

## **Contingency Theory Approach for Effective Community Policing**

**Bahadır KÜÇÜKUYSAL\***  
**Erhan BEYHAN\*\***

### **ABSTRACT**

The last few decades have shifted police from a force to a service oriented organization. Community policing is perhaps the most popular and the most demanded policing method among the law enforcement authorities, and has been implemented by many countries in recent years. However, implementation of community policing programs have always been problematic.

This study is a modest attempt to demonstrate that this problem requires a public policy approach, rather than seeing it only a criminal justice issue. Using a contingency theory approach, this paper identifies the central premises of a public policy for an effective community policing program.

**Key Words:** *policing, community policing, contingency theory.*

### **Etkili Bir Toplum Destekli Polislik için Olumsuzluk Teorisi Yaklaşımı**

#### **ÖZET**

Son yıllarda polis teşkilatları, güç kullanma odaklı organizasyonlardan hizmet odaklı organizasyonlara dönüşmüşlerdir. Toplum destekli polislik, kanun uygulayıcı otoriteler arasında belki de en popüler ve en çok talep edilen bir polislik metodu olup son yıllarda bir çok ülke tarafından hayata geçirilmiştir. Ancak, toplum destekli polislik uygulamaları çoğunlukla bir takım sorunları da beraberinde getirmiştir.

Bu çalışma, yaşanan sorunların çözümü için toplum destekli polisliği sadece polisiye bir konu olarak görmek yerine “kamu politikası” yaklaşımının esas alınması gerektiğini ortaya koymakta ve “Olumsuzluk Teorisi” perspektifinden yola çıkarak etkili bir toplum destekli polislik için ihtiyaç duyulan bir kamu politikasının temel taşlarını tanımlayı hedeflemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *polislik, toplum destekli polislik, olumsuzluk teorisi.*

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\* Ph.D., Turkish National Police e-mail: bkucukuyisal@yahoo.com

\*\* Ph.D., Turkish National Police e-mail: erhanbeyhan@gmail.com

**Introduction**

The last few decades have shifted police from a force to a service oriented organization. Community policing is perhaps the most popular and the most demanded policing method among the law enforcement authorities, and has been implemented by many countries in recent years. Police rely heavily on public approval to maintain their legitimacy and need to persuade the public to seek their consent to be governed.<sup>2</sup> In this context of police community relations, citizen satisfaction with police becomes critical.

Many police scholars believe that a new era in police management has been experienced since the 1980's. Community policing or community oriented policing has been the main theme of policing over the last two decades. While it is often argued that there is not a universally accepted definition of community policing, "every definition of community policing shares the idea that the police and the community must work together to define and develop solutions to problems".<sup>3</sup> Rather than a set of police tactics, community policing is seen an "organizational strategy" for running a police department<sup>4</sup>.

This paper aims to identify a core problem with the implementation of community policing programs. A community policing program which has proved to be successful in one setting is often duplicated by other agencies. However, it often fails to produce desired results. It is because consideration of specific characteristics of the environment and the community plays decisive role in the success of the program, and this fact is often ignored or overlooked by police agencies. Solution to this problem requires a public policy approach, rather than seeing it only a criminal justice issue. Using a contingency theory approach, this paper identifies the central premises of a public policy for an effective community policing program.

**Literature Review:**

In the United States, where community policing practices first started, community policing is accepted as a philosophy and practice that has been accepted as the most important contemporary police innovation designed to reduce crime.<sup>5</sup> Community-oriented policing has a large literature and has been researched from many perspectives regarding its role in reducing crime, and its effects on police officers

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence W. Sherman, *Consent of the Governed: Police, Democracy, and Diversity*. In Policing Security, and Democracy. eds. Amir, M. & Einstein, S. Office of International Criminal Justice: Huntsville, TX, 2001, pp. 17-32.

<sup>3</sup> Westley G. Skogan, *Community Participation and Community Policing*. In Brodeur, J.- P. (Eds), How to Recognize Good Policing. Problems and Issues, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1998, pp. 88-106.

<sup>4</sup> James Forman, Community Policing and Youth as Assets. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 2004, Vol. 95 Issue 1.

<sup>5</sup> Zhao Jihong, et al. *Community Policing: Did It Change the Basic Functions of Policing in the 1990s? A National Follow-up Study*. *Justice Quarterly*, 2003, 20:697.

and police organizations, and its effect on citizen satisfaction with police services. True community policing can be described as "a philosophy and an organizational strategy that promotes a new partnership between people and their police. It is based on the premise that both the police and the community must work together as equal partners to identify, prioritize, and solve contemporary problems with the goal of improving the overall quality of life in the area".<sup>6</sup>

Kelling and Moore<sup>7</sup> state that we arrived at this era of community policing with the call to re-establish close community relationships. The authors suggest that American policing went through the "political" era and the "reform" era. Reform era policing has been blamed to create a gap between the police and the community. To remedy the opposition against the police and to change the image of police, programs were established that directly related to community relations during the 1960's and 1970's.<sup>8</sup> During the movements that occurred in the 1960's, a lot of progress has been made in terms of creating community relations units for police departments.

With the increasing interest in the community policing studies since the 1970s, police literature adopted concepts from business and management such as, service consumers. Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch<sup>9</sup> refer to numerous studies of for-profit organizations to reflect the perceptions of the customers toward improvement of their service quality. The authors continue by positioning citizens as "consumers of police" since they need service, which they cannot obtain elsewhere. In the era of community policing, providing service in accordance with the public's expectations and improving the public's satisfaction becomes crucial for police departments. However, the increased need for security may conflict with public's priorities. This produces different expectations of police and the community towards each other, which may result in alienation of the community.

Jiao<sup>10</sup> addresses core issues to realize the goals of the community-oriented policing. First, "the police must decentralize their organizational structure and shift command responsibility to lower rank levels".<sup>11</sup> It is also important for police departments to establish community based crime prevention programs, which involve commitment to the community, external and internal communication, and mobilization of community resources.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Trojanowicz & Bonnie Bucqueroux, *Community Policing: A Contemporary Perspective*. Cincinnati, Oh: Andersen Publishing Company, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> George L. Kelling & Mark H. Moore, *The Evolving Strategy of Policing*. Perspectives on Policing, 1998, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Egon Bittner, E. (1975), *The Impact of Police-Community Relations on the Police System*. Community Relations and the Administration of Justice, ed. Geary, D., P. John Wiley&Sons, New York, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Sutham Cheurprakobkit & Robert Bartsch, Police Performance: A Model for Assessing Citizen Satisfaction and the Importance of Police Attributes. *Police Quarterly*, 4, (4), 2001, pp. 449-468.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Y. Jiao, *Matching Police-Community Expectations*. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 26. No. 4, 1998, p. 294.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 294.

Community-oriented policing has another important function in terms of roles of police officers. Jiao suggests that community policing requires that police organizations should broaden the scope of the roles of the police officers and engage in more proactive activities. Underlying philosophy of the community-based policing suggests that the role of the police is not law enforcement and the prevention of crime only. Police officers also should maintain order and provide community services in cooperation with the residents of the community.<sup>12</sup>

### **Problem Definition**

Since the late 1970's, significant resources have been devoted to encourage the community to be more involved in public safety. For instance, since 1994, the federal government has given more than \$8 billion to local police agencies to implement community policing.<sup>13</sup> While drawing attention to the proliferation of community policing programs and huge budgets that have been allocated by both federal and local administrations for this purpose, the author suggests that relatively little is known about its implementation.

Despite huge amounts of money that has been spent on community policing programs, not only in the United States but also in many other countries, it is not uncommon that these programs have ended with nothing but a disappointment. For example, in an evaluation of community policing programs in eight cities, the Vera Institute found that all of the departments in eight cities were not successful.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the departments experienced great difficulty in establishing a strong relationship between the programs that they implemented and residents of the communities.

One important reason for this failure is importing and implementing community policing programs without taking into account of the specific features of the environment that the program is aimed to be implemented. This important mistake that causes waste of efforts and loss of huge sources is due to the misassumption that if a community policing program has been successful in one place, then there is no reason for that program not to yield same results in another setting. Community policing programs adapted with no alteration without considering the specific conditions and needs of the environment, characteristics of the community and the structures of police organization often fails to produce desired results.

An effective public policy for a community policing program that matches the characteristics of both the environment and the police organization requires in-depth analysis of following questions:

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<sup>12</sup> Allan Y. Jiao, *Matching Police-Community Expectations*. Journal of Criminal Justice, Vol. 26. No. 4, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy M. Wilson, *Determinants of Community Policing: An Open Systems Model of Implementation*. Unpublished report prepared for the United States Department of Justice, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Westley G. Skogan, *Community Participation and Community Policing*. In Brodeur, J.- P. (Eds), *How to Recognize Good Policing. Problems and Issues*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1998, pp. 88-106.

- What factors facilitate or impede the implementation of community policing programs?<sup>15</sup>
- What are the variables that have impact on implementation of community policing programs?
- How can a community policing program be shaped according to the needs and characteristics specific environments?
- What is the relationship between community-oriented policing and the structures of police organizations?<sup>16</sup>
- To what extent do community policing programs require changes in the organizational structures of police departments and what is the nature of that change?

### Theoretical Framework

Some central premises of contingency theory can help understand core issues for implementing effective community policing programs. The term contingency theory was first proposed by Lawrence & Lorsch.<sup>17</sup> The authors showed in their empirical study that “different environments place different requirements on organizations”.<sup>18</sup> They specifically emphasized on the environments marked by uncertainty and rapid change in market conditions and technological areas since these kinds of environments present different demands, both positive and negative, than relatively stable environments.<sup>19</sup>

While contingency theory has been greatly elaborated over years, the general orienting hypothesis of the theory suggests that design decisions depend on environmental conditions, meaning that organizations need to match their internal features to the demands of their environments in order to achieve the best adaptation.<sup>20</sup> In other words, “driving force behind organizational change is the external environment, particularly the task environment with which an organization is confronted”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremy M. Wilson, *Determinants of Community Policing: An Open Systems Model of Implementation*. Unpublished report prepared for the United States Department of Justice, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

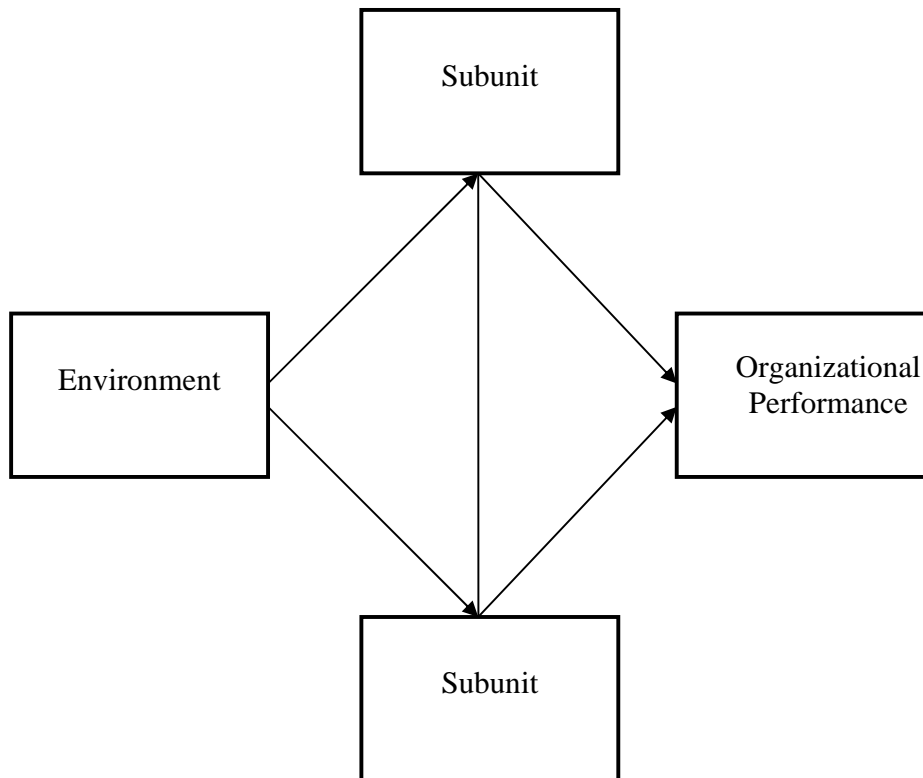
<sup>17</sup> Paul R. Lawrence & Jay William Lorsch, *Differentiation and Integration in Complex Organizations*. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 12, (1967), 1-30.

<sup>18</sup> William R. Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, 5th ed., Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 2002, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Zhao Jihong, et al. *Community Policing: Did It Change the Basic Functions of Policing in the 1990s? A National Follow-up Study*. *Justice Quarterly*, 2003, 20:697, p. 5.

**Figure 1. Simplified Model of Contingency Theory**

Scott points out two assumptions proposed by Galbraith<sup>22</sup> that underlies contingency theory, and adds a third one himself. These following assumptions that constitute the central premises of the contingency theory can be utilized to address the problems that are encountered in the implementation of community policing programs:

- There is no one best way to organize,
- Any way of organizing is not equally effective,
- The best way to organize depends on the nature of the environment to which the organization relates.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *Designing Complex Organizations*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. 1973.

<sup>23</sup> William R. Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, 5th ed., Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 2002, p. 95.

The first assumption challenges the traditional view that certain general rules and principles can be applied to organizations in all times and places.<sup>24</sup> In community policing, it is often assumed that community policing has certain guidelines that are indispensable to an effective community policing program. It might be true for the central notions of community policing, such as increasing cooperation between police and public and promoting public participation in law enforcement. However, it is a common misunderstanding that all guidelines and procedures of a program can be applied uniformly regardless of time and place.

Scott<sup>25</sup> argues that second assumption challenges the conventional wisdom of early economists that organizational structure is not relevant to organizational performance. Today, it is commonly held that organization form is associated with the performance of the organization. In community policing, however, importance of organization structure is often ignored or underestimated. An effective program often requires certain changes in the organizational structure of police departments, such as “decentralized decision making and flattened hierarchies”.<sup>26</sup>

Adams, et.al.<sup>27</sup> suggests that community-oriented policing requires two fundamental changes: First is reorganization of the resources of a police organization away from crime control. This means more emphasis on street patrols and problem-solving efforts and greater officer freedom. Second is change occurs in the behaviors and expectations of police officers<sup>28</sup>

The third assumption is particularly important in that it explains most of the factors that lead to problems in the implementation and application of the community policing programs. As stressed by Scott<sup>29</sup>, organizations are as successful as they are successful in adapting to their environments. When implementing a community policing program, specific features of the environment and characteristics of the community are often not taken into account, which is a major threat to the success of the program.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

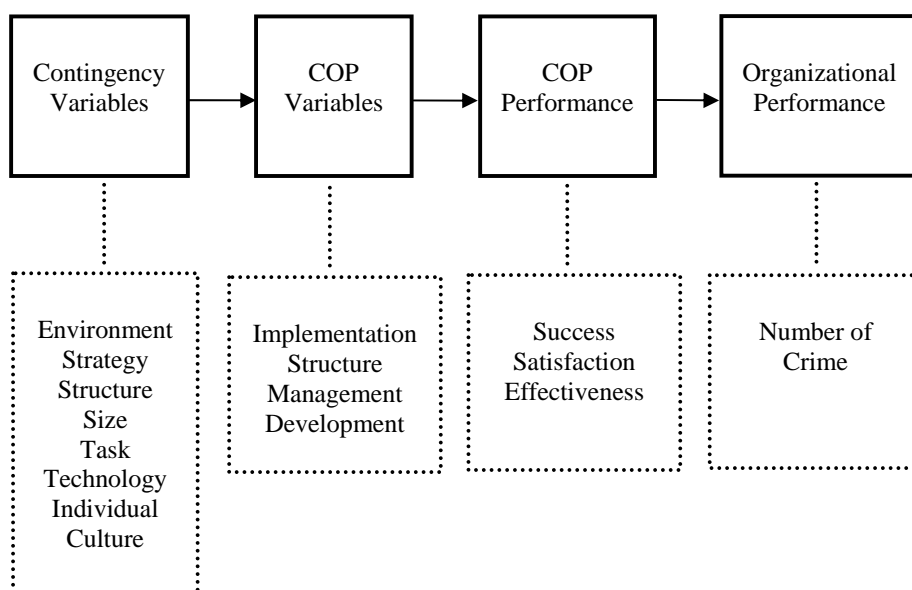
<sup>26</sup> Jeremy M. Wilson, *Determinants of Community Policing: An Open Systems Model of Implementation*. Unpublished report prepared for the United States Department of Justice, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Richard E. Adams et. al., *Implementing Community-Oriented Policing: Organizational Change and Street Officer Attitudes*. *Crime and Delinquency* 48:399-430, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> William R. Scott, Ibid.

**Figure 2. Proposed Contingency Variables for Community Policing Applications**



Wilson<sup>30</sup> compares the contingency theory and the institutional theory to explain the nature of the relationship between police organizations that apply community policing and their environment. While “institutional theory suggests that the structure and activities of organizations are responses to the institutional environment, contingency theory suggests that the task environment of an organization (e.g., its size and age, technology, and community characteristics) determines its structure and activities”.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, contingency theory approach to community policing suggests that police departments may implement community policing as long as it helps them manage and accomplish their task. For instance, if a community is heterogeneous, then police may become more likely to implement community policing because it would help them meet the needs of diverse residents.<sup>32</sup> For institutional theory, by contrast, the author suggests that there are some elements that institutional expectations of a police organization stem from, such as region, civil entities, and funding sources, which may exert

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy M. Wilson, *Determinants of Community Policing: An Open Systems Model of Implementation*. Unpublished report prepared for the United States Department of Justice, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



pressure over it. This suggests that police departments may implement community policing as long as it meets institutional expectations of residents.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Contingency theory and institutional theory as discussed above may be seen as competing; however, they do not need to be. As Wilson<sup>34</sup> states, policing scholars have often suggested both the institutional and task environments have importance in understanding the functioning of police.

As discussed above, contingency theory is of significance value for understanding the nature of the problem associated with implementation of community policing programs; however, incorporation of a successful synthesis of the institutional theory can make important contribution to the developed framework.

Strong theoretical framework should be supported with interdisciplinary perspective to develop an effective public policy. An interdisciplinary approach can achieve to consider and analyze relations and interplay among complex and intertwined factors, which is crucial to establish an effective community policing policy.

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<sup>33</sup> Jeremy M. Wilson, *Determinants of Community Policing: An Open Systems Model of Implementation*. Unpublished report prepared for the United States Department of Justice, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

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