Research Article

Integrity Practices Among Royal Malaysia Police Officers In Perlis: The Role Of Organizational Culture And The Border-State Context

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how integrity practices among officers of the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) are shaped by organizational culture, using the Perlis contingent as an embedded single case in a border-state setting. Although PDRM has established internal and external oversight mechanisms, integrity breaches continue to be reported, and little is known about how officers themselves understand the cultural conditions that sustain or weaken integrity, particularly in a border contingent. Guided by the Competing Values Framework (Cameron & Quinn, 2011), the study pursued four objectives: to identify the factors associated with integrity practices; to examine how organizational culture shapes these practices; to analyse how the culture–integrity relationship is shaped by the border-state context; and to propose measures for strengthening integrity practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four key informants, one focus group discussion with four participants (one from each of the four constituent establishments of PDRM Perlis), and analysis of publicly accessible institutional documents, and were analysed using six-phase thematic analysis. Integrity practices were shaped by interacting individual, organizational and institutional-contextual factors, with organizational factors (leadership and supervision, fair but situationally responsive handling of errors, peer influence and workload) most prominent. PDRM Perlis exhibited a hybrid hierarchy–clan culture that produces "structure-guided, relationally-supported integrity", accompanied by two distinct forms of silence. The border-state context functioned as an amplifier rather than a creator of existing cultural requirements. The study extends the Competing Values Framework to border-state policing and offers a practical action plan for PDRM Perlis leadership, the Department of Integrity and Standards Compliance (JIPS) and policymakers.

Keywords: Integrity Practices; Organizational Culture; Competing Values Framework; Border-State Policing; Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM); Perlis.

Introduction

Integrity is a foundational quality of law enforcement institutions. Because police agencies are entrusted with considerable coercive power, they are expected to operate according to the highest ethical standards in order to sustain public trust and legitimacy (Whitton, 2001). Integrity in policing is therefore not an add-on to police work but a precondition for the institution's legitimacy. It involves honesty, moral consistency and adherence to ethical standards even under pressure or temptation (Killinger, 2010), and it is understood as a multidimensional construct that covers officers' dealings with the public as well as their professional conduct within the organization (Klockars et al., 2006). Officers also exercise wide discretion in their daily duties, so their conduct directly shapes public confidence in the rule of law (Hickman et al., 2016).

The consequences of integrity failure are well documented. A lack of integrity erodes public trust,

reduces public cooperation with the police and heightens tension between the police and the communities they serve (Prenzler, 2009). A national study of arrests of sworn officers in the United States, for example, recorded 6,724 arrests between 2005 and 2011 (Stinson et al., 2016). Integrity is therefore a cross-national concern, and many jurisdictions have created dedicated oversight mechanisms to address it.

In Malaysia, the Royal Malaysia Police (Polis Diraja Malaysia, PDRM) has implemented several institutional safeguards. The Department of Integrity and Standards Compliance (JIPS) was established in 2014 as an internal oversight mechanism. External oversight was strengthened through the Independent Police Conduct Commission (IPCC), established under the Independent Police Conduct Commission Act 2022 (Act 839) and operational since 1 July 2023. The IPCC replaced the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC), which the Royal Commission had proposed in 2005 as part of 125 reform recommendations (Royal Commission to Enhance the Operation and Management of the Royal Malaysia Police, 2005). Despite these measures, incidents of misconduct and integrity breaches continue to be reported (Polis Diraja Malaysia, 2023; Transparency International Malaysia, 2021). This persistence suggests that formal oversight alone may not adequately address the underlying sources of integrity breaches. International scholarship has long made the same point: formal control mechanisms, without an organizational environment that supports integrity from within, tend to produce temporary or cosmetic solutions (Klockars et al., 2006; Punch, 2009; Sherman, 1978).

The literature suggests that integrity practices are shaped by factors at three interacting levels: the individual, the organization, and the institutional or contextual environment (Walker & Archbold, 2020). Among organizational factors, culture has repeatedly been identified as an especially strong predictor of police misconduct, shaping how ethical decisions are made and reinforced in everyday practice even after individual and external factors are taken into account (Armacost, 2004; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). Yet most of this evidence comes from urban or Western policing and from large-scale quantitative surveys (Ivković, 2005; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). Three gaps follow. First, there is an empirical gap: few studies examine how organizational culture shapes integrity practices among PDRM officers. Second, there is a contextual gap: border-state contingents, whose operating environment differs markedly from urban policing, remain largely unexamined. Third, there is a methodological gap: qualitative work that allows officers to articulate in their own words how they experience integrity and culture is scarce.

Perlis offers a revealing setting for addressing these gaps. It is Malaysia's smallest state, yet it borders Songkhla Province in southern Thailand, and its police contingent operates in an environment shaped by cross-border activity, smuggling-related risks and heightened security demands. PDRM Perlis comprises four constituent establishments: the Contingent Police Headquarters (IPK) Kangar and the District Police Headquarters (IPD) of Kangar, Arau and Padang Besar. The small size of the contingent and its proximity to tight-knit border communities can strengthen either a supportive, family-like culture or, conversely, a culture of mutual protection that conceals misconduct.

This study therefore addresses four research objectives: (1) to identify the factors that influence integrity practices among police officers in PDRM Perlis; (2) to examine how organizational culture shapes these practices; (3) to analyse how the relationship between organizational culture and integrity practices is shaped by the border-state context of Perlis; and (4) to propose measures for strengthening integrity practices based on the findings. By answering these objectives from officers' own accounts, the study contributes a context-specific extension of the Competing Values Framework to border-state

policing and offers evidence for targeted, rather than generic, integrity interventions.

Literature Review

Integrity and its determinants in policing

Philosophically, integrity is rooted in moral consistency: the alignment of a person's actions with their values and beliefs. In policing, Klockars et al. (2006) emphasize that integrity is not merely the absence of corruption but active and sustained resistance to the temptations that accompany police work, situated within an organizational environment that either reinforces or undermines that resistance. This view places the organization, not only the individual, at the centre of explanations for integrity. Newburn (1999) likewise concluded that single explanations of police misconduct, whether the "rotten apples" thesis or organizational structure alone, are insufficient to explain complex patterns of misconduct and integrity within a police agency.

Walker and Archbold (2020) group the determinants of police integrity into three levels. Individual-level factors include moral reasoning, personal commitment to ethical principles and length of service. Organizational-level factors include leadership behaviour, supervisory climate and culture. Institutional or contextual factors include oversight mechanisms, resource adequacy and the wider legal and political environment, as well as sustained operational pressure. Evidence on leadership is consistent with this framing: Huberts et al. (2007), for example, showed that leadership style is associated with integrity violations committed by police officers. The three-level taxonomy provided the basis for the conceptual framework used in the present study.

Organizational culture and police culture

Schein (2017) conceptualizes organizational culture at three levels: observable artifacts and behaviours, espoused values and beliefs, and the taken-for-granted basic underlying assumptions that members rarely question. Applied to policing, this implies that officers' integrity practices are shaped not only by formal codes of conduct (espoused values) but also by deeper, often unspoken, assumptions about what behaviour is acceptable in their unit. Schein also argues that these assumptions cannot be fully understood from artifacts or formal policy documents alone; they require in-depth exploration of members' own experiences and interpretations. This provides a methodological rationale for qualitative inquiry.

The police-culture literature has long shown that culture can both support and undermine integrity. Skolnick (2002) argues that strong solidarity, although it binds officers together in high-risk situations, can also shield misconduct from accountability through a "blue code of silence", and Armacost (2004) identifies code-of-silence cultures as a principal barrier to controlling misconduct. Wolfe and Piquero (2011) found that officers' perceptions of organizational justice were significantly related to their propensity to engage in misconduct. Kucukuysal (2008) examined how organizational culture affects Turkish police officers' perceptions of integrity, and Westmarland and Rowe (2018) questioned whether formal ethical codes can overturn an entrenched "blue code" without deeper cultural change at the level of operational units. Chan (1996) cautions that police culture is not a static or uniform entity but is shaped by the interaction between wider social and political fields and the dispositions officers bring to the organization. Culture is thus a double-edged sword: a source of support and strength, but also a potential mechanism for protecting wrongdoing.

The Competing Values Framework

To operationalize culture, this study uses the Competing Values Framework (CVF) developed by Cameron and Quinn (2011), which derives from Quinn and Rohrbaugh's (1983) spatial model of effectiveness criteria. The framework rests on two dimensions, flexibility versus control and internal versus external focus, which yield four culture types: clan (collaboration, loyalty and mutual support), adhocracy (innovation and flexibility), market (competition and results orientation) and hierarchy (structure, rules and procedural compliance). Cameron and Quinn stress that most organizations display a mixed cultural profile rather than a single type. Each type carries both strengths and risks for integrity. Clan cultures may strengthen peer accountability but risk fostering a protective code of silence; hierarchy cultures promote consistent formal compliance but may produce a brittle, compliance-oriented integrity when oversight weakens; market cultures may prioritize outcomes over ethical means; and adhocracy cultures may support creative solutions to ethical dilemmas while de-emphasizing standard controls. Denison (1990) and Ouchi (1981) provide supporting arguments that consistent, involving cultures and relationships of trust are associated with stronger member commitment to organizational standards. Because the CVF explicitly recognizes multiple coexisting cultures, it suits the argument that police culture is not monolithic.

Policing in a border-state context

Most research on culture and police integrity has been conducted in urban or Western settings, and its transferability to a border-state contingent cannot be assumed without empirical investigation. Crank (2014) argues that core features of police culture, such as an emphasis on danger and authority, are broadly consistent across contexts although their manifestations vary locally. It is plausible that the emphasis on danger is more pronounced in a contingent that deals with cross-border crime and smuggling risks. In addition, officers at border posts frequently make rapid decisions with limited direct supervision, which increases the weight of informal, shared norms about acceptable conduct relative to written rules. These considerations motivated the third objective of the study: to examine how the border-state context conditions the relationship between culture and integrity.

The Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative design within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. This choice follows directly from the research questions, each of which asks how officers experience, describe and interpret the factors, relationships and contextual pressures that shape their integrity practices, rather than how strongly variables are statistically related (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach was also considered more suitable for a sensitive, institutionally critical topic, because it allows trust to be built gradually between researcher and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Culture was explored inductively through officers' narratives rather than measured by pre-set questionnaire constructs.

Research design and case

The study employed an embedded single-case design (Yin, 2018). PDRM Perlis constituted the bounded case, selected because it is the only PDRM contingent operating wholly within a land border-state environment between Malaysia and Thailand. The four constituent establishments (IPK Kangar, IPD Kangar, IPD Arau and IPD Padang Besar) served as embedded sub-units of analysis. IPD Padang Besar is adjacent to a major border entry point and thus the most directly exposed to cross-border activity.

Participants and sampling

Participants were selected purposively using the key-informant technique (Marshall, 1996). One key informant (KI-1 to KI-4) was selected from each establishment, using consistent role-based criteria: active service in the establishment, at least three years of service in the unit, and supervisory responsibility or direct exposure to integrity and disciplinary matters. Four further participants (FGD-1 to FGD-4), one from each establishment and different from the interviewees, took part in a single focus group; these participants were operational or front-line personnel, so that the combined sample would represent a broader range of roles. In total, eight unique officers from the rank of Corporal to Assistant Superintendent (ASP) contributed data (Table 1). Because access to police personnel on a sensitive topic is constrained, the sample was deliberately small. Its adequacy was judged by the richness and relevance of the data in relation to the research objectives rather than by thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Patton, 2002). All participants are identified only by anonymous codes, and ranks are reported at a general level to prevent indirect identification.

Table 1
Profile of Key Informants and Focus Group Participants

Code	Establishment	Rank category / role	Years of service	Gender
KI-1	IPK Kangar	ASP level; supervisory	15	Male
KI-2	IPD Kangar	Inspector level; integrity/discipline duties	12	Male
KI-3	IPD Arau	Sub-Inspector level; supervisory	9	Female
KI-4	IPD Padang Besar	Inspector level; integrity/discipline duties	18	Male
FGD-1	IPK Kangar	Sergeant Major level; operational/front-line	20	Male
FGD-2	IPD Kangar	Sergeant level; operational/front-line	13	Female
FGD-3	IPD Arau	Corporal level; operational/front-line	9	Male
FGD-4	IPD Padang Besar	Sergeant level; operational/front-line	15	Female

Note. KI = key informant (individual interview); FGD = focus group discussion participant. Ranks are reported at a general level to avoid indirect identification.

Data collection

Data were collected through three sources. First, semi-structured interviews with the four key informants were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, two face-to-face (KI-1, KI-4) and two online (KI-2, KI-3); sessions were designed to last between 45 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent and were transcribed verbatim. Second, one mini-focus group (Morgan, 1996) was held with the four front-line participants to capture collective and interactional perspectives on culture and integrity, and it ended with an in-session member-checking summary. The interview and focus group guides covered general factors in integrity practice, experiences of organizational culture, culture and ethical decision-making,

border-specific operational pressures, the interaction between culture and the border context, and suggestions for improvement. CVF terminology was deliberately not introduced to participants; the framework served as an interpretive, sensitizing lens applied by the researchers during analysis, not as a scored diagnostic instrument. Third, publicly accessible institutional documents (including PDRM annual reports, official portal content and parliamentary records) were reviewed to contextualize and triangulate the interview and focus group data. Quotations reported below were translated from Bahasa Malaysia into English by the authors.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

The data were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analytical narrative. Analysis proceeded by research question: open coding first identified the range of factors officers associated with integrity (objective 1); culture-related themes were then developed using the four CVF quadrants as an interpretive lens (objective 2); and border-related themes were analysed in relation to the culture themes (objective 3). A cross-sub-unit synthesis then compared patterns across the four establishments. Trustworthiness was supported through the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Tracy (2010): triangulation across interviews, focus group and documents (Denzin, 1978); member-checking; an audit trail of coding decisions; thick description of the border context; and reflexive notes on the researcher's position as an academic outsider with no hierarchical link to PDRM.

The study followed ethical procedures appropriate for research with police personnel, which required formal permission from PDRM and institutional ethics approval from Universiti Utara Malaysia before data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Transcripts were anonymized, data were stored securely, and a brief debriefing was offered after each session in view of the sensitivity of the topic.

Results and Discussion

Factors influencing integrity practices

Participants consistently associated integrity practices with factors at three interacting levels (individual, organizational, and institutional-contextual), which is consistent with the taxonomy underlying the conceptual framework (Walker & Archbold, 2020). None of the eight participants framed integrity as a purely individual or purely organizational matter, which supports Newburn's (1999) argument that single-level explanations are inadequate. Table 2 summarizes the themes.

Table 2

Summary of Factors Associated with Integrity Practices, by Level

Level	Principal themes	Sources
Individual	Personal values and self-discipline; honesty in admitting mistakes; self-confidence and willingness to ask; experience as a "double-edged" factor (greater risk sensitivity but possible overconfidence)	KI-1, KI-3, KI-4, FGD-1, FGD-3

Level	Principal themes	Sources
Organizational	Consistent leadership and supervision; fair but situationally responsive handling of errors; peer influence; clarity of systems and procedures; workload and operational pressure; open communication climate; continuous reinforcement	All four key informants; FGD-1 to FGD-4
Institutional / contextual	Consistency of standards across establishments; professional boundaries and conflicts of interest; preventive approach; organizational learning; consultation and reporting channels	KI-1, KI-2, KI-3, KI-4, FGD-1, FGD-2, FGD-4

Note. Based on thematic analysis of interview and focus group data.

At the individual level, personal values and self-discipline were seen as the foundation of integrity but not as sufficient on their own. KI-4 stressed that many integrity decisions are made when an officer is alone: "If I had to choose one, I would say personal character and professional discipline… there are situations where nobody is beside the officer to tell them what to do. That is when the officer's own judgement and values become important." Participants also valued honesty in admitting mistakes and the confidence to ask for guidance, and KI-3 observed that unspoken uncertainty, not ignorance, is often the real problem. Experience was described as double-edged: it sharpens risk detection but can breed overconfidence. FGD-1 noted that experienced officers "can become too comfortable… experience helps you identify a situation, but it should not make you think you are beyond the reach of the rules."

At the organizational level, the most prominent theme was consistent leadership and supervision. All four key informants independently emphasized that supervisors' behaviour, more than formal statements about integrity, defines what subordinates regard as normal. KI-1 described the risk of mixed messages: "If a supervisor says integrity is important but ignores questionable behaviour because it is troublesome to deal with, then the message becomes mixed." KI-2 added that consistency should not depend on any single supervisor: "A strong integrity culture must continue even when supervisors change… officers need to see consistency, in how rules are explained, how concerns are handled and how accountability is enforced." A second theme was fair but situationally differentiated responses. KI-1 explained that a supervisor must first establish whether an incident is a genuine mistake, a lack of understanding, negligence or a deliberate attempt to conceal something, because "these situations should not all be treated the same way", and FGD-4 added that fairness "does not always mean treating every situation the same", provided that the decision can be objectively explained. Peer influence (learning from colleagues' daily conduct, which may be good or questionable), gaps between written procedures and informal practice, and workload were further organizational themes. Workload and operational pressure were mentioned by all four key informants and two focus group participants as increasing the risk of shortcuts when combined with weak supervision.

At the institutional and contextual level, participants emphasized consistency of standards across all four establishments, the clear management of professional boundaries and conflicts of interest, and a preventive approach. KI-2 framed small errors as signals of systemic weakness: "Sometimes one small mistake can show that there is a weakness in training, communication or supervision. If we only look for

someone to blame, we may miss the chance to improve the system." Clear consultation and reporting channels were seen as a prerequisite for acting on integrity concerns early.

When each participant was asked to name the single most significant factor, five of the eight (KI-1, KI-2, KI-3, FGD-2 and FGD-3) named an organizational factor (leadership and immediate work environment, system consistency, the people around them, or organizational culture). Two participants (KI-4 and FGD-1) named an individual factor (personal character and discipline), and one (FGD-4) named professional boundaries, an institutional-contextual factor. The two participants who prioritized individual factors were also the two longest-serving in the sample (18 and 20 years). This tentative pattern suggests that perceptions of the main source of integrity may vary with career maturity, possibly because senior officers have faced more situations in which they had to decide alone, although this proposition requires systematic testing in larger samples. Overall, the predominance of organizational factors supports the premise that organizational culture is the most significant and most amenable lens for understanding police integrity (Armacost, 2004; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011), while the persistence of individual and institutional themes confirms that culture must be read alongside, not instead of, other levels.

Organizational culture and integrity practices

Interpreting the officers' accounts through the CVF lens showed that the culture of PDRM Perlis is a hybrid, dominated by hierarchy and clan characteristics, with market elements present at a moderate level and actively constrained by process norms, and adhocracy elements present only in a limited form. Table 3 summarizes the relationship between each quadrant and integrity.

Table 3 Cultural Quadrants of the Competing Values Framework in PDRM Perlis and Their Relationship to Integrity

Quadrant	Emphasis in the data	Relationship to integrity	Sources
Clan	Dominant	Double-edged: supports professional correction and mutual support, but risks becoming protection of misconduct	KI-1, KI-2, KI-4, FGD-2, FGD-4
Hierarchy	Dominant	Supports integrity when applied consistently and fairly; risks silencing junior officers when too rigid	KI-1, KI-2, KI-3, FGD-2
Market	Moderate	Performance pressure is present but actively constrained by process norms	KI-1, KI-2, FGD-2, FGD-3
Adhocracy	Limited ("bounded discretion")	Judgement is permitted but must be accompanied by justification and accountability	KI-1, KI-2, KI-3, FGD-1, FGD-4

Note. Quadrants follow Cameron and Quinn (2011); emphasis reflects the authors' thematic interpretation of the data.

Clan characteristics (cooperation, trust and mutual loyalty) were highly salient. KI-1 and KI-4 described officers as depending on one another, and FGD-2 characterized the working culture as cooperative because operational work requires it. Yet participants also exposed the complexity of this loyalty. KI-2

distinguished between supporting a colleague in difficulty and shielding serious misconduct: “Loyalty can mean different things. Supporting a colleague who is struggling is positive… But if loyalty means ignoring serious misconduct, that is something else.” KI-4 described how silence can gradually become embedded: “Over time, silence can become part of the culture. And once silence becomes normal, small problems can continue without anyone addressing them.” These accounts echo Skolnick’s (2002) and Armacost’s (2004) analyses of solidarity and the code of silence.

Hierarchy (structure, a clear chain of command and procedural compliance) was the most frequently and consistently mentioned characteristic. KI-1 described the organization as structured and operations-focused, and KI-2 placed system consistency at the centre of integrity. However, participants also identified an internal tension: structure alone does not guarantee open communication. KI-2 observed: “You can have a clear reporting channel, but officers may still hesitate to speak up openly. For example, a junior officer may understand the proper channel but still feel uncomfortable raising a question involving a more senior officer.” KI-3 recalled thinking carefully, as a junior officer, before asking a question so as not to appear ignorant, and FGD-2 and FGD-4 made similar observations. Hierarchy therefore supports integrity through clarity of standards and accountability but can also generate status-based silence.

Market-type pressure (performance, targets and results) was recognized but kept in check. KI-1 warned of problems when “someone focuses too much on results and forgets the process”, and KI-2 noted that if performance is measured only by visible numbers, officers may feel pressure to prioritize speed. FGD-3 added that younger officers may hesitate to seek help because they want to prove themselves. Importantly, no participant accepted outcome pressure as a justification for shortcuts; all framed process integrity as more important than results. Adhocracy appeared not as encouragement of experimentation but as “bounded discretion”. KI-1 explained: “Police work requires judgement… But judgement does not mean you can simply ignore the rules”, and KI-2 cautioned that discretion becomes a problem “when discretion is used as an excuse to avoid procedures”. Officers are allowed flexibility in assessing situations, but always within strict limits of justification and accountability.

Participants also stressed that culture is not uniform across the four establishments or even within one establishment. FGD-3 said that the immediate team plays a large role, such that “two officers in the same institution can have slightly different experiences depending on who they work with”, and FGD-4 linked this to supervisors’ power to influence their immediate team’s culture. This is consistent with the view that police culture is internally varied and shaped by unit-level leadership (Chan, 1996), and it implies that interventions should target small-unit supervisors as well as contingent-level policy.

Taken together, these findings point to a distinctive form of “structure-guided, relationally-supported integrity”. Hierarchy provides clear standards and accountability; clan relationships provide support, trust and informal correction. Three conceptual insights follow. First, the clan dimension is actively negotiated by officers themselves, who show metacognitive awareness of the risk of drifting from healthy solidarity to unhealthy silence. Second, adhocracy in a law enforcement setting takes the form of bounded discretion, which differs structurally from the free experimentation emphasized in the classic adhocracy quadrant (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Third, the effect of a cultural quadrant on integrity depends on its interaction with the others, not on its strength in isolation; here, a dominant hierarchy appears to prevent market pressure from compromising process integrity. Two conceptually distinct forms of silence also emerged: loyalty-induced silence, rooted in clan culture, and status-

induced silence, rooted in hierarchy culture. They call for different interventions. The findings are consistent with the argument that integrity sustained mainly by rule enforcement may be more fragile than integrity supported by shared ethical commitment, and with the view that cultural change must accompany formal codes (Westmarland & Rowe, 2018). They also qualify the notion of a single police culture by showing a mixed profile, in line with Cameron and Quinn's (2011) position that organizations rarely occupy only one quadrant.

The border-state context and the culture–integrity relationship

The third objective examined how the border-state context shapes the culture–integrity relationship. Participants first rejected the assumption that a border setting automatically equates to crime or misconduct. KI-2 noted that "people hear the word 'border' and immediately assume that every activity is related to crime or misconduct. That is not accurate. There are legitimate social and economic activities involving people with cross-border ties." The risk lies instead in how closeness within border communities can blur professional boundaries. KI-1 explained that in fairly close communities people may know one another directly or indirectly, which is not automatically a problem, but that officers must be aware that personal closeness can influence, or appear to influence, professional decisions. KI-3 added that officers, including women officers, must take care to maintain professional boundaries in small, interconnected communities.

A clear risk pathway emerged, which we term the "access–relationship–request" pathway. KI-4 described it: "Sometimes it begins with access. Someone becomes close to an officer. A relationship is built. Then a request may arise. At first, the request may seem harmless… If the officer is not careful, the boundary can gradually weaken." FGD-3 added the effect of a first exception: "if you make one exception, people may expect another exception in the future." FGD-4 identified a distinctive difficulty: "Sometimes the difficulty is not saying no. The difficulty is maintaining the relationship professionally after saying no." The pathway runs from social access, to relationship building, to a first small request, to the normalization of follow-up requests, and it offers a prospective, preventive account of how an initially high-integrity officer can become exposed to risk. It complements work that analyses cases of misconduct after the fact by showing the process at its earliest, most preventable stages.

The most consistent finding for this objective, supported by all four key informants and confirmed unanimously by the four focus group participants during member-checking, was that the border environment does not change the basic standard of integrity but raises the level of awareness required. The participants' consensus statement was: "the border environment does not change the basic principles of integrity, but it may create different situations that test those principles." KI-3 added that consultation and communication matter more in assignments involving additional pressure or complex relationships, and KI-4 warned of overconfidence among officers long familiar with the environment: "Sometimes, the more familiar you are with an environment, the easier it is to stop noticing certain things." The border-state context thus functions as an amplifier, not a creator, of existing cultural requirements, namely open communication, consistent supervision and a preventive approach. The culture–integrity relationship described above becomes more critical, not different, under border conditions.

A comparison across establishments reinforced this reading. The two participants from IPD Padang Besar, the establishment most directly exposed to a major border entry point, gave the most detailed, experience-based accounts of the access–relationship–request pathway and of maintaining professional

relationships after refusing a request. Participants from IPK Kangar and IPD Arau discussed the border context at a general level with some illustrative examples, and those from IPD Kangar discussed it more conceptually. Their depth of discussion was thus aligned with their structural exposure, which suggests that training on professional boundaries should be weighted toward the most exposed establishments without neglecting general awareness elsewhere.

Implications

Theoretically, the findings extend Schein's (2017) model by showing at micro level how basic assumptions about acceptable conduct are formed through accumulated small decisions by individuals and supervisors, and they extend the CVF through the concept of bounded discretion, the interaction between quadrants and the two forms of silence. They also suggest that for small police organizations the immediate work team may be a more precise unit of cultural analysis than the contingent as a whole. Methodologically, the study shows that deep contextual understanding can be achieved from a small, purposively selected sample when it is combined with rigorous qualitative procedures, in contrast to the large-scale survey tradition that has dominated police integrity research (Ivković, 2005). Practically, the results indicate that integrity interventions designed for urban contexts and applied uniformly may not fit a border contingent, and that supervisors at unit level are a critical lever for change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to understand how organizational culture shapes integrity practices among PDRM officers in Perlis and how this relationship is shaped by the border-state context. Using an embedded single-case design, four key-informant interviews, a focus group of four officers and document analysis, it found that integrity practices result from interacting individual, organizational and institutional-contextual factors, with organizational factors, particularly leadership and supervision, most prominent in participants' accounts. PDRM Perlis displays a hybrid hierarchy–clan culture in which market pressure is constrained and adhocracy takes the form of bounded discretion, producing structure-guided, relationally-supported integrity that carries two distinct silence risks. The border-state context amplifies, rather than creates, the cultural requirements for integrity, operating through an access–relationship–request risk pathway. These findings answer the first three research objectives; the fourth is addressed by the recommendations below, summarized in Table 4.

Recommendations

First, PDRM Perlis leadership should invest in targeted ethical-leadership development at the level of small-unit supervisors (Sergeant to Inspector), emphasizing consistent modelling of ethical behaviour and system consistency that does not depend on any individual supervisor's personal qualities. Training should also build supervisors' ability to move flexibly between clan features (trust and support) and hierarchy features (discipline and procedural compliance). Second, the two forms of silence require different responses. For loyalty-induced silence, leaders should explicitly redefine "professional loyalty" to include professionally correcting colleagues, not merely protecting them. For status-induced silence, units should introduce regular "no-judgement query" sessions in which supervisors explicitly encourage junior officers to raise doubts without being seen as incompetent. Third, a scenario-based training module simulating each stage of the access–relationship–request pathway should be developed, prioritizing exposed establishments such as IPD Padang Besar and including skills for maintaining a

professional relationship after declining a request. Fourth, periodic reflection sessions for senior and experienced officers should challenge long-held assumptions about familiar environments, because these officers need a different kind of exposure, not less of it.

For JIPS and policymakers, the findings support a gradual shift toward organizational-learning approaches for minor breaches (for example, "integrity learning reports") in addition to punitive responses, and policy that allows local adaptation while keeping core standards uniform. We propose an "amplification model" in which core integrity standards are common to all contingents, including other border-state contingents, while the intensity of implementation (frequency of reinforcement training, detail of professional-boundary guidelines) is adjusted to the operational exposure of each unit. JIPS should also consider guidelines on managing the two forms of silence as part of national integrity training, and a small-scale feasibility study of early-intervention systems for border contingents.

Table 4 Summary Action Plan for Strengthening Integrity Practices in PDRM Perlis

Recommended action	Responsible party	Indicative horizon
Periodic ethical-leadership training for small-unit supervisors (Sergeant–Inspector)	PDRM Perlis leadership	Short term (0–6 months)
"No-judgement query" sessions to address status-induced silence	Unit supervisors / establishments	Short term (0–6 months)
Redefine "professional loyalty" in training and leadership communication	PDRM Perlis leadership and JIPS	Medium term (6–12 months)
Scenario-based module on the access–relationship–request pathway for highly exposed units (e.g., IPD Padang Besar)	PDRM Perlis leadership and JIPS	Medium term (6–12 months)
Periodic reflection sessions on overconfidence for senior and experienced officers	PDRM Perlis leadership	Medium term (6–12 months, recurring)
Partial shift to learning-based handling ("integrity learning reports") of minor breaches	JIPS	Long term (12–24 months)
Local-adaptation policy and amplification-model framework across border contingents	JIPS and PDRM Headquarters	Long term (12–24 months)
Small-scale feasibility study of early-intervention systems for border contingents	JIPS and national policymakers	Long term (>24 months)

Note. Compiled from the study's findings; horizons are indicative.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is a small-scale qualitative case study with eight participants from four establishments, so its findings are context-specific and cannot be statistically generalized to other PDRM contingents; transferability depends on readers' judgement of the similarity of their own contexts to the thick description provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The sample was deliberately limited because of the sensitivity of the topic and access constraints, and the findings may be affected by self-report and social-desirability bias despite assurances of confidentiality. Reliance on

culture, through the CVF, as the primary analytical lens means that other relevant factors, such as deeper individual psychological factors, organizational politics or local economic conditions, may have been under-explored. The data were collected cross-sectionally and therefore cannot show how the culture–integrity relationship changes over time, and coding was carried out by a single researcher, which carries a risk of interpretive bias.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research: multiple-case comparisons with other border-state contingents (for example in Kedah, Kelantan and Sarawak) to test the transferability of the access–relationship–request pathway and the amplification model; larger quantitative or longitudinal studies to test the tentative link between career stage and the perceived main source of integrity and to track change after interventions are implemented; studies on whether bounded discretion is relevant to other control-oriented organizations such as military, fire, prison and customs agencies; qualitative work on the gender dimension of integrity in border communities, which was raised by one participant but not explored in depth; multi-level designs that measure culture at both the contingent and immediate-team levels; and multiple-coder thematic analysis to reduce single-researcher interpretive bias.

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