reporting of crime

Tight boundaries of trust enclose extended families and small communities. Police and other organizations explained that this provides strength and stability but also prevents or excludes a policing understanding of family issues. Families never declare if a person has been charged. The Department of Police singled out women living together in extended families as a group who do not involve police. When offenders are arrested they never declare anyone from their family. One consequence of
breaching this cultural rule would be a lack of material needs in prison, as in Vietnam it is the expectation that family members will have to take care of them, including providing food. Problems are worked out inside the family, not outside. When family members have serious drug addiction problems or if there is domestic violence or child abuse, the issues are kept invisible and not remarked upon publicly by the rest of the community. There is also a personal safety risk of harm or other revengeful acts if anyone close to or from the family passes on information to police. The Social Security Criminal Investigation Department reported that most victims of child abuse and their families hide the issue but when it is reported it is always an anonymous phone call. In Vietnam, anonymity is important in all crime reporting.

We provided a lot of stamped addressed envelopes that they could send back with information to police. (Department of Police officer)

There is reluctance for the community to provide information about crime to the police.

The community is not prone to interacting with authorities. (Expatriate living in Vietnam)

Citizens may report street violence or robberies operated by small groups but not extortion or other criminal activity carried out by higher-level criminal organizations because of fear of retribution.

For example at a market in Hanoi criminals operate there, get into the market on motorbikes. They take money from the people on their motorbikes, the people in the market do not report it. It is difficult to investigate. It may take five to seven years of operations before we can identify a group and take them to court. (Department of Police)

They do not dare to report criminal organizations that have been operating in one area for a long time and they are afraid of the big people of the organization. And in these kind of organizations many people have been hurt, some killed or injured especially by the very strong criminal organizations for coming to the police. (Department of Police officer)
Corruption was widespread with Vietnam ranking the 114th most corrupt nation out of 160 countries (Nationmaster 2009/03/19). Corruption was reported as a significant factor in generalised mistrust and lack of confidence in the police. It was discussed by expatriates, observed by the researchers and commented on in the public media.

Police are not held in high regard. (Australian living in Vietnam)

There is a natural suspicion of police. (Australian living in Vietnam)

Any traffic police officers in HCM City caught taking bribes would be stripped of their titles, according to a new decision taken by city Police Director Nguyen Chi Dung. (08/07/2008 VietNamNet Bridge)

President Nguyen Minh Triet on Monday asked traffic police to hold their work ethics and morality in high regard as he praised their contributions. ‘This is a tough battle field. It requires you to constantly train yourself and to adopt a firm politician point of view in the struggle to purify all social relations,’ said the President. (08/07/2008 VietNamNet Bridge)

Interviews with NGOs and other groups revealed a lack of transparency and accountability in the treatment of foreigners arrested, particularly in relation to serious crimes such as drug trafficking. In these cases it may be several weeks before foreign embassies provide information or access to foreign nationals or legal assistance. Court processes are lengthy with little information provided to offenders.

The experience of non-Vietnamese living and working in Vietnam was that people will not express their views or talk publicly about issues and problems. According to some NGOs this was because they were closely monitored; others found it a cultural pattern. Police seldom would speak openly to NGOs even when they worked on preventing crime such as trafficking of girls and women. Other expatriates advised that you don’t visit the local police station to discuss policing issues related to your business, instead you take police officers and officials out for dinner and build relationships.
Human security and safety issues in Vietnam

Gambling is an illegal activity but is widely practised and has the biggest impact of all social issues on the community. Gambling in Vietnam is linked to debt, drugs and prostitution. Some NGO members reported that gambling was ruining many families. We were also informed that of the 26 Australian Vietnamese in prison in HCMC for drug trafficking, all except one resulted from their own or other family members’ gambling debts. When gambling or drug addiction is a serious problem the overriding commitment to family, saving face and protection of integrity keeps the problems hidden. Specific examples were given of eldest sons involved in drugs yet protected by the family above all else, even if it meant that the family finances and relationships are undermined. Some families we were told, pay the police to stay away from children or other family members with drug addictions. For many social problems there are no support agencies or mechanisms for assistance. Female addicts often end up in prostitution, karaoke bars and massage parlours to support their habit. Alcohol consumption and alcoholism is not publicly considered a problem by the government although according to NGO representatives 7-10% of the community have an alcohol problem. The lack of recognition that alcohol is a community problem means that it is not policed. Other human security and safety issues were sexual servitude, human trafficking and the brides industry.

Conclusions and implications for practice

Gambling is the biggest identified community problem in Vietnam and gambling debts are an underlying cause of many criminal activities. Gangs and criminal groups control small street crime and extortion in markets through to highly organised criminal activity that is often international and integrated into business activities.
Although the Department of Police claimed to be policing the typical crimes of violence, drugs, robberies, narcotics and economic crime other groups claimed that many serious social problems and criminal activities were not policed. These included gambling, sexual servitude, prostitution, human trafficking and the brides industry.

*Questions for the work in progress:*

- What should be the investigative capacity for Victoria Police around gambling?
- What is the current impact of drugs and gambling on Vietnamese Australian communities?
- How does Victoria Police protect vulnerable people involved in prostitution, human trafficking and the brides industry?

Boundaries of trust around families keep problems ‘in-house’ and hidden from police. The small networked unit is maintained by an over-riding commitment to family and the cultural practice of saving face. The result in some cases was that serious safety issues and problems are left for small groups or families to deal with, unsupported by outside expertise or resources. Policing issues within these networks was reported to be strongly influenced by a mistrust of police. We could not assess if mistrust of police was the prime or a contributing factor in under-reporting of crime. Informal neighbourhood networks protect property for citizens and expatriates.

*Questions for the work in progress:*

- Are there effective security networks that by-pass police within the Victorian communities in our study, and if so how inclusive are the networks?
- What is the extent of violence and exploitation within the home, and how are they dealt with in the communities in our study?
Building generalised trust requires specific cultural training for police officers in Victoria that recognises differences between the provinces and the historical significance of regions. The Vietnamese identify with and originate from quite distinct social and economic environments. These regional connections influence their societal alignment within the Australian community. Suggestions from Vietnam to build cooperation with the Department of Police include sharing of information on criminal cases and exchange of students at the Academies, police officers and research. The 'household register' and use of other surveillance has implications for the perceptions of local police as instruments of quite generalised surveillance. Past experience in Australia has shown that the use of Vietnamese Australian police to police their own community has failed. Clearly, Vietnamese Australian police members should not be used in surveillance roles that undermine the cooperative brief of community policing. The challenge for Victoria Police is how to build new models for communicating and building trust with Vietnamese Australians. Future approaches should recognize the local and transnational links and the economic, political, interfamily and social issues that affect community security and safety in Australia and Vietnam.

References


