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# Becoming an Undercover

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# Becoming an Undercover

By Mitch Librett



*For two years, beginning in 2004, Mitch Librett left his day job as a Shift Commander in his own police department at 4 o'clock, 3 afternoons per week, donning old clothing to assume*



*the role of narcotics investigator with the Special Investigations Unit of another police jurisdiction. He conducted in-depth interviews with these undercover police officers, eventually gaining their trust and confidence. Dr. Librett is currently writing a book about his research. Qualitative research of this sort is often rooted in the personal experiences of the researcher. It also benefits from a careful and honest examination of this history by the researcher. This article reveals some of Dr. Librett's self-examination as an undercover police officer and researcher, and presents some excerpts from his field notes and insights. All of the locations, names, and settings from his research have been disguised, both here and in his manuscript.*

## BECOMING A POLICE OFFICER, RESEARCHER AND ACADEMIC

In a sense, this inquiry began on February 18, 1982 when my friend Jeff Ross was gunned down in the Ranch House Roadhouse in Tucson, Arizona. Jeff was then an undercover/vice officer in the Tucson Police Department who was part of an arrest team tasked with taking into custody a one-legged cocaine dealer known as "Peg-leg Cliff." The plan was that Clifford Hamilton, who worked in a back office as the Roadhouse manager, was to be taken following the

successful exchange of cash for a large amount of cocaine. As the door to the office was breached and the arrest team surged into the room, Cliff must have been

more afraid of losing the cocaine than he was of being arrested. Or maybe he believed the police raid to be something more sinister, perhaps being robbed by a group of outlaw drug dealers. At some point, a 9mm pistol was drawn and fired at the police officers, killing Jeffery H. Ross at the age of 28.

At that time I was a college student in Tucson. I had become acquainted with a group of men approximately my own age who had obtained employment in the police

department and were now working in a countywide narcotics unit. They worked undercover, seeking drug buys and introductions to and from informants in the traditional way. In this era there was a great deal of autonomy afforded to drug police. In order to establish and maintain cover, Jeff Ross' unit was given the use of a department-provided apartment, allowed to cultivate very long hair, a beard and decidedly non-regulation modes of dress. Other than their status as police officers, to all appearances they weren't much different from the other friendship groups with whom I had become acquainted in my seven years in Tucson. Ethnically and economically we shared much the same demographic profile of middle-class, European-American, primarily white Protestant. Before Jeff's murder, I had harbored no expectation of ever serving as a police officer. After it, obtaining police employment became an obsession that was eventually realized a year later.

I entered police work with a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts, and considered myself an idealist. As a member of the generation that came of age in the late 1960's to early 1970's I was not unfamiliar with, nor overly disturbed by, narcotics as encountered within the context of my own life history. I considered myself to be a hu-

manist in most respects. But there was something different in the street-level narcotics trafficking that I encountered in 1983 as a new police officer who was assigned periodically to work undercover ferreting out and arresting drug dealers. I was not a stranger to life in a marginalized ghetto area. While attending college in Tucson, of necessity I lived for a time on the verge of the largest *barrio* in the city. But I felt uncomfortable in the African-American ghetto area of the city where I worked as a police officer. I observed people overtly selling drugs and gambling policy when I knew that they could have real jobs. It was not so much a matter of prejudice as a result my educational and cultural background.

With the perspective gained through many years of academic inquiry, it eventually became apparent that the “blame the victim” connotation to the “culture of poverty” argument was ingrained in my personal perspective. I believed, with the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, that the problems suffered by the urban poor were, at least in part, due to their own shortcomings, and that they adapted to their disadvantaged lives by developing a way of life that helped trap them in their ghettos. I also believed that these conditions would be insurmountable by these residents unless they adopted the worldview that had been passed on to me. These beliefs, conflated with the altruistic motivation for my entry to police service, provided the template for the formation of my own police identity.

Most of those I arrested were African-American and Caribbean street-level dealers with whom I had little personal contact. They were arrested according to the “buy-bust” scenario. But other investigations involved my introduction by informants to higher-level, usually white, dealers with whom I sometimes developed long-term acquaintances. When the time came for these people to be arrested, there was often a bad feeling, a sort of “if not for the grace of God, there go I” feeling of regret, affinity, and betrayal. My self-presentation had, of necessity, adapted to conform to what was considered acceptable within the milieu of the police culture

to which I now belonged, and I enjoyed the excitement and prestige that came with undercover work. It was sometimes difficult to reconcile my “police self” with the person that I had been for the first twenty-six years of my life; there was a tension that, at times, engendered near-crises of identity. However, my own undercover experience was short-lived. After my cover was



blown and I was “burned” for a ten-dollar marijuana buy in a housing project, there followed a return to patrol assignment and a relatively uneventful career as a patrol officer and supervisor.

Fifteen years into my police career, the specter of Jeff’s death remained with me. It was a wound still, though long scabbed over. The routine trajectory of my time in the police department led through the course of my marriage to another police officer, two promotions, and myriad opportunities to reflect, from a layman’s perspective, upon the impact of harsh enforcement and incarceration policies targeting narcotics. Fifteen years on I had to ask what Jeffrey Ross died for. To save the “victims” from themselves? To stand in perpetual solidarity with the other fallen soldiers of the war on crime and drugs? Was there another way? And if so, then why did Jeff have to die? For that matter, why did Clifford Hamilton have to die? Of course it stands to reason that if you fire on a group of armed police, there is the expectation that they will defend themselves. I continue to regard Mr. Hamilton as the murderer of a friend and fellow officer, yet it was over drugs, the mere “feel-good” substance that has been socially constructed to connote a great threat to our survival as a cohesive society, but one that in the final analysis, may not be.

## THE VOICES OF THE INFORMANTS

What follows are excerpts from the manuscript for a book I am writing on my research.

Performance, acting, representation for an audience or in the presence of “the other,” underpins any attempt to understand the world of undercover policing. Also key to the understanding of the formation of identity, both in the workplace and beyond, is the idea that there is a “moral” component to self-presentation, as well as to the reception of the performance in the “theater” of the street. The point is that the construction of the undercover identity both enables and circumvents certain logical expectations in the lived experience of a sworn police officer. An undercover officer often engages in a form of “method acting” in order to gain entry and acceptance to a world where the assumption of a shadow-like alternative persona is necessary to establish a *bona fide* within that milieu, and to effectively move among those who populate it.

*Louie V. is 41 years old, a River City undercover/vice cop. He is a huge man- 6'5" at least, 300 pounds and of mesomorphic physique. Tattoos, some of them freshly done, cover his tremendous arms, which are bigger than my thighs. Louie is dressed in a cut-off tee shirt and jeans. His head is swathed in a blue print bandana in the style of an outlaw biker. He moves easily between the discourse of policing and the affected identity of a gay man (he and his partner have been labeled “gay and gayer” by Jackie C.). Long assigned to vice work, he has on several occasions questioned my motives in researching the undercover experience. He offers the opinion that undercover work is indeed an aspect of policing worth looking into, because of its inherent danger to the cops that are assigned to it. Louie volunteers that his own experience tells him that one can become muddled, mentally lost in the transition from identity to identity across the day-to-night and back-to-day transitions*

**Mitch Librett (front row, right) with the undercover police he studied.**



*involved in undercover policing. Menacing in appearance, Louie’s presentation speaks to the very core of the issues that prompted this research in the first instance.*

*On a hot Indian Summer night in River City, in a desolate industrial lot hard by the river, I witnessed the result of upwards of ten years of exposure to the process of “becoming an undercover.” As we ate White Castle hamburgers by the riverside, over a time frame of perhaps 90 minutes, I observed Louie engaged in his undercover identity. We discussed the difficulty of assimilating to the tasks of buying drugs undercover on the street, his “cop” identity, his off-duty identity as a general contractor and the events of September 11, 2001 and our respective roles in the aftermath at Ground Zero. He also moved easily between English and Spanish, bantering with Ron M. The point here is that Louie was an unusual, gregarious and willing muse who indicated the direction he thought my research needed to head. Namely, how does a person make the transition from either uniformed cop or, as is the more customary pathway, from police recruit to undercover police officer? And, perhaps most important to the issue of re-entry following a period of service as undercover agent, how does one balance the emotional and social demands of bouncing between the expression of the various personae?*

*The process of learning to interact with, do business, and socialize with street-level drug dealers is often facilitated by an apprenticeship to a more experienced officer. During this research, a fortuitous event occurred in January of 2005, when Eddie V. was assigned to SIU. Eddie had just completed the Police Academy and had yet to be assigned to highway patrol*

duty. It is was glaringly obvious that the undercover officers assigned to SIU were, and are still, exclusively minorities. Eddie V. was a 24-year-old Latino from Jumperson Village. Prior to his police service he worked as a paramedic and earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. His transformation from an upwardly-mobile, second generation descendant of Puerto Rican immigrants who aspired to and achieved employment as a police officer, to an aspirant to the undercover world, provided a tremendous opportunity to explore the processes through which this transformation occurs.

Hector was expected to play the dominant role in Eddie's assimilation to the unit, this by default since Hector was the only undercover left in the unit and because the office sensed that he would have a unique ability to introduce Eddie to the collective worldview. Eddie's apprenticeship began with the responsibility for simple, mundane tasks, such as preparing the coffee at the beginning of each shift. He was also expected to look over Hector's shoulder as Hector prepared the written correspondence for his pending cases and court appearances. But the most important segment of the learning process, according to Hector, was for Eddie to learn to dress properly, speak properly, and to learn to "give off" the impression of a street person. He was advised to watch the Black Entertainment Television channel (BET) as much as possible so he could become acquainted with the latest in rap music hits. He was also expected to learn to recite the lyrics and instructed to buy the fan magazines for the hip hop and rap genres and read them carefully. Hector jokingly referred to this as Eddie's "homework."

"What he's gotta learn, is...you gotta get inside their world. Like, when I was hanging out with those crackheads in Cannondale last year. They were my friends! They weren't bad people, other than the fact that they smoke crack. I could talk to them nice—about music, a ballplayer, women—life in general which is what anyone would do just hanging in the street with nothing better to do. You think that's [selling/buying/using drugs] all they do but you're wrong...they people just the same. That's what Eddie has to learn. He still works his side job too, riding the ambulance in Jumperson, which is stupid and I try to tell him that but he don't want to listen. How he's suppose to be pickin people up off the street one night in a ambulance and buying drugs the next week on the same corner? But he don't wanna listen. Yet."

By the second week of Eddie's assignment to SIU, his appearance began to change. When he went out on the streets he began to wear a hooded sweatshirt covered with a bubble jacket, black or blue jeans and the requisite bandana. But still something was out of place. I realized that it was his footwear. The rest of the group, including myself, wore worn leather work boots or broken-down running shoes. In the first several weeks of Eddie's tenure with the group he insisted on retaining his New Balance running shoes, which were quite new, and marked him as a cop in the eyes of the others.

#### FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

On the micro-level, following the assumption that undercover policing strategies are an entrenched component of policing in the United States, my study concludes that improvements are necessary in the selection, preparation, and training of undercover officers. The goal is to improve the quality of their lives. On the macro-level it is expected that the study provides fresh insight into the processes that facilitate the development of police officers into proxies for the state in terms of enacting race/class relations.

—Mitch Librett is an Assistant Professor in the  
Criminal Justice Department.