

Police Officer Perspectives on Higher Education: Is the Degree a Necessary Ingredient for the Performance and Behavior of Police Officers?

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Abstract

In efforts to better understand the relationship between higher education and police performance in the United States, qualitative data from 61 police officers of all ranks and educational backgrounds from the Midwest examine attitudes pertaining to the necessity of a college-educated force. Explanations are offered as to why officers do or do not believe a college education is an essential ingredient to police work. Overall views express the significance of a college education with incongruences in the amount of education officers should attain. Accounts and opinions related to officers' respective motivations and impetuses for choosing their profession are scrutinized. Career roles, future goals and aspirations are identified.

Keywords: criminal justice, police performance, higher education, police officer attitudes

Problem & Purpose Statement

The worth of college degrees for police officers has been debated for decades. Many studies have been conducted, specifically during the 1970's, with contradictory results. Few qualitative studies have addressed issues pertaining to whether or not police officers (of all ranks) believe a college degree is important. Additionally, little is known regarding job satisfaction/dissatisfaction among officers with different levels of educational attainment within the policing field. A qualitative analysis of police officers' belief and opinions pertaining to the worth of a college education in relation to police performance and behavior was conducted.

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The central purpose of this study was to ascertain whether police officers believe a college degree aids them in job performance and behavioral issues related to their occupations. Sixty-one police officers were interviewed for the study, on a voluntary basis. One-hour interviews were held with the officers to determine the perceived worth of a college education in relation to the behavior and performance of police officers. The concept of worth illustrates whether a college education, be it a two or four-year degree, has value within some context or use of application. Worth is a product that is of intrinsic value (Lincoln & Guba, 1981).

Literature Review

The relevance of college-educated police officers has been debated for the past 100 years. Additionally, an overabundance of studies has proven contradictory concerning the relationship between higher education and police performance. Particular researchers cogitate that because 'someone already did that,' an analogous study would not be useful. "Nothing could be further from the truth. The more studies conducted on a topic, the better picture we have of 'the truth' " (Aamodt, 2004, p. 201). Today, less than 1% of police departments in the U.S. require a four-year degree (Reaves, 2010). However, college degrees are desired, recommended or preferred--but not required. The status of college education among police officers in the U.S. in the last 85 years has vastly increased.

Folgelson (1977) demonstrated that in the 1930's, 67% of officers had only an 8th grade education. Twenty-five percent of officers had at least one year of college in 1965 (Bell, 1979). Bell (1979) found that since the 1950's, increasing numbers of local police departments have required at least some college as a prerequisite to entry-level hiring. In 1974, 47% had at least one year of college (Police Foundation, 1979). Two decades later, in 1990, 65% of police officers had at least one year of college; 23% had attained a four-year degree (Carter & Sapp, 1990). Finally, as of 2010, roughly 25-30% of all police officers in the U.S. had a four-year degree (Reaves, 2010). Interestingly and perhaps by design, the percentages of officers holding four-years degrees now closely mirrors the proportion of the U.S. working population over the age of 25 with a four-year degree. Of that population (over age 25), 29.9% had attained four-year degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Whetstone (2000) derived two interesting points: every national census of police personnel showed the average educational level was on the rise, as was the proportion of officers holding college degrees. By 2006, 98% of local departments had an educational requirement; 18% had 'some type' of college requirement; 9% required a two-year degree, and less than 1% required a four-year degree (U.S. Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Local Police Departments, 2007). White & Escobar (2008) suggested there was compelling evidence for professionalized and representative police forces in societies with higher-than-ever expectations for well-trained, skilled and diverse police forces.

Multiple studies have found college educated officers display better written and oral communication skills; display more professionalism and tolerance; exhibit greater understanding of human behavior; are more intellectually developed, independent, flexible, and well-rounded; place more emphasis on ethical conduct; are better able to analyze problems and display increased self-confidence, morale and motivation, and display more professional attitudes and public relation skills (Alpert and Dunham, 1988; Breci ,1997; Carlan and Byxbe, 2000; Carter and Sapp, 1990; Cascio, 1977; Finckenauer, 1975; Kakar, 1998; Roberg and Bohn, 2004; Scott, 1986; Sherman et al., 1978; Smith, 1978; Worden, 1990). Early studies purported that college degreed officers hold higher service standards and are more humanistic (Miller & Fry, 1976; Regoli, 1976).

More recent analyses have, too, shown support for the benefits of degreed officers, as officers with less than two years of college were four times likely than officers with two or more years of college to face discipline by commissions for moral character or violations (Delattre, 2002). College-educated officers have fewer disciplinary problems than officers with a high school diploma/GED (Aamodt, 2004). Officers with no college education account for a disproportionate number of discipline cases (Cunningham, 2003). Furthermore, achieving a bachelor's degree prior to being hired is associated with less supportive attitudes of abuse of authority (Telep, 2011). Higher education and policing collaboratively improve police professionalism, accountability and legitimacy on an international level (Paterson, 2011). Finally, college educated officers perceived higher education as beneficial to their work (Rydberg, Nalla & Mesko, 2012).

Critics of higher educations believe “college-educated officers are more likely to become frustrated with their work, with restrictions imposed by supervisors, and with limited opportunities for advancement” (Worden, 1990, p. 567).

Hudzick (1978) found that educated officers placed less value on obedience to supervisors and were less satisfied with their careers. Others were concerned that “college-educated officers will quickly tire of the irregular hours, constant pressures, and relative low pay of policing” (Varricchio, 1988, p. 11). Whetstone (2000) acknowledged, “hiring candidates with improved credentials also invites eventual problems such as greater job dissatisfaction and personnel turnover” (p. 247). Kakar (1998) demonstrated that a college education might decrease officer’s quality of service because police work does not offer opportunities to stimulate the college-educated mind.

Methodology

Sixty-one police officers were interviewed for this qualitative study. This was a non-random convenience sample of selected police officers. Interested participants were recruited through Southeast Missouri State University’s Criminal Justice Department’s undergraduate and graduate internship programs. In-depth, structured interviews (1-1.5 hours each) were held in the researcher’s office and/or in conference call rooms at the police departments. Participating officers represented 16 different police departments (medium-large size) from two Midwestern states. The ages of the officers ($M = 38.9$, $SD = 10.74$, Range 23-57). Over 85% of the participants were male ($N=53$, 86.9%), whereas, ($N=8$, 13.1%) were female. Of the officers interviewed, 52 (85.2%) were Caucasian and six (9.8%) were African American. Regarding the participants’ number of years in policing ($M=14.72$, $SD= 14.00$, Range = 5 months - 35 years).

Interview Questions

In addition to routine questions addressing demographic, career development and rationales for entering the policing field, and perspective levels of job and career satisfaction, the following questions and issues were explored:

1. As far as education and policing, is a college education necessary to become an effective police officer? Is a two or four-year degree most essential?
2. How and why do officers make career choices to become involved in policing?

3. What is the best educational requirement for police officers and why?
4. Is there a relationship between a college education and job satisfaction for police officers? Why or why not?
5. Is it harmful or helpful for agencies to mandate four-year degree requirements?
6. What do you think about the difference between two and four year degrees as they pertain to policing?
7. What do you think about the relationship between education and job satisfaction for police officers?
8. Do you think it hurts agencies that mandate four-year degree educational requirements? Do you think applicant pools are smaller than in the past? Why or why not?

Table 1 provides the current positions of the interview respondents.

Table 1: Profiles of Respondents

Current Position of Respondent	n	%
Officer	45	73.8
Detective	2	3.3
Lieutenant	4	6.5
Sergeant	7	11.5
Corporal	2	3.3
Captain	1	1.6

Note. N=61.

Table 2 provides the educational levels of the respondents.

Table 2: Educational Attainment of Respondents

Educational Attainment	n	%
High School	14	23.0
Some College	3	4.9
Bachelor's Degree	33	54.1
Master's Degree	4	6.6
Doctoral Degree	1	1.6
Currently Working on Bachelor's Degree	6	9.8

Note. N=61.

Findings

Five major themes emerged from the interview data

1. Myths and misconceptions as to why people choose policing careers
2. Opinions vary as to the importance of a college education for police officers
3. Educational requirements may be counterproductive for police departments
4. Context over textbook: Unspoken coursework
5. Tides may be turning, as higher levels of education could be leading to more satisfaction with employment

Myths and Misconceptions as to why People Choose Policing Careers

It is a general misconception that police officers chose their professions because they had an inner calling to preserve order and protect people. Officers offer multitudes of reasons as to why they chose the policing profession. Nearly 30% of the respondents had a father or other family member who was a current/former officer, but it appeared that they went into policing because it was just an easy employment opportunity, not because their fathers or family influenced them to do so.

Table 3: Family Members/Relatives of Respondents in Law Enforcement Field

Relationship to respondent	n	%
Father	9	14.8
Brother	1	1.6
Cousin	2	3.3
Spouse	3	4.9
Uncle	3	4.9
No relatives in field	43	70.5

Note. N=61.

Reviews of the literature demonstrate that officers choose to enter into the policing field for many reasons. One of the central reasons explaining why people choose the policing field is due to a belief that the career will be full of excitement. The media portrays policing as glamorous and exciting. However, while officers may say a small part of their duties are full of excitement, most of their duties include administrative paperwork.

My dad was a police officer when I was a kid, and was either into some type of law enforcement or in the military. I went into the service. When I got out, one of my friends got a job at the county, as a sheriff's deputy. And I said, if he can do it, I can do it. That's when I pretty much decided that I wanted to become a police officer. So it wasn't much that I had this burning desire to serve the public; that wasn't really it at all. It was mainly because I was needing to get into some type of career, and law enforcement seemed like the most likely choice at the time.

--30 year-old police officer who is within 20 hours from completing a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice

My family has a history of police work, my father and two of my brothers were police officers, and I went away to school and did other things, when I came back that wasn't working out, so I decided to become a police officer

--32 year-old female police officer

I had my pilot's license. I was going to be a pilot. I went through all of my Air Force qualifying tests and I had no problems. We were short of a budget for pilots in the Air Force, and there were freezes on all of the pilot slots for six months. After I waited about six months, a guy called me and said my Air Force Scores were great, but they didn't have a slot for me and asked me if I wanted to become a security officer. I mean, I never considered policing. You know, they promised me at the time that if I got in, I could be a pilot once I got in. So, I got into policing. It was like a fluke.

--38 year-old detective within 3 hours of completing Master's degree in CJ administration

Opinions Vary as to the Importance of a College Education for Police Officers

Table 4 displays the respondents' perceived best educational requirement for police officers.

Table 4: Officers' Opinions of Best Educational Requirements

Perceived Level of Needed Education	n	%
High School Diploma	28	45.9
Some College	4	6.6
Associate's Degree	15	24.6
Bachelor's Degree	14	22.9

Note. N=61.

I think the 60 hour requirement is good because it shows they have a willingness to learn, ... you pull those guys from the military and stuff, or just from the smaller agencies, or have prior experience that don't have college degrees, that conform to the job because they know how to deal with people, where it seems like most people who wash out, they have degrees and zero life experience, so I think life experience is a bigger factor as far as a good police officer.

--36 year-old Officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

I think the department has a standard two years and I think that's actually quite good. It gives an applicant who comes into the department; it ensures the young ones at least have some life experience to go back on, and a lot of courses early on are communication courses, which helps enhance the officer's ability to deal with people, which is pretty much what we do.

--37 year-old Corporal with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

Should Departments Mandate Four-Year Degrees?

We're not accountants, we're not here to crunch numbers, it's all about interacting with people and dealing with and solving problems on the scene, you know, in quick moments. So actually yes, I think it is helping us if we were to mandate a four-year degree; In talking to other people from other agencies that have four-year, like Arlington, Texas, and places like that where they mandate it, they say that yeah it's kind of hard because the people they get are book smart but yet they can't operate out in the field.

--36 year-old male officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

In my opinion, these days, whether it is police departments or fire departments or a schoolteacher. It is not what the degree is in, but having a degree shows that you have determination, drive, and the fortitude to complete a college degree. I went to school and worked full-time at night. Today I think that having a degree tells the employer that you have the drive to stick with it and it's hard. If it were easy, everyone would have a degree.

--25 year-old male officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

Additional Associated thoughts from Participants

No, what's important is common sense. You do have to have at least a high school education. Higher education, no. Without common sense, you could have 20 doctorates and you wouldn't make it in policing.

--54 year-old male officer, no college education

Yes, I think the more educated a person is, the better his reports are. In college, it teaches you how to write papers. A lot of what we do is explaining how something happened; the more you do that in college, the better off you are out here on the street, you'll write better reports. Going to court and testifying--I think it allows you to testify better...you sound more intelligent. You understand the criminal laws better; it teaches you better study habits to where you will learn that the more you know about the various laws, the more tools you have at your discretion in order to solve long-term issues that you'll face out on the street.

--40 year-old male Sergeant with four-year degree in Business Administration

I do think it's necessary for a police officer to have some sort of higher education; not necessarily a four-year degree, but I do agree that they need to have some sort of college education, mainly because I think it shows that the officer is dedicated, not only to policing, but also to enhancing their own abilities and skills

--31 year-old officer with Bachelor's degree in Psychology

There are a lot of tangible things that come out of education, but there are a lot of intangible things that we look for in a person, such as integrity, character, ethics—that are all more important than education. Education does not teach you that.

--50 year-old Lt./with two Bachelor's Degrees in Criminal Justice and Broadcasting and Film, and a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice Administration

I think a degree is necessary. A lot of people that we deal with, especially out there, are fairly educated and they aren't going to have any kind of respect if you don't have an education. Having an education makes you a better police officer because you are able to investigate things and put into words more clearly what happened.

--26 year-old male officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

What you need to know in this job, most universities don't teach it. Most criminal justice programs, and I have an undergraduate in CJ. Most of it is based on theory and statistics, and things like that. Not so much how to do the job, and criminal law, and how to relate to people

--38 year-old female officer with Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice

There are mixed emotions about mandating degrees. However, the opinions of these participants may be leaning toward the idea that perhaps it is harmful for police departments to mandate four-year degrees. Therefore, educational requirements may be counterproductive for police departments

There are a lot of things that go into policing that are not included in a four-year degree. I don't think it is very useful for a patrolman to just have a four-year degree. It's so much more.

--47year-old male Captain, with a college degree in Management, and graduate hours

You are cutting off a lot of opportunities to hire a lot of great candidates for the police. I think it's a trend though, some agencies now, it's almost a given to have a degree. Especially in this job market, with the 2008-housing boom, it can be a lot more competitive. It can be an advantage, but I think it can be harmful because you are eliminating some qualified individuals who can do the job just as well with a high school degree, versus a bachelor's or master's degree

--30 year-old male officer, with Bachelor's degree in Wildlife Conservation

I don't have a degree and I think that I am an asset to my department. I think that I bring a different attitude. I bring life experiences, where you can get someone who gets out of school for four years and that's all he knows. They are probably better at report writing, but when it comes to dealing with people, I believe that is a learned behavior.

--39 year-old male Sergeant, no college education

Four-year degrees are extremely expensive and very time-consuming. One that could be a very good candidate, as a police officer, might not have the resources or time to go to a four-year college. So, it could definitely affect the amount of officers that go through the academy.

--35 year-old female officer with Associate's Degree

I think it is harmful, maybe in the sense that we may be eliminating good candidates because they do not have a degree. But, depending on how many people you have apply for your department, you may need some kind of cut-off in order to weed people out. It's a double-edged sword.

--38 year-old male officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

Yes, emphatically. I have seen policemen with a high school education and so much common sense that they should be chief instead of a regular patrol officer or just the rank of officer. It boils down to how you handle yourself. Bottom-line—it's your personal make-up.

--52 year-old officer with Associate's Degree in Sociology

It forces people into a realm that they maybe didn't want to go into. I think that there are some people, again (I don't think you need a formal education to do this job), so the fact that you force them to get it, I think is harmful for people who want to do this job.

--32 year-old female with Bachelor's Degree in Psychology

I think a four-year degree is pretty excessive for a requirement to be a police officer. For example, there are military guys who don't have any type of education and that would eliminate them from the pool of applicants

--37 year-old male officer working on Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

It can be harmful in a hiring process if you mandate, and as agencies have discovered, it will shrink your applicant pool. You'll have difficulty finding that there are a lot of qualified people out there that don't have four-year degrees that can develop later on or get their education as they are progressing through their career. If you eliminate them up front, I think you are doing a disservice to the agency because then you are limited.

--45 year-old Sergeant with Bachelor's degree in CJ Administration

I've seen some educated people that just failed at and were miserable and made a poor career choice, so mandating it can be harmful if that's not taken into account.

--45 year-old Sergeant with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

On the other hand,

I think that mandating a four-year degree is starting everyone in the step of a direction, because everyone and their brother have an education right now. You can go online and get one in two years if you have to. I think that departments that require degrees are quite smart.

--32 year old male officer, with Bachelor's degree in General Studies

Context Over textbook: Unspoken Coursework

Another theme that presented itself from the interviews was that the importance of a four-year degree may be due more to the collegial environment, than what is gained from classroom experiences.

Going to college is more about learning to play the game, not so much as what is learned from textbooks and lectures.

--31 year-old male officer, currently in his junior year of a Criminal Justice program

I don't think that it's so much the fact that you're in it (college); I think it's really more about life experiences. The fact that you can commit to something for four years and you can actually put up with all of the hoops.

--38 year-old male detective, completing his Master's Degree in Criminal Justice Administration

Being able to demonstrate your ability to meet obligations, whether it's homework assignments or social activities, college gives you a chance to be involved. If you are involved with your community while you are in college, that gives you more experience with the things you need when you become a police officer.

--43 year-old male Captain, currently working on Master's Thesis in Criminal Justice

As educational attainment is becoming more of a norm in policing, higher levels of education may be leading to more job satisfaction among police officers.

Although the prior findings in quantitative studies, as mentioned earlier, demonstrate the increased levels of education is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction, in this study many participants believed the contrary.

Table 5: Perceived Relationship between Education and Job Satisfaction

Current Position of Respondent			n	%
More Education, Less Satisfied			13	21.3
More Education, More Satisfied			24	39.4
No Relationship	22	36.1		
Some Relationship, unsure of direction			1	1.6
Lack of Education, more dissatisfied			1	1.6

Note. $N=61$.

If someone is going through with getting a college education, especially a criminology major and has the idea that they are going to be in law enforcement, it gives them a great foundation to build on. I think one would definitely be more satisfied with a position in which one is trained in and have a preconceived idea that their goal in life was to become a police officer.

--34 year-old male officer, with a Bachelor's degree in Criminology

People with more education are more inclined to move up the ladder in their department and that gives them a fresh start, new outlook, higher goals and accomplishments to reach, so they would have great job satisfaction that the guy who is just listening to the radio and answering calls. You are less likely to get bored because the more education you have, the more that supervisors are going to trust you and let you run with it because of the education you have.

--52 year-old male police officer, with a Bachelor's Degree in Communication

Education can create an opportunity. Opportunity is what really creates job satisfaction. You can take a 20-year patrolman who has done nothing but patrol. It eventually becomes mundane and he loses satisfaction with his job.

--45 year-old male officer, with a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice

I think officers who have an education are probably going to be a lot happier. I think officers who do not have an education are going to think that they are being looked down upon with officers who have an education

--30 year-old male officer, with a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice

I believe a college-educated officer would be more satisfied, because obviously, they have gone other routes. It's not like someone who's gone right out of high school, worked at a gas station for a couple of years and into in the police academy, who wouldn't know anything else but a job like that. Whereas other people, who've gone to college, probably worked a couple of jobs and are a little older and know that it is probably what they want to do.

--36 year-old male officer, who recently graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and has been on force for five months

I would say it would be more satisfactory to have an education because one will enjoy his/her job more because there are more opportunities available

--26 year-old male officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

If you have an education, you have the chance to be promoted, which would give you something to look forward to.

--37 year-old police officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

If you get more education about what you are getting ready to go into when you start this job, I think it helps a lot with job satisfaction. That was, you are not just going into it blindly. I think that sitting in a university or going through a police program you really have to know what you are getting into before you even think about doing this job.

It's not something that you can just think about and go do. You need to get an education and learn about what you are going to be getting into and definitely be prepared for what's going to happen.

--32 year-old female officer with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

It's all about confidence. Knowledge is power, so the better knowledge you have in whatever you are doing, whether it's a computer operator or being a police officer. The stronger your knowledge is, the stronger your confidence is and the stronger are your abilities. You are going to perform better and will be more satisfied with your job. At the end of the day, your performance reports and your written reports will not come back. When you go to court, you aren't getting your can handed to you, so you are not going home frustrated with that.

--Male officer in his 32nd year on the job, with a Bachelor's degree in Education

Similar to what Whetstone (2000) and Kakar (1998) found in past research, twenty-one percent of the respondents did believe that higher levels of education would lead to more job dissatisfaction. This can be illustrated as a 38-year-old male officer with a Master's degree in Criminal Justice recalled,

Higher education leads to being less satisfied. The type of work you are doing, such as working midnights and answering barking dog calls--thinking, I have Master's degree, why am I doing this?

I think that if you have somebody that's got an extremely high level of education, their job satisfaction may go down because they may see that there are other opportunities out there beyond just being a police officer.

--42 year-old male officer, no college education

I think the higher the educational attainment, the less satisfied you would be in your career. You will feel that you could be doing something else--something maybe a little bit better.

--35 year-old male officer, has some college

In this study thirty-five percent (35%) of respondents believed there was no relationship between education and job satisfaction, as the respondents reported the following statements:

I think you're either going to like your job or you're not. I've seen it on both sides where people who have degrees get here and then they get burned out fast, and I've seen guys that don't have degrees get here and get burned out. I think it's just an individual person and what they want to accomplish and how they handle things.

--36 year-old male officer with four-year degree in Criminal Justice

I believe that you can enjoy the job and an education will not make a difference.

--43 year-old Sergeant with Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice

Overall Perceived Importance of Degree

It is evident both from the literature, as well as from these respondents that police organizations value an educated police force. Additionally there are many political issues surrounding whether educational requirements will be recommended or required. However, most of the participants agreed that their agencies that recommended educated officers portrayed that it would be a feature, which would look good to their respective communities. On the contrary, in this study, the majority of respondents believed a college degree is not an overall necessary component for a police officer's educational background. Table 6 describes participants' perceived level of importance for college degrees.

Table 6: Perceived Importance of Degree

Level of Importance	n	%
It is important and necessary	23	37.7
It is unimportant and unnecessary	38	62.3

Note. N=61

Limitations, Discussion and Conclusion

Findings cannot be generalized to police departments across the country because this study did not involve a random sample of officers across the United States. Furthermore, the study did not evaluate race/ethnicity or population size in analysis. More females should be included in the study participants.

Trofymowych (2007) recalled a troubling issue, which may have served as problematic for those pushing college degrees, "While the changing environment has been superimposed with calls for police professionalism, there is still no clear definition of police professionalism among key stakeholders in the field" (p. 428). Various police managers, rather than academics, questioned the relevance for the need for the police to be professional. Despite the lack of requirements, officers in this sample, as well as many others in the country, have elected to earn college degrees. Conflicting results of numerous studies could be the reason why nearly 90% of all local police departments only require a high school diploma/GED.

With the paradigm shift in society, as well as changing technologies and more complex organizational designs, the policing field needs higher-educated officers to enable them to understand our new global environment. The bottom line: Police departments will continue to evolve as educational levels rise.

Words of Wisdom—

The willingness to learn is required to become a police officer. The law is dynamic; everything is changing. I think it's good that police departments are requiring bachelor's degrees, so candidates can show their willingness to learn. Years ago in law enforcement, this was a job you largely did when you got out of the military. Things have changed a lot. Now, we're responsible for changes that happen daily, civilly and criminally. On the top of that, we have computer systems that we cannot get along without. You have to know how to use them. You must be computer literate. The important part is that it shows the willingness to continue learning.

--46 year-old male officer, with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology

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