'Still' Police officers? Insights into the culture of police officers working within the setting of integrated offender management

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This post draws on data from an ethnographic study of Integrated Offender Management (IOM) in an effort to shine a light on the cultural practices of a specialist group of plain-clothed police officers operating within this setting. The empirical enquiry began in September 2012 and ended over 12 months later, in October 2013. I carried out four hundred hours of observations in five research sites across one urban English police area. IOM police officers work alongside staff from other criminal justice agencies in a bid to reduce offending by prolific offenders. The job involves traditional policing methods of enforcement and intelligence gathering, but the novelty for some police officers lies in a requirement that they adopt the role of 'offender manager' (OM). This means attempting to draw prolific offenders away from crime and improving their life chances through 'pathway support', such as helping them into employment and supporting them into stable housing arrangements. In theory, this changes the nature of the policing task considerably. Given the emphasis in the existing literature on how 'cop culture' (an assortment of recurring informal norms, values, beliefs and craft rules which inform police conduct (Reiner, 2010: 119-32)) derives from the nature of the job police officers perform (e.g. Skolnick (1966)), we might expect OMs to exhibit different cultural traits from their mainstream colleagues.

Research suggests that some OMs, working within IOM units around the UK, are moving away from traditional police cultural practices, and are instead adopting values and methods more akin to probation (e.g. Senior et al. (2011); Williams and Ariel (2013); Annison et al.,(2015); and Sleath and Brown, (2017)). My own empirical enquiry into one English IOM unit uncovered evidence of a blurring of culture and practice between agencies, with a minority of OMs moving beyond a pure 'catch and convict' policing mentality towards a more welfare-orientated approach to offender management. In the main, however, I found that many of the core constituents of cop-culture (e.g. an exaggerated sense of mission; a desire for action and excitement; the glorification of violence; an Us/Them divide of the social world; solidarity; social isolation; prejudice; authoritarian conservatism; suspicion and cynicism; and, hyper-hetero-masculinity (Loftus, 2010; Cockcroft, 2013) continued to structure the discretion OMs exercised during interactions with IOM offenders. Below, I provide some powerful examples of the endurance of cop-culture, as expressed through talk and action of OMs, working within the setting of IOM.

Suspicion, cynicism and pessimism

Observations and interviews highlighted a pervading sense of suspicion, cynicism and pessimism throughout the ranks of OMs. Offenders, for example, were often viewed with distaste and described by OMs in derogatory terms (e.g. as 'vile', 'smackheads', 'walking abortion cases', 'dirty scrotes' and 'wastes of space'). At the same time, the majority of OMs I encountered seemed sceptical about the likelihood of IOM offender change. 'Most have been offending like it's going out of fashion. I don't see any reason why they're suddenly going to change now', one OM complained. Another suggested that "putting them all down" would "do society a favour" and "save us all a lot of money". OMs were also found to retain a deeply cynical view, both of the justice system and the broader social world. Her Majesty's courts were accused of "continuously letting offenders off" (apparently, because magistrates/judges lacked "proper training"), whilst society itself was deemed to have "lost its moral compass".

Waddington (1998) would likely describe this kind of talk as a reflection of the 'oral tradition' of frontline policing – nothing more than 'canteen culture', which does not directly translate into action. However, this exaggerated cynicism, pessimism and scepticism seemed to cement further the crime control-orientated approach of most OMs to offender management. Consequently, most OMs spent most of their time engaged in enforcement activities (mostly surveillance, but also the occasional arrest).This practice is at odds with formal IOM policy (equal attention should be given to intelligence gathering *and* support (Police Operations Guide 2010; Home Office, 2010), and more closely connected to the cultural desire for action and excitement.

Action and an exaggerated sense of mission

Action orientated crime fighting was not a core constituent of everyday IOM policing. Rather than unpredictable and dangerous physical interactions with offenders, OMs spent considerable time in front of police computers and/or knocking on the (often unanswered) doors of IOM offenders. This is not to say that OMs did not desire the thrill of the 'search, chase and arrest' (Waddington, 1998: 99). In fact, most were resistant to the idea that the job was not action orientated and redefined 'action' to fit the OM role. Action was now meeting with offenders, generating information from them by building up trust and rapport so that "they tell you stuff without even realizing and then you put in an intelligence report". As one OM explained:

It's a bit dry, but a different way of looking at things. As much as I'd like to roll around on the floor with some of them, we're not doing that. I get a buzz from going to someone's house talking to them and looking around without having just kicked the door in.

The 'buzz' therefore comes from using inter-personal skills to out-smart offenders, gaining their trust whilst acting against their interests. Although this sort of work is not as action-orientated as "rolling around with offenders", the police cultural desire for action is sated by the exciting combination of out-smarting and spying on IOM offenders. Furthermore, visiting (mostly unannounced) the homes of IOM offenders and 'dropping in on' routine probation appointments is also a subtle way of imposing social discipline on an offender given that regular contact between police and IOM offenders will serve to communicate control and remind them that the police are watching.

For some OMs, however, this reconfiguration of 'action' was insufficient. Instead they pursued thrills, whilst attempting to steer clear of work typically characterised as 'bullshit' and 'rubbish' (Reiner, 2000; Loftus, 2009). For example, on one occasion two OMs encountered a man, known to be disqualified from driving, sitting in the driving seat of a car – a rare opportunity of gaining direct evidence of what they suspected was offending behaviour. They parked up, observing the man in order to gather useful intelligence. Whilst this endeavour falls within the OM mandate and in this sense is unproblematic, these particular OMs confronted the suspect – activity conventionally carried out by the enforcement arm of IOM. Evidently, the chance of catching a misbehaving IOM offender 'red- handed' was impossible to resist and in any case viewed as 'real police work'. "We're police officers, it's what we're supposed to be doing really", one OM later explained. The words and actions of these OMs resonate deeply with the police preoccupation with crime fighting and moral (and cultural) commitment to the separation of social order from chaos (Reiner 2000: 89, Loftus 2009: 90). Attempting to get this particular offender locked up provided the OMs with an opportunity to engage in a challenging and exciting game of wits and skill. Business as usual, from a police cultural perspective.

Conclusion

The IOM scheme, I examined, was well-established having operated for five years, time enough for traditional police attitudes and values to evolve. Although some OMs did engage in meaningful rehabilitative activity (e.g. developing working relationships, providing logistical support, and encouraging offenders to engage with services), a majority reworked the role of OM to fit the reality of policing as they saw it: penetrate, survey and control a 'dangerous' community of known prolific offenders. This is a departure from the stated aims of IOM, which seeks to break the cycle of offending via welfare-orientated policing (albeit carried out against the backdrop of law enforcement), but it does conform to police culture. It seems, old habits die hard.