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# From resistance and control to normative orders: *The Wire*'s Cedric Daniels as an ethical bureaucrat

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## Abstract

While the categories of control and resistance have provided important frames of reference to understand workplace relations, we argue that they offer a limited analytical range when investigating conduct in public institutions where work still has sizeable elements of discretion – despite the increasing demands of performance measurement that have been a central component of new public management. Here, we investigate the HBO series, *The Wire*, and situate it as a piece of social science fiction. By affording more attention to the different ‘codes’ of policework depicted on the show we develop a more pluralistic understanding of workplace conduct. In tracing out different normative orders that characterize these codes, we consider *The Wire*’s Cedric Daniels’ distinctive positioning in relation to performance measurement and the predominant normative order of ‘the numbers game’ and argue that he consistently displays the code of an ethical bureaucrat.

## Keywords

control and resistance, discretion, ethical bureaucrat, normative orders, performance measurement, social science fiction, *The Wire*

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## Introduction

This article builds on a growing body of organization research that draws on popular culture for the insights it can offer into management and organizational life (see, for example, Buzzanell and D'Enbeau, 2014; Rhodes and Parker, 2008; Zundel et al., 2014). We focus on the 2002–2008 HBO cable television series, *The Wire* (Simon and Burns, 2008), to provide insights into how actors respond to performance measurement, which is a pervasive output control in many organizations, particularly with the spread of 'market rationality' into the public sector as a result of new public management (NPM) (Bevan and Hood, 2006; Doolin, 2002; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). We propose venturing beyond accounts that focus on ever more pervasive control (Flyverbom et al., 2015; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Manley and Williams, 2019) or reclassifying resistance (Courpasson et al., 2012; McCabe et al., 2020; Thomas and Davies, 2005) to focus instead on the *codes* through which actors work. In working life, 'a man must have a code'<sup>1</sup> as the capable, amiable and heavy drinking Homicide Detective Bunk Moreland so aptly puts it (*The Wire*, season 1, episode 7). Such codes, as depicted on *The Wire* in the Baltimore police force, are enacted within a realm of discretion that remains characteristic of police work (see Johnston, 1988; Lipsky, 2010). Thus, classifying conduct through the lens of control or resistance can detract from the complexity this gives rise to.

*The Wire* is apposite for our purposes here because of its unique sociological scope in presenting a fictional portrayal of the narratives of multiple organizational lives, including Baltimore drug gangs, the press, the docks, the education system and – the key focus of our analysis – the Baltimore police force. We characterize *The Wire* as a piece of 'social science fiction' (Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011). The concept of social science fiction rests largely on Wright Mills's (2000: 19) important insight that social science is not the exclusive preserve of academics and that journalists, novelists and now television directors and producers also have social insights (see also Bryant and Pollock, 2010). The *fiction* here is a fictional truth, which by telling stories may get closer to experience than a collection of facts or data (see Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011: 154–155).

The key contributions of this article stem from the application of Herbert's (1997) categorization of 'normative orders' in policework, which emerged from his ethnographic analysis of the Los Angeles police force. Herbert (1998: 347) defines normative order as a 'set of generalized rules and common practices oriented around a common value'. He identifies six (at times conflictual) predominant normative orders in police work: law, bureaucratic authority and control, adventure and machismo, competence, safety and morality (Herbert, 1998). We rework this categorization to include the predominant neoliberal normative order in public institutions depicted on *The Wire*: 'the numbers game' (*The Wire*, season 4, episode 11; see also Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 629). A game that has emerged with NPM and performance measurement.

The application of this conception of normative orders to *The Wire* makes contributions in the following respects: first, it shifts our analytical focus in important ways from compliance/resistance to the *codes* through which characters work and act in response to surveillance and performance measurement (see Sewell et al., 2012: 208); rather than simply in opposition to these processes. We highlight a need to move beyond classifications of what is and is not resistance (Contu, 2008; Courpasson et al., 2012;

Fleming and Spicer, 2003; McCabe et al., 2020; Thomas and Davies, 2005), to a richer understanding of people's working lives, in which at different points they work against, *work around* or actively support a given set of dominant institutional normative orders, like the numbers game. This fresh analytical lens is particularly important in working environments where organizational purposes are contested (Hoggett, 2006) and where there is a high level of discretion at street level – such as the police force (Bohte and Meier, 2000: 180; Lipsky, 2010). Such an approach also advances from existing accounts that stress ever more pervasive workplace controls under NPM (see, for example, Clarke and Knights, 2015; McCann et al., 2020) by examining the under-theorized position of public sector workers who exercise significant discretion in delivering policy (Lipsky, 2010). Second, this analytical frame also contributes to the literature on *The Wire*, since much of the literature has focused on the power of failing institutions (Anderson; 2010; Bandas, 2011; McMillan, 2008; Mittell, 2009), along with some insightful character studies (see, for example, Beck, 2009; Bryant and Pollock, 2010; Kraniauskas, 2009; Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011). However, the concept of normative orders enables us to trace out the *multiple* lived codes of policework that are depicted on the show in a fuller and more pluralistic fashion (see Herbert, 1997: 20). Third, we offer a distinctive reading of the series by focusing on the fictional character of Cedric Daniels – initially a Lieutenant of the Narcotics Unit who becomes a senior manager in the Baltimore Police Department. We argue that Daniels presents a portrayal of the predicaments around Du Gay's (2000) *ethics of office* (Du Gay, 2005, 2008), which take us beyond a resistance and compliance frame of analysis. Daniels retains a set of classic bureaucratic ideals, through his commitment to task and detail, law and bureaucratic authority (Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017).

Our case rests on the normative orders framework, which offers distinctive insights into *The Wire* and working life in organizations subject to NPM, in the following steps: first, the implications of *The Wire* for organizational research are drawn out and situated in relation to previous engagements with popular culture in the field. Second, we analyse *The Wire* in terms of NPM, neoliberalism and performance measurement, and explain how we understand this in relation to the realm of discretion that continues to characterize policework. In the accompanying subsection, 'Codes and normative orders', we also introduce the key concepts that frame the investigation. We then turn to *The Wire*'s rich depiction of the dynamics around performance measurement. The series highlights the importance of the games surrounding performance measurement, their complex and, at times, counter-productive effects, and also how competing codes and normative orders exist around performance measurement. We then situate Cedric Daniels as an 'ethical bureaucrat' in the context of NPM (Hoggett, 2005: 185) and discuss how he responds to the practices of gaming the stats portrayed on the show. In the following 'Discussion' section, we argue that analysing normative orders in *The Wire* offers a means to advance from the existing organizational literature on surveillance and control, by affording greater recognition to workplace discretion in certain contexts of NPM. We also argue that this approach offers an alternative to reclassifying resistance, towards a deeper analysis of the multiple codes displayed in the context of NPM; and that this presents a richer way of understanding the compromised position of the ethical bureaucrat that takes us beyond the resistance/compliance dichotomy.

## The Wire as social science fiction

In this article we argue that televisual dramas like *The Wire* can be considered *social science fiction* (see Bryant and Pollock, 2010; Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011) because they offer valuable insights into social relations, especially in and around work. Social science fiction refers to fiction with a sociological sensibility. There is a danger, when televisual entertainment is explored for insights into management and is labelled as *popular culture* (Buzzanell and D'Enbeau, 2014; Rhodes and Parker, 2008; Rhodes and Westwood, 2008) that this, often unintentionally, further sediments the distinction between 'high' academic theory and 'popular' mass entertainment. One reason why *social science fiction* is useful and has resonance for us is that, rather than simply calling for greater academic analysis of how management is portrayed in popular culture (Rhodes and Parker, 2008), the concept pushes us to examine popular culture alongside academic research (Osborne et al., 2008). Drawing on social science fiction to better understand organizational life has further methodological advantages in offering a rich collection of illustrations of institutional working lives. Particularly a show like *The Wire* which has been described as possessing an ethnographic sensibility (Holt and Zundel, 2014: 580; Parker, 2012: 29) in portraying the experiences of a range of subjects across organizational contexts.

It has also been argued that management research remains divorced from the *lived experiences* of organizational life (for some classic versions of this argument see Knights and Willmott, 1999; Lennie, 1999). Yet how one captures these lived experiences remains a pressing theoretical and methodological challenge. Drawing on social science fiction helps to address this because it offers portrayals that viewers can identify with. As fiction, *The Wire* can resonate with the working lives of different viewers as they approach the show from a range of different organizational experiences. Social science fiction can also offer creative ways of (re)theorizing organizational experience (see Rhodes and Westwood, 2008: 6). Furthermore, dramatic fiction encompasses different intersecting institutions and contrasting lives lived in and through these institutions, which *The Wire* does in rich detail; conversely the academic article tends to have a more singular analytical focus on particular cases of working life or on particular institutions (see Wilson and Chaddha, 2010).

As well as capturing lived experiences, the social science fiction of *The Wire* also gives us a clearer grounding in how codes and institutional dynamics unfold in practice. While social science fiction is clearly a form of fiction, when researchers name and characterize social realities in particular ways they are also theoretically trying to make sense of them, at least one remove from the actors themselves. The show's creators, Ed Burns and David Simon, construct a rich account of Baltimore and its institutions, which forms a kind of autoethnography given their respective backgrounds working in the police force, and in schools (Bryant and Pollock, 2010: 718), and for the Baltimore press in the case of Simon. While social science conventionally names social phenomena through nominalizations such as 'control', 'surveillance' or 'resistance'; as social science fiction, *The Wire* inverts such analysis by beginning from a rich depiction of the lived codes characters embody in working life.

Thus, quality social science fiction can give us a richer perspective on 'the conditions of individuation' (McMillan, 2008) in which subjects are shaped by, but also make clear

choices within, institutions. Indeed, as Bryant and Pollock (2010: 712) note perceptively, this ‘fiction is to be understood neither as fantasy nor falsehood; it creates a logic for the arrangement of actions that produces intelligibility from the chaos of events that constitute the social’. Indeed, this is precisely what we endeavour to do as social scientists. Social science fiction at its best, and *The Wire* in our view certainly warrants this tag, can provide a rich portrayal of intersecting institutions, including the police force and the educational system, that people inhabit. But social science fiction also offers a more character centric approach to the social by dramatizing multiple (albeit fictitious) lives lived in, and through, institutions. It therefore offers a distinctive and important additional perspective in the social sciences.

There has been a limited amount of academic research on *The Wire* in the field of organization and management – in total three academic articles (see Parker, 2012; Holt and Zundel, 2014; Zundel et al., 2014). The focus here has often been on the institutional dimensions of social life that are depicted on the show (see also Johnson-Lewis, 2009; Levine, 2015; McMillan, 2008). But how different individuals experience the realities and pressures of institutional working life, and the *codes* through which they respond to them, has been somewhat neglected. Interestingly, this dimension of the series has often been emphasized by *The Wire*’s executive producer, David Simon, in subsequent interviews. For example, in a revealing quote, Simon (2009) notes:

It’s about how institutions have an effect on individuals and it’s about how regardless of what you’re committed to, whether you are a cop, a drug dealer, a long shoreman, a judge, or a lawyer. You must ultimately compromise and contend with whatever institution you’ve committed to.

Simon is alluding to the complex question of the relation between individuals and institutions, and *The Wire* presents us with valuable source material to bring ‘individuals back into institutional theory’ (Lawrence et al., 2011: 53). The individual dimension here concerns whether a given actor *compromises* or *contends* with the norms and requirements of their institution in particular circumstances not of their own choosing. This points to the centrality of the different ‘codes’ characters display in *The Wire*; a theme to which we will return but first we set out the broader institutional context of NPM and policing.

## **New public management and policework discretion**

Across different series, *The Wire* portrays a range of public institutions in Baltimore, including the police force and the education system, increasingly subject to metric driven public management practices. NPM can be understood broadly as the process of bringing business-like practices into the public sector (Vogt, 2001); one key dimension of which is the increasing use of performance management and measurement (Bevan and Hood, 2006; Bohte and Meier, 2000; Hood, 2006; Kelman and Friedman, 2009; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007; Moynihan, 2008). NPM can be connected more broadly to an expansion of neoliberal principles into the public sector through the growing emphasis on customers and competition (see Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Foucault, 2008).

Foucault's 1979 lectures on neoliberalism are prescient here. For Foucault (2008: 131), the key problem of neoliberalism is how the exercise of political power can be modelled on the market economy where competition is 'the very source and foundation of society' that only has to be allowed to rise to the surface. These lectures date from roughly the same time as the inception of NPM after the crises of governance in Britain and the USA in the 1970s (Gruening, 2001; Johnston, 1988: 54). Foucault's positing of neoliberalism as a general effort to resituate society itself according to principles of enterprise and competition, resonates with NPM. Foucault also distinguishes neoliberalism from the governmental practice of 'laissez-faire', as he notes, '*laissez-faire* is turned into *do-not-laissez-faire* government, in the name of the law of the market, which will enable each of its activities to be measured and assessed' (emphasis in original, Foucault, 2008: 247). It is precisely the effects of this competitive measurement of public institutions according to an artificially constructed 'law of the market' that leads to 'a filtering of every action by the public authorities in terms of contradiction, lack of consistency and nonsense' (Foucault, 2008: 246). This is reflected in *The Wire*, through the efforts of middle managers and officers to write off murders as accidents at the start of season 2, or in season 4 in their reluctance to discover bodies in boarded up houses because it will leave the clearance rate for homicide cases under 50%.

Where does the spread of this competitive ethos into the public sector leave employee subjectivity? Here the literature tends to stress an enhanced means of neoliberal control that is so effective it reconstructs identity through performance measures (Clarke and Knights, 2015: 1880; Lorenz, 2012). Although the tensions this gives rise to between public purposes and the competitive ethos have also been explored (see, for example, Doolin, 2002: 385; Stokes and Clegg, 2002: 238–239; Thomas and Davies, 2002). One aspect that remains under-theorized is the position of public sector workers who are inescapably 'policy deliverers with broad discretion' – or street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010: 25). Where does street-level discretion fit into this story of pervasive output controls that shape competitive subjectivities? Arguably this element of discretion applies strongly to policework. Indeed, as Johnston (1988: 53) notes, 'the exercise of discretion by front-line officers as to which laws to implement, under what circumstances, and in what manner' is a defining characteristic of 'normal police behaviour'.

McMillan (2008; see also Mittell, 2009) argues that *The Wire* reflects the power of institutions in 'producing (and destroying) individual subjects by penetrating their "forms of life" with disciplinary power'. Conversely what *The Wire* highlights in regard to the police force is that, while the disciplinary power of institutions reshapes conduct, it is not absolute. The demands of NPM and performance measurement '*partly* closes the open' (emphasis in original, Hammer, 2011: 91) but not absolutely. Even if the demands of senior officers to secure statistical 'performance' on measures is always somewhere in the background; it is an output-based measure and often a crude one (see Bevan and Hood, 2006; McCann et al., 2020) that is necessarily at a remove from the work on the ground of the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 2010). This applies particularly in public institutions where underlying purposes are politically contentious (Hoggett, 2006), and *The Wire* continually highlights tensions around the purposes of policing. One key example is the desire of senior managers and politicians to secure some easy street-level arrests of addicts and low-level dealers; while the purpose of certain organizational units, like Major Crimes that Lieutenant Cedric



Daniels heads in season 1, is to undertake slower and deeper investigations to uncover underlying criminal networks. This highlights a key discretionary power of the police around where and (equally crucially) when to exercise the power of arrest in an ongoing investigation (see Moskos, 2008: 121) – something often contested at the level of operational practice on *The Wire*.

### *Codes and normative orders*

Thus, we can only understand the diverse codes of police conduct and practice by taking discretion seriously, since in practice it means that different, at times contrasting, codes characterize policework. The concept of normative orders offers a descriptive and non-universalizing focus here, and it provides a lens into how actors act differently within particular institutional contexts. Herbert (1997: 19) defines normative orders as rules and practices that structure action around a primary value. The first two key normative orders within policework are law and bureaucratic authority. In terms of law as a central normative order, other authors have been more sceptical about its role in policing (see Manning, 2003: 35). Bittner (1970: 35) for example defines policing through the ‘distribution of situationally justified force in society’, and law is arguably secondary to this. As Manning (2003: 39) notes in regard to the police, ‘the most salient lasting and important decision is whether to apply the law’ rather than the law being the definitive normative order per se, which again leaves considerable scope for discretion (Lipsky, 2010). Herbert’s account serves to redress the balance somewhat by emphasizing that the enforcement of the law serves as a key ‘normative value’ in establishing and retaining the legitimacy of the police force (Herbert, 1998: 353). Crucially for Herbert it is one powerful normative order among others in police work. The second normative order is that of bureaucratic authority, which is necessary to ensure that the organization can act ‘in a coordinated fashion to secure public order’ (Herbert, 1997: 62). Crucial to bureaucratic authority here are ideals such as the chain of command (Herbert, 1997) and due process according to clear lines of authority (see Du Gay, 2000; Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017).

The next normative order is that of adventure/machismo, a ‘subcultural collection of rules and values’ based around power and aggressiveness (Herbert, 1997: 80) frequently expressed on *The Wire* through the desire to get onto street corners and aggressively hunt down low-level dealers. The normative order of ‘machismo’ underlines the gender dynamics of the show, with some characters expressing a masculinist conception of policing – most obviously the inept ‘Herc’ Hauk – through a keenness to get on corners and make easy arrests. This approach is frequently associated with ineffective policing. While the alternative, *competence* normative order of policing, is rooted in deep, painstaking investigations through developing informants and establishing wire taps.

The next normative order is that of morality (Herbert, 1997). This consists both of a clear sense of right and wrong but is also connected to the social aspects of policing, in seeking to develop community relations. Similarly, on *The Wire* this moral dimension is often depicted as a social awareness of the causes of addiction and murder – thus best termed as *social* morality. Take the efforts in season 4 of Bunny Colvin – after he has been forced to leave his position as Major in Baltimore’s Western District – when he works on a school project with ‘corner kids’ to develop a different, less statistics driven,

approach to learning. Target driven measures in public bureaucracies, as Carter et al. (1995: 49) note, often have the function of tin openers rather than dials, in opening up a can of worms (Bevan and Hood, 2006: 520) – or rather highlighting a deeper and more intractable set of underlying social causes (see Bohte and Meier, 2000: 174) – classed as beyond the remit of the public institution. That is, the normative order of social morality seeks to look inside the tin at the underlying reasons for patterns of crime and to find potential ways to address them, despite their scale.

While Herbert (1997) also includes the normative order of safety, there is little evidence of this on *The Wire* since the series tends to concentrate on heroic street-level officers; as well as senior managers (and some middle managers) who ordinarily remain office bound. One other normative order that we do see in *The Wire* and which is not included in Herbert's (1997) normative orders is that of 'the numbers game' (see also Moskos, 2008). This element of strategic calculation often characterizes the conduct of ambitious middle managers and 'successful' senior managers. The spread of neoliberal performance measurement generates a normative order of strategic gaming around numbers. What *The Wire* highlights is the extent to which performance measures actually generate a distinctive normative order that shapes the conduct of certain actors, in a manner that is reflective of the neoliberal principle of using market competition in governance (Foucault, 2008).

These different normative orders are relevant for tracing out the different codes of policework depicted in *The Wire* – codes are best seen as collections of normative orders and characters at times cross into different normative orders over the course of their policework. For Herbert (1997), normative orders combine the insights of Foucault and Weber in a more pluralistic fashion. This applies to *The Wire* too since, as we will see, while one character reflects Weberian bureaucratic authority, Cedric Daniels; others adopt a neoliberal NPM ethos of strategic calculation and gaming that resonates with Foucault's conception of neoliberalism.

### *Gaming and performance measurement*

Performance measurement has been researched across institutional contexts (see, for example, Kallio et al., 2017; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007; Muller, 2018; Power, 2004; Starbuck, 2005) but our particular interest here is in strategic *gaming* surrounding performance measurement. There are some studies of gaming performance measures in the organizational literature (see, for example, Bohte and Meier, 2000; Butler et al., 2017; Kelman and Friedman, 2009; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007) but research here remains limited, probably due to methodological difficulties in finding gaming activities in complex organizations (Bohte and Meier, 2000: 175). Burawoy (1979) in his classic study of consent in the Greer machine shop, highlights how gaming is widespread through 'making out' practices that get round existing rules in order to maximize individual productivity; yet he stresses how as a result 'a game generates consent with respect to its roles' (Burawoy, 1979: 81). In the public sector, where task and purposes are contentious (see Hoggett, 2006), it seems likely that the relation to consent is less straightforward. Indeed, in *The Wire* characters clearly work against certain managerial orders but they do so for the sake of broader organizational purposes, or different normative orders of policing,



such as social morality. Bunny Colvin's Hamsterdam experiment in season 3 in which he in effect decriminalizes drug use in one part of Baltimore to reduce crime significantly elsewhere is one clear example (see Bryant and Pollock, 2010). What we see in this case and in many others is a conflict between normative orders, between the social morality normative order (arguably with the normative order of competence mixed in too) and the more dominant normative orders of law and bureaucratic authority, which of course eventually reassert themselves with Major Colvin's sacking.

As noted above, the normative order of 'the numbers game' (*The Wire*, season 4, episode 10) is a crucial one that is missing from Herbert's (1997) analysis. This is one of the things that makes *The Wire* so valuable as social science fiction: there are strong suspicions that 'gaming the metrics occurs in every realm' (Muller, 2018: 3). However, research is not equipped to document these trends due to access constraints and ethics. Accounts of gaming in public institutions, especially the police force, are relatively scarce by comparison (for some exceptions not focused on policing see Bohte and Meier, 2000; Hood, 2006; McGivern and Ferlie, 2007). However, Rodger Patrick (2014), drawing on 30 years' experience in the UK Midlands police force, including as a Detective Chief Inspector (combined with Freedom of Information requests), documents statistical gaming practices that are pervasive enough to be characterized as 'organizational in nature' in the UK police – particularly with NPM in the 1990s. Patrick (2014) outlines how political pressures, which became management targets around reducing crime, led to widespread gaming practices, such as reclassifying crimes to downgrade them or deliberately under reporting crime (see also Skogan, 1974). Patrick (2014) sheds light on the gaming practices induced by performance measurement pressures. But his principal interest is in documenting these practices, rather than considering how middle managers and 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010) might respond differently to the tensions they give rise to, which is the central focus in our analysis of *The Wire*.

The ethical stances that subjects adopt towards performance measures have also been discussed in some rich cases (see, for example, King and Learmouth, 2015; Sewell and Barker, 2006; Sewell et al., 2012). In their study of an Australian call centre, Sewell et al. describe the conflicts that arose from opposing performance discourses of 'care and coercion'. In this case study, Sewell et al. (2012: 208) note that performance measurement opens up 'questions of ethics but not an ethics that is extrapolated from the universal moral absolutes associated with particular political ideologies'. This is why the concept of normative orders becomes so useful in offering a pluralistic perspective that enables us to trace out different codes and normative orders around performance measurement.

## Methodology

We have long been enthusiastic viewers of *The Wire* and have been involved in countless discussions about the show for years. From this starting point as engaged and sympathetic followers of the series, we took notes on each of the 60 episodes of the series and separately re-watched all scenes that were related to performance management and the 'numbers game' – a key normative order that frames our analysis of *The Wire*. We identified Cedric Daniels as a central figure who displays a collection of normative orders that

take us beyond the control and resistance dichotomy in performance measurement. Key word searches were also undertaken of each episode script to identify the use of reoccurring terms related to performance measurement and workplace responses to it, such as 'the stats', 'gaming', 'natural police' and 'chain of command'. Episodes with key words in were also re-watched, with each author taking separate notes on relevant episodes and then comparing them. It should be noted that the application of normative orders and Du Gay's (2000) conception of an 'ethical bureaucrat' was a 'slow and uncertain' process (Law, 2004: 10), in which instances that seemed to question our initial account were given equal attention to episodes and scenes that supported this reading.

## **Performance measurement and competing codes on *The Wire***

Gaming, as portrayed in *The Wire*, refers to reducing one's working life to scoring highly on whatever measure is needed for professional survival and success. This constitutes a dominant normative order, the 'numbers game', that yields professional success. The measure becomes the institutional objective that must be met. In *The Wire*, gaming the measures is the norm and the normative orders that conflict with this are the exception. At the same time, the underlying social causes of crime – social deprivation, inequality, absence of opportunity, violent peer groups – are beyond the capacity of the police force to address (see Manning, 1977: 16), and thus the measure itself remains divorced from the underlying conditions that produce crime. This is highlighted at the end of each series of *The Wire* when – often after a number of arrests in the final episode (following craftily orchestrated plea bargaining to reduce sentences) – there is a montage with accompanying music in which the previous patterns of crime reassert themselves, even though the position of individual characters often changes.

The portrayal of gaming in *The Wire* encompasses both reclassifying or artificially 'bending' data to make it more favourable to managerial targets, and reducing one's conduct to meeting the targets that are preconditions for success (see Bevan and Hood, 2006; Muller, 2018: 24–25) and it is thus strategically and actively adhered to by subjects; rather than being something subjects simply passively comply with (McGivern and Ferlie, 2007; McMillan, 2009). One defence of performance measurement might be that reducing one's conduct to performing on the measure is not necessarily bad, since it does not entail being dishonest. It just reflects a need for better and more rounded measures, and therefore one can distinguish ethically between active dishonesty and reductive targeting (see Kelman and Friedman, 2009). Yet in *The Wire* these two forms of gaming can be difficult to distinguish in practice. For example, at the start of season 2, the police are quick to claim that the discovery of 13 women's bodies in a cargo container should be classified as accidental deaths; since they do not have any incentive to take on a complex and difficult multiple murder investigation that potentially will undermine their statistical performance. It is not that the police force working in the Baltimore docks are actively being dishonest. It is simply that they do not have any extrinsic motivation to undertake a difficult additional investigation into how the women died, which will potentially damage statistical performance if these cases become classified as unsolved murders.

As well as being widespread, ‘gaming the stats’ – more commonly referred to as ‘juking the stats’ in *The Wire* – also denotes a particular normative order that is characteristic of the spread of the neoliberal ethos under NPM, and the emergence of a strategic ‘calculating self’ (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 629) in which one reduces one’s role to hitting target measures. A position in which the institutional numbers game takes precedence, and where the most effective strategy is to adopt particular strategies to win games without actually strictly cheating (Macdonald and Kam, 2007: 641) – often by *bending* the rules rather than breaking them (as Marla Daniels puts it in *The Wire*, season 5, episode 10). What *The Wire* offers us is an analysis of performance measurement as a series of ongoing subjective experiences (Fay et al., 2010: 28) that characters react to in various and conflicting ways according to their codes and normative orders.

*The Wire* also highlights how characters cross between different normative orders at times in unexpected ways. Take Jay Landsmann the overweight Sergeant in the Homicide Division who rarely leaves his office and is a strategic follower of ‘the numbers game’ but for purposes of ‘self-preservation’ (*The Wire*, season 2, episode 1) rather than professional advancement. Yet Landsmann also displays a wider sense of social morality, for example at one point Bubbles – an amiable heroin addict who has previously served as an informant – finds himself responsible for the murder of his young sidekick, Sherrod, after he was ‘dipping’ into his supply and dies from taking spiked heroin (intended for somebody that is robbing Bubbles). Landsmann questions Bubbles in custody and he confesses in a distraught state, but to the surprise of one of his officers he allows him to leave uncharged even though this weakens the overall statistical performance of the Homicide Division. Thus, while the numbers game is a pervasive normative order in policework, in *The Wire* characters often move between normative orders and at times move into conflicting ones over the course of the five series.

### ‘Juking the stats’ and natural police

The most skilled and active practitioner of the numbers game is, clearly, Major Rawls. As Rawls notes when he tries to avoid his unit taking on responsibility for a difficult multiple murder investigation:

I have fought and scratched and clawed for four months to get my clearance rate up above 50% and right now it stands at exactly 51.6. Do you happen to know what my clearance rate will be if I take 13 whodunits off your hands? – 39.4%. (Major Rawls, *The Wire*, season 2, episode 3)

Yet, there is an alternative code of policing that the most talented police embody, which is reflected in the label ‘natural police’. These figures, principally Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon, are respected for their professional work but are never promoted above detective level. These officers reflect alternative normative orders of policing based around social morality and competence, that takes precedence over both law and bureaucratic authority – although this is particularly the case for McNulty. Both detectives fearlessly undertake complex and deep investigations of drug networks through wire taps and developing informants to build cases against major figures in the Baltimore drug world. These officers pay little attention to the dominant measures of performance that

are narrowly based around statistical clearance rates. As Jimmy McNulty, a classic example of 'natural police', explains to his long-standing friend Bunk: 'Fuck the fucking numbers already. The fucking numbers destroyed this department' (Jimmy McNulty, *The Wire*, season 5, episode 3).

The dualistic characterization of natural police and statistical gamers, dominant in *The Wire*'s portrayal of the police force, has been critiqued (see Brooks, 2009) and seems to reaffirm anti-bureaucratic sentiment, which Du Gay (2000, 2005: 5) suggests is a reoccurring problem in existing critiques of bureaucracy. Weber for example refused to accept the idea of a 'unified moral personality' (Du Gay, 2000: 29) and instead stressed one's comportment and calling within specific domains (Goldman, 2005: 56; Weber, 1978: 19). However, *The Wire* does present an important counter-example to anti-bureaucratic sentiment. In the fourth and fifth series, McNulty and his colleague Lester Freamon consider their main objective to be the capture of the brutal leader of a ruthless drug gang responsible for multiple murders: Marlow Stanfield. However, as political priorities shift for the new mayor of Baltimore due to a crisis in schools funding, the resources of the police department are dramatically cut, leading to the closing down of the Major Crimes Unit that was tracking Marlow and his associates. McNulty and Freamon alter the dead bodies of homeless people to make it look as though they have been victims of a serial killer. This story captures the attention of the press and from the additional resources generated in this hunt for an imaginary serial killer, Lester Freamon transfers over funds to help build the case against Marlow Stanfield. The two most 'natural police' in *The Wire* responsible for this are clearly guilty of a lack of professionalism, of not respecting the chain of command, of dishonesty in fabricating the existence of a serial killer; their behaviour is a serious criminal offence. They thus break the two key normative orders of bureaucratic authority and, most crucially, law. Their motives, however, are those of competent, 'good police', as they use the money to drive their investigation into the brutal Marlow Stanfield.

There is also a clash between different codes of policing when Deputy Commissioner Rawls and Daniels (now Commissioner) have an altercation with McNulty when this is discovered (*The Wire*, season 5, episode 10). McNulty has engaged in an act of resistance that consisted of acting flagrantly against the normative orders of law and bureaucratic authority. Rawls' immediate response – as a figure who works according to 'the numbers game' – is to highlight that the serial killer fabrication means that he has been paid unjustified overtime; while McNulty stresses that 'it wasn't about the money' it was about capturing Stanfield. Commissioner Cedric Daniels meanwhile remains silent and exudes authority as he stands back while Rawls berates McNulty. Daniels simply states: 'So this is your last case; work it.' Cedric Daniels consistently and quietly reflects a different code and set of normative orders concentrated around law and bureaucratic authority – while simultaneously being guided by a clear sense of organizational task (Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017).

### *Cedric Daniels: The ethical bureaucrat*

Daniels is an important character because he presents a third and thus far overlooked ethical code in *The Wire*: that of the ethical bureaucrat. The ethical bureaucrat (Du Gay,

2000: 29) does not fit neatly into either the numbers game or natural police codes. The ‘good bureaucrat’ acts according to the normative orders of competence, bureaucratic authority and law; while breaking from ‘the numbers game’ when it fundamentally contravenes these normative orders. The ‘good bureaucrat’ is defined through adherence to procedure; acceptance of sub- and superordination; an ‘abnegation of personal moral enthusiasms’ that reflects an ethos of impartiality when handling cases (Nash, 2019); and an underlying commitment to the task of office (see also Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017).

This conception of the ethical bureaucrat is distinctive because it is specific and contextual rather than presenting an ethics based around universal principles, since offices embody different purposes (Du Gay, 2008: 151). The ethical bureaucrat judges with discretion appropriate conduct according to their role in a given situation. It thus serves as a general orientation towards practice rather than something that can be definitively embodied in a single type. The ethos of the bureaucrat is based on ‘an ensemble of purposes and ideals within a given code of conduct’ (Du Gay, 2000: 4), and is thus particular to one’s institutional context and position in working life.

Daniels is initially a Lieutenant – an important but common middle management position in the Baltimore police force – who is promoted to Major and then Colonel over the course of the five series, before resigning soon after becoming Commissioner at the end of season 5. In tracing Daniels’ conduct and his professional successes, he is clearly an imperfect and, like most characters in *The Wire*, at times a morally questionable figure. But he also commands loyalty and admiration. One of the most striking features of the show is that, in the professional world of managing the police force, there are no moral heroes who can be identified as unambiguously on the side of good (see McMillan, 2009). Daniels’ past behaviour is difficult to square with the principled approach we see him adopt as a more senior figure in the police force. He has a long-standing case of corruption hanging over him when he worked in the Eastern District, prior to when we follow the character on the show. Early on, Daniels contravenes other elements of the ethical bureaucrat code by trying to secure arrests quickly to please senior managers, or helping an officer who belongs to his unit to concoct a story after he seriously injures a young boy in an unprovoked attack (*The Wire*, season 1, episode 2). But these incidents are concentrated in the early episodes of the first series. By the end of the first series, he consistently displays the distinctive code of an ethical bureaucrat, a position he holds to despite accompanying tensions in subsequent series. Daniels grows into the role of the ethical bureaucrat; his principles and professional ethos develop over the course of the five series – which highlights how agents can move between different normative orders over the course of working life.

What makes Daniels such an interesting figure is that rather than simply rejecting or decrying performance measures and ‘the numbers game’, he offers a more nuanced characterization of the choices middle managers in public institutions are faced with when they work with, or work around (rather than against), performance measures in different contexts (see also McGivern and Ferlie, 2007). The four attributes of the ‘good bureaucrat’ that Du Gay (2000) emphasizes provide a useful frame to situate Daniels’ conduct: acceptance of sub- and superordination; adherence to procedure; abnegation of personal moral enthusiasms; and commitment to the purposes of office.

First, sub- and superordination is displayed through Daniels' conduct on the show, strongly reflected in his references to 'the chain of command' (see Herbert, 1997: 4). Daniels invokes the 'chain of command' as a responsibility that should not only be adhered to but actively followed. In terms of superordination, this is reflected in the third series when two of his detectives, Kima and McNulty, pursue a criminal investigation of a drug king pin, Stringer Bell, rather than the mid-level dealer they have been ordered to target. In response, he brings them to his office and reminds them of his rank (*The Wire*, season 3, episode 6).

Second, in regard to adherence to procedure and due process, Daniels' commitment to this is reflected when his detectives find \$20,000 of money in a vehicle – and they have strong reasons to suspect that the money has come from a gang selling heroin in the Baltimore building projects. It quickly becomes evident that the driver of the vehicle with the money in banded, manicured bills is a Senatorial Aide. Commissioner Burrell, as a strategic gamer and political opportunist, immediately orders that the money be returned, and the investigation shut down. But in holding to the ideals of equality before the law and adherence to procedure, Daniels insists the money be kept as it constitutes a case of 'civil forfeiture' (*The Wire*, season 1, episode 8). Ultimately however, Daniels acts according to the chain of command and following Commissioner Burrell's insistence, orders that the \$20,000 be returned.

Third, through his abnegation of personal moral enthusiasms, rather than holding grudges or the desire to pursue vendettas, Cedric Daniels retains his commitment to organizational task by making sure the best detectives available are recruited to work on his cases, including Jimmy McNulty, despite regular altercations with him during the five series for going outside the chain of command. Finally, in terms of organizational task, Cedric Daniels often has to protect his organizational units and the work of his officers from the bosses' desire for 'fast and clean and simple' (Jimmy McNulty, *The Wire*, season 4, episode 13) cases, with some quick arrests. Daniels does so with a consistent and clear sense of the 'task' and detail of the organizational units he leads (Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2017). For example, while working as the Lieutenant of Major Crimes in season 1, he convinces Commissioner Burrell to keep the wire taps running, and thereby ultimately secures higher-level arrests (*The Wire*, season 1, episode 6).

## Discussion

What then does the tracing of normative orders on *The Wire* tell us about surveillance, control and resistance? While contrasting subject positions have been drawn out previously in relation to performance management (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ball and Wilson, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005), the concept of 'normative orders' adds a valuable additional means of analysis, by shifting the focus to the particular codes people adopt in working life. Herbert's (1997) conception of normative orders gives us a richer and more pluralistic perspective in drawing out the codes that different characters embody, in a way that is not reducible to a single theoretical framework. Herbert's conception of normative orders brings Weber's conception of bureaucracy and Foucault's analysis of power together. Both of these theoretical approaches have an affinity with different characters in *The Wire*'s depiction of the Baltimore City police force.

In drawing on Du Gay's reading of Weber and applying the concept of the 'ethical bureaucrat' to Daniels, and the Foucauldian conception of the enterprising (neoliberal)



self to Deputy Commissioner Rawls, we have argued that the codes of different characters reflect a certain distinct constellation of normative orders. It should be noted that these distinct codes are lived in and through institutions in which neoliberalization and the spread of market competition into the social sphere (Foucault, 2008) is predominant. Thus, by the end of the fifth series Daniels has resigned from the police force to become a lawyer, while Rawls is promoted to Superintendent of Maryland State Police. At the same time *The Wire* highlights that this is by no means a one directional process (Doolin, 2002: 375) in which bureaucrats consistently hold to one code of conduct in all circumstances. Individuals live through normative orders and in so doing respond to dominant institutional demands by strategically working with them, complying, working around or resisting them, and often some combination of these at different points.

### *Surveillance, control and discretion*

Turning first to the question of surveillance and control, and what the depiction of performance measurement in the Baltimore police force on *The Wire* suggests here. Sewell and Baker (2006: 939) define surveillance as ‘the few watching over the many’; while Bell (2005: 90) characterizes surveillance as ‘the practice of gathering and sorting data with the explicit purpose of influencing and managing the data target’. This difference in emphasis is a significant one. The first alludes to control and influencing behaviour through direct observation; while the latter refers to shaping and controlling behaviour through the abstraction of the performance measure that is then lived by subjects (Fay et al., 2010). *The Wire* highlights how these measures are lived and responded to at different levels in different ways according to one’s code and one’s affinities with particular normative orders: in a broader context in which discretion, in the sense of unsupervised conduct, is an inescapable element of policing (see Kleinig, 1999); running somewhat counter to the story of ever more pervasive organizational control that crafts subjectivities in its wake (see Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; McCabe, 2011) – at times in accounts of enhanced surveillance under NPM elements of discretion are (briefly) noted, albeit marginal ones (Clarke and Knights, 2015: 1875; McCann et al., 2020: 436). For example, Iedema and Rhodes (2010: 199) argue that undecided spaces remain that are not determined by ‘surveillance-based discipline’. This can only apply to a greater extent in public institutions with contested purposes (see Hoggett, 1996, 2006) and significant levels of discretion. Performance measurement reconstitutes and shapes elements of discretion but does not eliminate them, which leaves some space for the embodiment of different codes and normative orders.

It should be noted at the same time that some provisos are in order to better situate discretion in policing on *The Wire*: first, those characters that choose to undertake deep investigations tend to be the most skilled and capable detectives and middle managers (most obviously Jimmy McNulty, Lester Freamon and Cedric Daniels). Certain characters are inclined to follow the numbers game arguably more through necessity than choice. Take Sergeant Jay Landsman the survivalist follower of the numbers game, or Detective Michael Santangelo who as a result of having a backlog of unsolved cases is pressured by Major Rawls into monitoring and informing him about McNulty’s conduct in season 1. It must also be recognized that as performance measurement becomes

coercive in a context of growing insecurity, discretion is further circumscribed (see McCann et al., 2020), even if the nature of certain professions makes it impossible to remove entirely. Professional sanction in *The Wire* for violating the normative order of ‘the numbers game’, or breaking from the chain of command and thus bureaucratic authority, tends to result in demotion (after senior managers discover in what unit the individual would least like to work) – which of course is a more potent threat at senior levels. But it tends not to result in losing one’s job, sackings are normally reserved for those that are discovered to have broken the two key normative orders of bureaucratic authority and (crucially) the law itself. McNulty and Freamon’s fabrication of a serial killer in season 5 and Bunny Colvin’s Hamsterdam experiment in season 3 are both examples of this. The analysis of normative orders goes beyond a stress on ever more pervasive workplace controls (see, for example, Manley and Williams, 2019; Saunder and Espeland, 2009) by recognizing discretion; but it also raises some further important questions about how we might understand resistance.

### *From resistance to normative orders*

The organizational literature has seen contributions in which resistance has been variously reclassified: as micro resistance (Thomas and Davies, 2005), defiant resistance (Contu, 2008), cynical resistance (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), pragmatic resistance (McCabe et al., 2020), productive resistance (Courpasson et al., 2012), and some critical discussions around whether these actually constitute resistance at all (see Contu, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). But we argue that there is a strong case for shifting the analytical focus in some cases away from how resistance is best classified, to the codes that actors embody when choosing not only whether to resist or when to comply, but *how* to comply and how to utilize the elements of discretion that actors possess in certain professions. This is particularly apposite in cases in which resistance tends to be individualized and the absence of collective mobilization through union organization is marked (see Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). As demonstrated in season 2, centring on the impoverished position of stevedores at the Baltimore docks, in which organized collective resistance is confined to stealing a police truck and sending photographs of its travels between ports to the strategic gamer, political opportunist and future Baltimore Police Commissioner, Major Valchek. That said, consistently in *The Wire* actors live and work according to different codes that reflect contrasting normative orders. As Ackroyd (2012: 4) notes, ‘the impulse to misbehave seldom comes simply from a desire to break rules, but from something more positive’. The conception of normative orders gives us a firm basis to trace out these alternative, at times ‘more positive’, codes of working life.

The concept of normative orders highlights the ambiguous terrain between compliance and resistance within realms of discretion. The character of Cedric Daniels is particularly relevant for the analysis here because, while he has a number of conflicts with senior managers, including Major Rawls and Commissioner Burrell, his conduct cannot really be regarded as ‘resistance’ in any conventional sense. Cedric Daniels would certainly not characterize his own conduct as resistant to professional police lines of authority, since he only goes outside the chain of the command in exceptional circumstances on a couple of

occasions. For example, when he has a discussion with the new Mayor Thomas Carcetti in private about how the ‘stats game’ is damaging policing in Baltimore (*The Wire*, season 4, episode 10). Even on these occasions, Daniels acts according to some of the normative orders that are characteristic of the ethical bureaucrat through his deep sense of organizational task, which is centred on how the police might build viable prosecution cases against high-level criminals. Thus, the concept of normative orders sheds far more light on Daniels’ conduct than the concept of resistance. He acts consistently according to the normative orders of bureaucratic authority, law and competence – although this often comes into conflict with senior managers who ascribe to the normative order of the numbers game.

These tensions culminate in his resignation as Baltimore City Police Commissioner at the end of season 5. Soon after Daniels attains the top senior management role of Baltimore City Police Commissioner, he is asked to reorder his conduct in favour of the ‘numbers game’. He is approached by his now ex-partner and aspiring councilwoman, Marla Daniels, who tells him that there is political pressure to artificially improve the statistical performance of the Baltimore police force and that if he fails to do so, the report about his links to past corruption will be made public and as a result his career will be finished. After Cedric Daniels refuses Marla Daniels’ request that he ‘juke the stats’ – as instructed by Nerese Campbell, the strategic and ambitious President of Baltimore City Council – the conversation continues:

Marla Daniels: Then you’re done. There’s enough in that file that you’ll never make it through confirmation hearings and enough so that my career’s dead before it even gets started. The tree that doesn’t bend breaks, Cedric.

Cedric Daniels: Bend too far you’re already broken. (*The Wire*, season 5, episode 10)

This reaction means the end of Cedric Daniels as a manager in the police force, as he opts finally to leave the organization. Interestingly, Marla’s comment about the need to ‘bend’ with the institutional tree, implies that some element of compromising with, or ‘bending’, to the powerful normative order of the numbers game is a necessary part of the job. Indeed, as Clarke (2005: 221) notes, in many public institutions today ‘it is impossible to stand aloof from the evaluative/competitive nexus, since it has resource and reputational consequences’. The implication is that this is a reality in politics as well as the police force, and more broadly in the ‘tree’ of institutional hierarchies subject to NPM. The idea that one must bend to the numbers game in order to survive, is an important counterweight to Daniels’ refusal to give ground. Not resigning and ‘bending the stats’ according to the wishes of political leaders would have entailed the abandonment of his ethical commitments as a professional bureaucrat; this would have meant rendering himself subordinate to a code of policing and management that becomes reduced to an instrumental ‘statistical game’. The clear implication here is that it is at the higher echelons of police management where the normative order of ‘the numbers game’ is most strongly enforced; and competence and social morality are very much subordinate to it.

## Concluding remarks

This article has engaged with some of the conflicting codes around performance measurement as depicted in the HBO series, *The Wire*, which we have characterized as a piece of social science fiction (Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011). Although there have been some interesting engagements with dramatic fiction in the management and organization studies field (see, for example, Knights and Willmott, 1999; Rhodes and Parker, 2008), we think that social science fiction is a concept that adds extra weight to these debates by encouraging us to consider series like *The Wire* alongside, rather than as subordinate to, academic work in related fields.

What *The Wire* offers us that conventional empirical research cannot really provide is an understanding of how the codes of different actors, and the particular normative orders they reflect, unfold over time in relation to the institutions they work for. This takes us beyond a search for what is and is not resistance, to something arguably richer and also closer to many people's experiences of working life, in which at different points actors compromise, work against, *work around* or actively support a given set of dominant institutional normative orders over the course of their career. It is this focus on the unfolding codes and normative orders of working life that provides a contextualization of the circumstances in which resistance or misbehaviour happens, but also highlights how actors in public bureaucracies at times work within a realm of discretion that gives rise to the development of multiple normative orders. The police officer serves as a particularly interesting case here since it is the street-level bureaucrat which is 'perhaps the most controversial and the most subject to conflicting goal expectations' (Lipsky, 2010: 47). Yet, there is a strong basis to suggest that similar kinds of conflicts and multiple normative orders operate across public institutions that have been subject to NPM (see Bohte and Meier, 2000; Hood, 2006; Muller, 2018; Nash, 2019).

Thus, the key contribution of this article has been to apply the concept of normative orders to develop our understanding of control, surveillance and resistance in *The Wire* as a piece of rich social science fiction. This intervention is significant in the following respects: first, the concept of normative orders offers a tool to trace out the codes of multiple actors in public sector institutions in a manner that is not reducible to a dualistic framework of resistance or compliance (see also Sewell and Barker, 2006). This also adds to our understanding of *The Wire* by helping us to trace out the multiple codes of policing depicted on the show, which takes us beyond the natural police versus statistical gamer division that others have been critical of (Brooks, 2009). Second, this conception of normative orders helps us to explore how and why, in professions with a clear element of discretion, actors find ways of working around or in spite of performance measures, rather than against them (see also McGivern and Ferlie, 2007). Third, the emphasis on normative orders inverts the focus from how and when actors resist, to the codes by which actors live and work in public institutions, who may contravene dominant normative orders in certain instances and not others. It should be noted that what appears to be far more important than resistance for David Simon and Ed Burns in their sociological dramatization of the Baltimore police force is the codes of working life, and the normative orders particular characters adopt in relation to the pressures of NPM and performance measurement. We suggest that, particularly in working environments with significant elements of discretion,

such a shift in focus towards normative orders could have real value for future studies of how surveillance and performance measurement are lived through and responded to by different individuals.

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## Note

- 1 Although this perspective is clearly far too gender specific for the argument we wish to present here. This example of overly masculine centred terminology does highlight some important grounds to raise critical questions about *The Wire* around its rather dated characterization of gender relations and the female characters that are depicted in the Baltimore police force on the show. While there are some strong female characters they tend to serve as secondary figures in the construction of the overall narrative (Stearns, 2011). One could argue that this arises from the documentary-like perspective of the show that portrays the machismo often displayed in policework, and this has been discussed in some of the literature on policing (see, for example, Herbert, 2001). Yet classic series like *The Wire* also have the opportunity to problematize and challenge the gendered realities they depict in different ways, given their rich sociological insight and scope. From our perspective this is an important issue to highlight and consider even though it is not the primary concern in the analysis that follows, although failed machismo is a theme that we will touch on. See Stearns (2011) for a well-made critique of the position of female characters in *The Wire*.

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